

A Twist In Fate

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A Twist In Fate

by [AGByrne](#)

Summary

In an alternate universe, Steve is the one who fell from the train. Devastated by the loss, angry at themselves for not being able to save him, and afraid of what HYDRA and the Third Reich will be able to accomplish without Captain America standing in their way, Peggy and Bucky turn to each other for comfort.

Notes

Hi guys! This one's a little grittier and smuttier than my normal works so proceed with caution, but I'm really enjoying writing it and I hope you enjoy reading it as well! I have a Spotify playlist based on this fic and I'm open to suggestions for songs to add! <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4GJqqhY5TxhHKGIFphl4ue?si=6PjVTH1ySe2GEvkW8oFJ4A>

Until Tonight

The somber chaplain took a deep breath and opened his Bible as he began to speak to the little group of people crowded around the hole in the ground, “We come here today to honor the life and legacy of Steven Grant Rogers, known to the world as Captain America.”

This was his best friend’s eulogy, but between the sound of the falling rain and the buzzing of distant gunfire that never seemed to leave his head, Bucky couldn’t seem to concentrate. For the millionth time he heard, “Buck, grab my hand!” and saw Steve pulling him to safety, only to lose his footing and plunge into the ravine, arms outstretched and terror in his eyes. The eyes which haunted his nightmares...

He shuddered visibly and Peggy stole a glance at him. She reached out as inconspicuously as possible and grabbed his hand. He accepted it gratefully and she offered him a sad smile of solidarity.

As sickly as Steve had been growing up, Bucky had made his peace with the idea that he would probably outlive his best friend. Each time he went looking for him in an alley, or took him Mrs. Barnes’ chicken soup after an illness, or caught him lying on another enlistment form, he’d imagined this day. Steve’s funeral. But then Steve had taken the serum, and he seemed fucking bulletproof. So healthy, so vibrant, the size of his body finally catching up with the size of his lion heart. Bucky had stopped imagining the funeral, stopped worrying. And now to know that Steve had gotten his chance at a long, normal life and it had been cut short in exchange for his? That was almost too much to bear. “I’m with you till the end of the line pal,” he heard, and he screwed his eyes tightly shut to block out the memory.

As they lowered the empty coffin into the ground Bucky raised a silent prayer for the rain which hid the tears pouring down his face. Whatever the chaplain had said was barely processed and quickly forgotten. On the way back to SSR headquarters Bucky was completely silent. As soon as they arrived he headed straight for his room and pulled out the bottle of whiskey he’d hidden. He unscrewed the lid and gulped it down like water, sputtering and coughing when he couldn’t take the burning anymore, enjoying the pain. I deserve it. He thought, I’m the one who should be dead, not Steve. He downed the entire bottle as quickly as possible, but found he wasn’t nearly as drunk as he expected to be.

In another room down the hall, Peggy was doing nearly the exact same thing. First she’d allowed herself a good cry, then a bourbon. She’d been saving it for a special occasion. Death of the man you were falling in love with seemed like a pretty valid reason for bourbon.

When she ran out of liquor, she stood up and walked to the door which she opened to find Bucky about to knock.

“Sergeant Barnes,” she said in surprise, “How can I help you?”

“I just need somebody I can talk to about him,” Bucky said, pleading in his eyes, “You’re the only person here who knew Steve Rogers and not just Captain America.”

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment.

“And I brought whiskey,” he added.

She opened the door and stepped to the side.

“How are you holding up?” She asked.

He laughed coldly, “Are you kidding me?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to sound trite,” she said softly, “He meant the world to me too.”

“Y’know we grew up together? In Brooklyn. He was a frail, skinny thing. Hundred pounds soaking wet. All the fellas in school picked on him but he never would back down. Always fought back.”

Peggy nodded with a sad smile, “He once told me, ‘once you start running they’ll never let you stop.’ Would you like to sit down Sergeant Barnes?” She asked, gesturing to the couch.

He looked around the little room and noticed it was a little more furnished than his more barracks-type room. It resembled an officer’s room, with a little desk and chair, a coffee table and couch, threadbare but clean, and a full sized bed with nightstands instead of bunks.

“Thank you,” he said as he took a seat, “Y’know where he got that from?”

Peggy shook her head.

“Sarah Rogers. God rest her soul. That woman was some kind of fierce. She was a nurse. Irish and Catholic and a walking fucking stereotype but one of the strongest, kindest women I’ve ever met. She always told him to stand back up, no matter what knocked him down.” He took a long swig of the whiskey and passed the bottle to Peggy.

Peggy gulped some down and began, “I didn’t know Captain Rogers for long...”

“Please just call him Steve,” Bucky interrupted, “I know you two were on a first name basis and I didn’t come here for another eulogy. I came here to talk about the guy we both loved.”

She nodded slowly, “Steve... Was one of the most wonderful men I have ever had the good fortune to know. He reminded me much of my late brother. He didn’t believe in backing down either.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your brother. What happened to him?”

Peggy swallowed another drink of the liquor before biting out, “Nazi’s.”

Bucky gritted his teeth. “The Krauts have taken so much from us... Hydra has taken so much. I swear to God I’m not gonna stop until I’ve blown every single one of those bastards’ brains out.”

Peggy sighed, “When Steve and I were... falling in love... I found myself hoping the war would be over soon so we could be together. But now... His death is just another reminder

that even if we survive, even if we win, nothing will ever be the same again. The world has changed, and not for the better. I just don't know if I'm strong enough to live in it without him."

"You are," he said softly, "You are so strong. Steve really depended on you. You were his rock, the reason he stopped listening to the brass and went after Hydra in the first place. You and I? We're going to survive this. And if not then dammit we're gonna drag them to hell with us."

Tears were flowing down both their faces. Bucky pulled Peggy into his arms and gently traced the path of one of her tears with his fingertips. Their eyes met and suddenly the air felt thick. Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was the pain of losing Steve and the fact that the two of them were feeling the loss so much more deeply than anyone else around them. Whatever the reason, before he could stop himself, Bucky cupped her chin in his hands and softly kissed her lips.

It wasn't like he'd never thought about it. When she walked into the bar in that red dress, he had wanted nothing more than to tear it right off her. But she'd had eyes only for Steve, and he for her. Part of him had been jealous. He'd tried so hard to get Steve to date, so why couldn't he be happy now that Steve finally found a nice girl? And Peggy... The more he got to know her the less he enjoyed his bar-top fantasy. Not that he disliked her; she was incredible. Intelligent, brave, the most badass woman he'd ever met, and he knew forgetting her would be impossible. But she was Steve's girl, and far out of his league, and at the end of the day she was a fellow soldier, and too much like Steve for him to feel comfortable fucking her. And besides, Peggy was not the kind of girl you could fuck once and move on. Until tonight.

Peggy hadn't had much of a reaction at all when she first met Bucky. He'd seemed arrogant, sleazy, too much like every other soldier in the army. Besides, she was in love with Steve, the kind, brave, little man who'd taken a serum and turned into an Adonis. She barely would even look in his mouthy friend's direction. But Steve told her, in brief snatches, how much Sgt. Barnes meant to him and how he'd always been there for him when no else was. So she gave him a chance. And as she got to know him better she learned that much of Bucky's bravado was just to cover up the fact that he was a very sensitive person, much like Steve. Maybe more than Steve. He had no heroic ambition, no need for greatness or righteousness or vengeance. He was definitely her type, but she was in love with Steve. So she didn't really think about him much at all. Until their lips touched and something snapped in Peggy. Mummy's proper little girl, proper British lady, proper Bletchley codebreaker, proper SSR agent... She'd rebelled against the system, but always in subtle ways, respectful civil disobedience, pushing slowly on the glass ceiling by working harder and just being better. She'd never really been bad, never really indulged herself. Until tonight.

She pushed Bucky backwards so that he fell flat on his back on the bed. His eyes widened in fear and regret, rumors of the iron lady reminding him that she was not to be disrespected and telling him he was probably about to get wrecked. She didn't give him time for an apology though, tearing open his uniform and pouncing on him as she recaptured his lips in her own.

This was bad.

This was wrong.

This was the best friend of her dead love, on the night of his funeral. This was a fellow soldier, moreover, a subordinate. She was drunk, emotional, angry at the world and desperate for comfort. This was not okay, by any standard, in any universe.

But it felt so damn good.

She kissed him till the lack of oxygen stung her lungs, ripped his shirt off so hard that she broke a nail, clawed down his chest before she jerked his pants undone and palmed at the front of his underwear. Bucky's mind finally caught up with what was happening and his body unfroze and he tangled his hand in her hair, pulling and tugging at it just enough to make her moan into his mouth, pupils lust-blown so wide his eyes looked black. He pulled away from the kiss and helped her straddle his hips just right, his hand mirroring hers as he palmed at her underwear, pushing it aside to make sure she was wet enough, circling the clit and chuckling at the breathless gasp that elicited. Peggy responded by leaning down to kiss his neck for a moment or two before sinking her teeth into it. He hissed through clenched teeth and pushed her underwear to the side as she pulled his down and reached in, stroking him. He covered her hand and guided it up and down a few times before lining it up at her entrance. He looked in her eyes and waited for the eager nod, before lifting up his hips and burying himself in her as she threw her head back and cried out in pleasure.

Peggy had been engaged before, had gotten a little naughty in the back of boys' cars in secondary school, kissed Steve in dark rooms after briefings, pleased herself when the house was quiet and dark and no one could hear. But nothing came close to this. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she gasped for air, seeing stars, feeling so much pleasure at once, trying to adjust to the feeling of fullness between her thighs, thinking deliriously that she was a puzzle and this had been the missing piece. Bucky waited patiently for her to relax and when her breathing slowed and she twitched around him he asked, "You ready?"

"Mmmhm," she choked out.

He began his thrusts slowly and she began to moan as he placed his hands on her hips and guided her up and down. They found a slow rhythm and she returned to his lips to kiss them roughly as he pinched and flicked at her nipple with one hand, still guiding her hips with his other. As the waves of pleasure came higher and faster he released her lips to say, "Imma turn you over real quick, we can finish faster that way, kay?" She nodded almost hysterically and he wrapped his arms around her waist and held her tightly as he rolled them over, starting up his thrusts again as he picked up the pace, grabbing her wrists and pinning them roughly above her head as they gasped and moaned breathlessly. Peggy came with a cry and Bucky followed shortly after, body shuddering as he sagged forward and fell next to her.

For a few moments afterwards Peggy lay there, trying to collect her breaths and her thoughts. As the fireworks faded she began to realize what she'd done. She looked over at the breathless man at her side, Steve's best friend, marks from her mouth and her fingers all over him, looked down at her own naked body, the bruises forming around her nipples and fingerprints on her hips, the sticky cooling liquid drizzling out of her vagina and coating her thighs. Not Steve's. And no condom. Regret and terror washed over her and she said calmly, "Sergeant Barnes it's time for you to leave."

“Huh?”

“I said I think you need to leave,” she said louder.

He looked at her face and began in a concerned tone, “Look Peg, I’m so sorry if-”

“No, no, no, don’t apologize,” she choked out. “Just go. Now!” She grabbed up his clothes and threw them at him. He pulled them on quickly and ran out without another word. Her breath picked up again and she began to sob, the tears flowing down on her pillow as she curled up on her side and cried herself to sleep, alone and naked in the dark.

Aftermath

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bucky lay in his room, staring at the ceiling, not allowing himself to grieve anymore. He had gone to Peggy to honor Steve, and then dishonored him in such a personal way. How could he have slept with his best friend's girl on the night of his funeral? He stood up and pulled out another bottle of whiskey, drinking it like water and wondering why he still didn't feel drunk. What would he do tomorrow? How could he ever face Peggy again? Would she tell anyone about what had happened?

His logical mind told him that she was just as eager to keep this a secret as he was, but his paranoia told him to expect to have his sergeant's stripes ripped from his shoulders in the morning.

He drank the last few drops of whiskey and suddenly Steve's face flashed unbidden into his mind. "Take my hand!" He cried. Bucky wished he hadn't. He wished he'd let go, wished he'd fallen, wished he was dead.

The whiskey bottle shattered in his grip, glass shards falling around him and cutting into his palm. "Fuck!" he shouted, reaching to his bedside table and grabbing a shirt to wrap around his hand. With his other hand he picked up as many large pieces of glass as he could, then used his shoe to sweep the others into a pile. He then unwrapped his hand to find that the shirt was only a little bloody, and the glass had barely scraped through the first two layers of his skin. He shook his head and thanked whatever luck kept him from having to go to the medic and explain what had happened. After cleaning up the last of the glass he got back in bed and fell into a restless sleep, tormented by pictures of Steve falling and Peggy's tear-streaked face.

Peggy wasn't faring much better. The alcohol was wearing off and the knowledge of what she had done was slowly setting in, but so was a much more terrifying revelation. She'd had sex, with a subordinate, who happened to be her recently deceased boyfriend's best friend, on the night of his funeral... and she had enjoyed it. Even as guilty and horrible as she felt, she couldn't say for sure that she wouldn't make the same choice if she had known. And still worse, she couldn't promise herself that it would never happen again. She already missed Bucky's weight between her thighs.

But there were more practical concerns as well. If she was pregnant, her career in the SSR was over. She had always been so careful, so ambitious, fought so hard, and she'd thrown it away for what? A single night of unethical hedonism? She wrestled with her cognitive dissonance far into the night, and had come to no resolution by the time the sun began its climb.

She sighed heavily as she took her robe off and began dressing, wincing at the unfamiliar soreness. She looked into the mirror at the dark circles under her eyes and wished for the small luxury of some makeup. The circles under her eyes were forgivable of course - she and

Steve had been an open secret - but not so the hickey which danced threateningly at the edge of her shirt. She buttoned it one button higher than usual, hoping no one would notice. She smoothed down the front of her skirt and tried to ignore the way her desperate body keened at the feeling of friction against her bruised thighs, but as she smoothed it once again she neglected the wrinkles in favor of pressing the heel of her hand subtly against her pubic mound, sucking a sharp breath in between her teeth. Although she'd always had an appetite for the carnal, she'd managed it so well, only satisfying her cravings enough to keep the ravenous wolf at bay, but now that she'd given in once...

She ran her hands down her sides, fingers pressing into her ribcage and then dragging down to her thighs. She gave up pretending to straighten her clothes and turned towards the bed, bringing her fingers back up, this time traveling up the insides of her legs and pulling the skirt up with them before sitting on the edge. With one hand she cupped her breast, squeezing it through the cone-shaped bra and rough army blouse, and with the other she began circling the inside of her thigh. She slowly trailed upwards and had begun to toy with the top of her underwear when reveille sounded. She leapt to her feet and ran over to the mirror, straightening her clothes for real this time, before leaving the room to meet with Colonel Phillips and the remaining Howling Commandos.

When she reached the war room the men were already sitting around the table with Colonel Phillips standing at the head of it.

"Good morning, Carter," he said, a softer tone in his gruff voice, "C'mon in we were just getting started."

"Morning gentlemen," she nodded, as she slipped into the chair beside Dum Dum Dugan, careful to avoid Bucky's gaze from across the table.

Dum Dum elbowed her gently and mouthed, "You ok?"

She nodded and smiled gratefully at him, hoping she didn't look as miserable and hungover as she felt.

"Well here's the situation we're in." Col. Phillips said, "Captain America is dead, but Hydra has no way of knowing that. The question is this, do we tell the world that Hydra killed Captain America and hope that his status as a martyr will piss off enough American soldiers to make a difference, or try to convince the Krauts that he's still alive?"

"I say we tell the truth," Gabe said. "He was a beloved hero, and he inspired so many people in his life. His death will do the same. Besides, he deserves to be mourned."

"We can mourn him when the war is over and every damned Nazi is rotting in a grave," Peggy said hotly.

"She's right," Bucky added, "And you also gotta remember, people back home loved Captain America partly because they thought he was invincible. They thought he was... some kind of superhero or something. The chosen one who can put an end to that mustached son of a bitch once and for all. We can't let them know he was dead. Legends aren't allowed to die."

Peggy stole a little glance at him and noticed, to her fury, that he showed no damage from their tryst. He was every inch as put-together and handsome as always. Smug son of a bitch. How dare he sit there like that, calling Steve a legend, acting as if they hadn't desecrated his memory just hours ago?

"Well there's only so much leftover propo footage we can use," Col. Phillips said, "Sooner or later someone's gonna figure out Captain America isn't leaving the studio."

"So we replace him," Bucky said.

The entire table turned to him in shock.

"Look, I grew up with Steve. I know how he acts, know how he thinks. I have experience fighting with him, and even more military experience from before him. I may not be a superman, but that shield is bulletproof right? And I'm sure Stark could figure out a way for me to pull some stunts every now and then to keep up the legend."

"No way, Rogers was always the first target when we were out there. You wouldn't last a month!" Jim Morita said.

Dum Dum added, "We can't lose another brother."

"Please," Bucky begged, "He gave his life to save me. At least give me a chance to keep his legacy alive." He glanced at Peggy and noticed that she was looking down at the table in front of her. He knew he looked like shit, but she was so fucking beautiful, not a hair out of place, even after all they'd done the night before. She was clearly sad of course, but in an almost angelic, maternal way.

"Alright," Col. Phillips said with a sigh, "We'll give it a shot. Go to Stark, see what he can do for you in the way of fixing up the suit and making it look like you have powers. We'll work strategy harder than usual, use scare tactics and maneuvers to make sure you do as little close range fighting as possible. Stark made a backup suit and I think it'll fit you with a little altering."

With that Peggy stood up and choked out, "Excuse me gentlemen I'm... I'm not feeling well," before fleeing the room as gracefully as possible.

The men stared after her sympathetically, but didn't really know what to do.

"I'll go talk to her," Bucky volunteered.

He followed her down the hall and caught her by the elbow, "Peg," he began.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Peggy asked, tears flowing down her face.

"Honoring Steve."

"You'll be the target of every Hydra agent from here to Berlin, every waking moment of every day, coming at you from every direction with weapons we can't even comprehend. You can't possibly survive this."

"He died for me Peggy, I gotta do something to pay that back."

"Yes he died for you. But he chose to do that because he wanted to save you. He died so you could live, not go on some reckless suicide mission. Allow him the dignity of his choice!"

He shook his head, "You know I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I can't let his sacrifice be in vain."

"It isn't!" She cried, "And I can't lose you both."

"Peg," he said gently, reaching out to touch her cheek.

"Don't you dare touch me," she snarled, slapping his hand away, "Just because you're going to be the next Captain America doesn't give you the right to replace Steve in every regard."

He drew back, shaking from the stinging rebuke. With that she turned and ran away as he watched helplessly.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! I'm not sure what sort of upload schedule I'll be on but I'm really enjoying this concept which means the fic is pretty much writing itself so check back soon!

Adrenaline

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for reading and for being patient with my irregular uploading schedule! I've never written Howard Stark before so I was a little nervous about it but I really had fun. Hope you guys enjoy!

Howard Stark had been doing little more than drinking himself into oblivion since Steve died, and his lab was in shambles when Bucky entered it.

“Stark this place looks like shit!”

Howard sat up slightly from where he was lying on top of a desk, opening one eye slightly.

Bucky coughed, “And you smell like a bar. What the hell?”

“Everyone grieves in their own way,” he slurred, “Don’t judge me.”

Bucky rolled his eyes, “Well you gotta sober up,” he said, pulling Howard up to a seated position and taking his liquor bottle away from him, “There’s still a war on.”

“Yeah no shit, I’ve been flying planes in it and selling weapons for it since before you even enlisted.”

“Yeah I know buddy. You’re a hero, a genius, and a testament to American ingenuity. Now we need you again, but you’re no good to anybody if you’re wasted.”

“The hell do you want?”

“You gotta fix up some gadgets for me. I’m gonna be posing as Steve to keep up the allies' morale.”

“Fuck you, I will not.” Howard growled as he tried to snatch the bottle from Bucky, who shook his head and hopped back, holding the bottle above his head and out of Howard’s reach.

“Give it back, Barnes.”

“Not until you tell me how I can fool a bunch of Hydra soldiers into thinking I’m Captain America.”

“I refuse,” he said, folding his arms and pouting.

“C’mon, Stark, you can’t just drink your life away.”

Howard’s eyes cleared and he seemed coldly, tragically sober as he said, “No, what I refuse to do is send another Captain America out there to die.” He clenched his jaw and turned away as he continued, “All I’ve done my whole life is create destruction. He was the one good thing I’ve done, and now he’s gone too. I can’t go through that again.”

“Now you listen to me, Stark,” Bucky said darkly, grabbing him by the shoulder and spinning him around. He pretended not to notice the tears in Howard’s eyes so he could afford him what little sense of dignity and control he still had, “Steven Grant Rogers did not need you to be good. You did not make him who he was. All you did was give him the muscle to do what he’d been trying to do since his skinny ass was born. And if you’re worried about losing another good man then don’t, because I’m not. What I am is the guy who’s mad enough and desperate enough to go to my death and take Hydra down with me. You said you create destruction right? Then create destruction. Cuz that’s all I’ve got left to live for.” He tightened his grip on Howard’s shoulder and leaned so close that Howard could see the glint of his teeth as he added. “And if you can’t help me take down the fucking super science Nazis that are eating a hole in the allied forces then as far as I’m concerned you don’t have anything to live for either. Understand?”

Howard winced but he nodded. Bucky released him and he tried not to be too obvious as he shrunk away from him in terror.

“Good. I’m gonna go tell Colonel Phillips that you’ve got a fantastic, no - genius - plan. So you’d better sober up fast because I don’t wanna be around if he finds out that’s a lie.”

As he strode out of the room Howard pulled down his shirt collar to examine his shoulder. Already the blood was pooling into ugly massive bruises where Bucky had squeezed him, “May not even need to invent him anything, he can just manhandle Hydra to death,” he grumbled. Ordinarily he would have been concerned for the state of his lavender silk shirt, but it was already rumpled and stained from his days of binge drinking. How many was it now? Three? Four? A week? Nothing mattered anymore anyway.

Maybe Barnes was right though. Maybe he could make one last project. One last cursed invention to bring an Armageddon on this terrible world, Samson bringing down the Philistines with his dying breath. He trudged over to the percolator to make himself a cup of coffee. Not that it would taste much like the coffee he was accustomed to. But in wartime sacrifices had to be made.

After several fretful hours filled with shitty coffee, he was finally ready to bring a proposal to Colonel Phillips. He put on a fresh shirt, wincing as he adjusted the collar over the purple fingerprints. He wondered if his collarbone was a little cracked. "Just like my head," he thought dismally to himself. But what choice had he been given?

He stood in the war room at the head of the table, Colonel Phillips, Peggy, Bucky, and the Howling Commandos all watching him expectantly, waiting for the flash of Stark brilliance that would save the day. A Deus Ex Machina. Sadly, Howard was no god. He stared at the table, hesitant to make eye contact with the group as he began, “As you know, any hope of replicating Dr. Erskine’s formula pretty much died with Steve. And even if we’d had his

blood, there's a good chance we wouldn't have been able to reverse engineer the damn stuff for decades at least. I don't think it's too presumptuous to say I'm the best and brightest you have working on this and I don't have a clue how to turn Barnes into a supersoldier. So I started looking at tech. The problem there is that whatever Johann Schmidt is using to power his weapons is going to outmatch any technology we're capable of right now. And I don't know how to miniaturize any of my designs enough to fool him into thinking it's biological."

"I didn't call you in here for more questions Stark, I need answers dammit!" Colonel Phillips said angrily, "Barnes told me you had a genius idea, so what the hell is it?"

He shook his head, "This crosses the line of genius and falls on the side of madness. But it just might work. Steve Rogers wasn't the first person who has ever performed impossible physical feats, he just was able to heal faster and do them for longer."

"Howard, what are you saying?" Peggy asked.

He took a deep breath and looked directly into Peggy's eyes as he said slowly, "Mothers have lifted cars to rescue children trapped underneath them, people have survived below freezing temperatures or ripped the heads off of animals attacking them, medics carry wounded soldier after wounded soldier off the battlefield and don't get tired..." He looked around the table as he explained, "It's called hysterical strength. The human body is capable of incredible feats of strength and stamina. If you wanted to lift this table, or a car, or turn over a Hydra tank, you probably could, but your brain won't let you because it knows you'd injure yourself. But when you're in mortal danger your adrenaline kicks in and you do it anyway because the rewards outweigh the risk."

Danger and anger flashed in Peggy's eyes but Howard ignored it as he continued, "We'll try to use it as little as possible. Train a lot with the shield, try to fight from a distance, let the snipers take out everyone they can. But every mission, at least once, Barnes will take a serum of epinephrin and painkillers and do one big stunt. Keep the legend alive."

"Absolutely not!" Peggy said.

"Agent Carter!" Col. Phillips said in a reprimanding tone.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I cannot possibly allow this to go without objection. It's bad enough you're allowing Sergeant Barnes to assume Captain Rogers' duties at all, but if we do this we won't even be pretending to care about his life. This is assisted suicide, pure and simple. Of all the thoughtless, careless, rash inventions you've ever created Howard, this is by far the worst. How long can Sergeant Barnes survive this? Assuming Hydra manages to muck up killing Captain America for a second time."

"It depends on what he does and how many injuries he sustains, as well as his pain tolerance and recovery time in between battles-"

"How long Howard?"

"Months. At best."

“We’ll take it,” Col. Phillips said, “If we play our cards right a few months is all we’ll need to crush Hydra.”

“Sir you can’t be serious! This is highly unethical at best and shoddy strategy at worst! What if you haven’t defeated Hydra by the time he dies, will you just keep sacrificing more false Captain Americas to them until you do?” Peggy cried out passionately.

“Agent Carter, with all due respect, your opinion does not matter here. I’m the one commanding these men, I’m in command of Sergeant Barnes, and I’m the one whose ass is on the line if Captain America doesn’t make good on his promise to crush Hydra. Besides, Barnes already volunteered for this, no conditions and no exceptions. He understands what it means to make a sacrifice for his country, do you? I get that you’re still hurting over the death of your boyfriend and he meant a lot to every single person at this table, but right now you’re the only one dangerously close to insubordination. So either you prove to me and to the brass that I wasn’t a damn fool for bringing a woman out here or you go back home and find some way to support the war effort that won’t offend your gentle sensibility. You understand me?”

“Yes Colonel,” she said softly.

“Alright. Stark, Barnes, you two stay here and talk through the logistics of this with me. Everyone else, you are now dismissed.”

Still stinging from Colonel Phillips’ words and the idea of sending Bucky to the slaughter, Peggy went back to her room to drown her sorrows in bourbon.

Unfinished

Peggy was deeper into the bottle than she ever normally allowed herself to get, telling herself bitterly that nothing mattered anyway, that this was the end of the world, that Steve was dead, Bucky was going to die, the rest of the Howling Commandos would follow him, and that eventually Johann Schmidt and Hitler and the rest of the Nazi and Hydra goons would just swarm all over the free world anyway. The bourbon wasn't burning like it used to. That probably meant something but she didn't care to process it now.

She heard a knock on the door and froze for a second. She stared at the bottle and then caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror. Her makeup was smeared, her hair was disheveled and limp and tangled, her shirt was un-tucked from her skirt, and the stubborn little spark she usually saw in her eyes was gone. She felt like a drab reflection of her former self, the ghost of who Peggy Carter used to be. When she'd left Bletchley, left her husband at the altar, left her mother and all of her mother's hopes and dreams and expectations, she'd thought she was doing that for a good cause. For something greater than herself. For freedom. But this? This wasn't what she'd thrown her life away for.

"Peg?" Dum Dum called out as he knocked again.

"Just a moment please!" She called, searching for an excuse, "I'm... uh... naked."

She hastily pulled the dangling pins out of her hair and ran her fingers through it, wrapped her robe around herself and hid the bottle before opening the door.

"How can I help you Sergeant Dugan?" She said, blinking at him and trying to smile.

"Peg, we send Bucky off tomorrow, do you really think it's a good idea to be drinking?"

She bristled, "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

He looked at her sternly, "If you're gonna lie to somebody, lie to somebody that doesn't recognize the smell of bourbon."

"Well what are you here for, other than critiquing my choices?"

He scuffed his boot across the ground and slowly pulled a little book from behind his back, "Colonel uh... found Cap's sketchbook. He didn't have any family so we didn't really know what to do with it but we... I thought you might like to have it."

At that her expression softened, and she reached out to grab the sketchbook.

He lifted out of reach and shook his head, "Not unless you promise to drink some water."

She narrowed her eyes and tried to put on her best Do-As-Peggy-Says face, to no avail. "Fine, I've been drinking a bit. But if there was ever good enough reason to I have it."

“I don’t disagree with you,” he said carefully as he handed the sketchbook to her, “And I wish you could cry and scream and get drunk and stay in bed until the pain eases. But Peg, I don’t think you understand just how much we need you. Steve Rogers would never have been Captain America without you, and Bucky certainly doesn’t stand a chance. I’m not askin’ you to not grieve. I’m just askin’ you to... put it away for a little while. And I know I’ve got no right to ask that of you but I’m not lying when I say I really don’t see us winning the war without you.”

If Dum Dum saw a sparkle of tears in Peggy’s eyes as she nodded he certainly didn’t mention it, and if Peggy noticed an extra amount of compassion in his smile as he wished her goodnight and closed the door, she certainly didn’t complain.

She sat down on the bed and looked at the sketchbook in quiet reverence, stroking the cover as gently as she would have touched Steve’s cheeks. With shaking hands she opened it to the first page. It was a sketch of a woman in a nurse’s uniform who looked to be in her early forties, blond hair pulled into a bun, her eyes tired but bright and kind. The sketch ended just below the shoulders, and was wreathed in lilies and pale roses. From James’ description and a dried teardrop on the page Peggy guessed this must have been Sarah Rogers, Steve’s mother.

She flipped through some sketches of Brooklyn, of Coney Island, of a house, of a soldier in a uniform. Then she landed on a sketch of Bucky. She would have recognized those eyes anywhere, but so much else about him was unrecognizable. He’d been captured on the page in the middle of a laugh, dimples prominent and wrinkles around the corners of his eyes, pearly teeth flashing brightly. This was nothing like the cold, ironic smiles and sarcastic laughs she’d seen from him. This was unbridled joy and peace. He’d felt safe and he’d been happy. He wasn’t in uniform, but rather in a soft white shirt and suspenders. He was perched on the railing of a bridge, one knee up, an overflowing popcorn bag in his hand, a piece falling to the ground. She wished she had been able to meet this Bucky. And yet even then she was sure she would have fallen in love with the shy quiet man sketching him. So why was she still staring at the page?

The next sketch was the one of the monkey in the star spangled suit that she’d seen Steve drawing the day she’d convinced him to go save the 107th. She remembered that day like it was yesterday. The heat she’d felt despite the cold rain when Steve had stood close to her. The excitement of doing the right thing even though it was going against orders and against the low expectations everyone had for them. The fear that he wouldn’t make it out alive and the relief when he did... That was the moment she’d started to really believe they could win. To believe in Captain America. And to believe in herself.

When she turned to the next page she nearly burst into tears. Steve had begun drawing an image of the two of them dancing on a ballroom floor. Her face had been rendered in loving detail, ruby red lips parted in a smile, eyes gazing up at him through long lashes, hair falling around her shoulders, fingers resting lightly on his shoulder. His hand was on her waist, and he was dressed in a dark suit, but as she traced the lines with her fingertips they fell short right at his shoulder. He hadn’t drawn his own face. How bitterly appropriate, she thought, for the only image of them together to be incomplete, for the only dance she would ever have

with him to be unrealized, with only emptiness where he should be. Teardrops fell on the page and she frantically patted them dry with the hem of her nightgown. He was really gone.

She wished there had been a body in the coffin. As much as seeing Steve lying twisted and lifeless would have hurt, it would have been better than the alternative. A tiny part of her was still waiting on him to burst through the door. The serum had made him so strong, so resilient... But no one could have survived that fall. And even if he had survived, mangled and bloody, he would have frozen to death at the bottom of the hill.

It was time to move on.

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Given the nature of Howard's concoction, the testing phase was rather short and unconventional. Many of the lab rats' hearts simply gave out, but a few tweaks to the formula had them performing amazing stunts before they died, unbothered by pain or fear. They couldn't afford human trials, but Bucky was more than willing to test it out. He lifted some weights, ran some laps, and took a few punches from Dum Dum without flinching, but it wasn't like they could shoot him or make him lift a car, so they had to rely on faith.

Howard outfitted the suit with as much extra bulletproofing as he could without drastically altering its shape, and handed it to Bucky with a somber smile. He accepted it gratefully and excused himself to the bathroom to get suited up.

It fit him well, considering it was made for someone else. The added protection Howard had put in the suit made it a little bulky, but still flexible enough to fight in. He walked over towards the mirror and took a deep breath as he pulled the cowl over his head and adjusted it so that he could see out of the eyes. When he gazed at his reflection he was surprised to find Captain America staring back at him instead of Bucky Barnes. He wondered if Steve felt the same way when he'd worn this suit - his own identity so completely stripped away and replaced by the weight of what being Captain America meant. Tears welled in his eyes and he watched helplessly as they turned to blue, the mouth that wasn't his pulling into a gentle smile he didn't feel.

"I'm with ya till the end of the line pal," Steve said.

Bucky began to tremble and the tears flowed freely from his eyes as he swallowed hard, "You're not here. You're not real. You're dead."

"C'mon Buck, you know you can't kill Captain America," the reflection said, his smile widening just a little too much, eyes dead, white teeth glinting.

"I'm not Captain America, I'm not you. This isn't right."

Steve's reflection stopped smiling suddenly and answered sharply, "Of course you aren't me and of course this isn't right. You never should have put on this suit. You don't deserve it. But you couldn't save me, so now you have to save everybody else. Everybody I would have saved if you had died on that train like you were supposed to."

The reflection began to smile again, a twisted, mocking grin, eyes black and glittering as he saluted and began to sing in a slow discordant tone, “Who’s strong and brave, here to save the American way?”

“Stop it!” Bucky hissed.

“The star spangled man with a-”

“I said STOP IT!!!” Bucky shouted as he punched mirror Steve in the face, cutting short the last melancholy lyric with the sound of shattering bits of glass.

His hands shook as he tore the cowl off his face, his breath coming out in loud panicked heaves, his heart racing. He worked up the courage to look back at the mirror and saw nothing but his own shattered reflection, twisted and scarred, with pieces missing where the glass had fallen on the floor. He looked down at his knuckles to wipe the blood away, only to notice that the skin was barely scratched. He ran a hand through his hair and tried to slow his breathing as he sank to the ground, trying to take it all in.

When he left the bathroom the Howling Commandos were gathered around, in the most “act natural” pose imaginable. He chose to pretend he didn’t notice that, and they pretended they hadn’t heard him scream. Before he could say anything he was interrupted by the sound of clicking heels. They turned to see Peggy walking through the door, not the faded shadow she had been since Steve’s death, but the confident, brave, authoritative woman who first joined the SSR and pushed past ever barrier set up for her. She hesitated for a moment when she saw Bucky in the suit, but she brushed off the distraction and strode to the middle of the room.

“Right, so we’re doing this.” She turned to Bucky and addressed him directly, “Now you listen to me. I am damned tired of hearing your suicidal melancholia. Maybe this plan isn’t our ideal, but it’s a sight better than anything anyone else came up with so it’ll have to do. Steve Rogers did not give his life so we could all sit around like wailing widows and figure out the quickest way to follow him. If we’re doing this we’re going to do it right. Johann Schmidt may have aliens or gods on his side but we’ve got the brightest minds of the allied forces here. Captain America was formidable, but he would have been able to do very little without his team. That team is still alive and well and ready to dispatch Hydra to the depths of hell. We use strategy, we use insurgency tactics, and by God we make this work. Who’s with me?”

The boys cheered and clapped in agreement, and Dum Dum smiled softly, “Sounds like you’ve got a plan Peg. Wanna share?”

She nodded with a twinkle in her eye and asked, “Where’s Zola?”

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