

Body Of Years

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Body Of Years

by [MellowJam](#)

Summary

Captain America doesn't find out about The Winter Soldier being James "Bucky" Barnes before Zemo publicly exposes mission report of Dec 16 1991. The race to whoever will find The Asset first, either to take revenge or save him, is enough to split the Avengers appart. Then the Blip happens and Thanos is defeated. But cut off one head and two more will grow. When Hydra re-emerges, they take advantage of Captain America's retirement to eliminate all potential threat to their new arising, and that means killing Baron Helmut Zemo, the man who knows more about Hydra's Winter Soldier program than anyone else.

Notes

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

Chapter 1

The re-emergence of Hydra isn't a surprise to Zemo. Cut one head off and two more will grow. People are easily corrupted and so Zemo never expected to actually grow old in a cell. He knows too much to stay alive, and even though he never actually found the Winter Soldier, he did destroy all of his kins along with important operators of Hydra's Super Soldier program.

Solitary treats him well enough, probably because even though his attempt on Iron Man's life had put him on the Super Hero bench for a long time, the man had felt bad enough about the whole Ultron shit show to pay for some of Zemo's luxuries. That included books, daily walks in the yard, cigarettes, a TV and other items from the outside world that Zemo indulges almost everyday. His anger has dulled over the years, and even though his failure in finding Sergeant James Barnes, or what remains in the empty shell Hydra has made of him, he is grateful that the disagreement over the signature of the treaty alongside the fracture between Iron Man and Captain America had been enough to break the Avengers up. He is responsible for it, of course, with him exposing The Winter Soldier's real identity and his involvement in Howard and Maria Stark's deaths, which then triggered a wild hunt for who was to save or kill him first.

People are easy when motivated by revenge or by love. He isn't an exception. But now that his desire to get back at the « heroes » who indirectly killed his family is sated, he doesn't have much to look forward to. He simply wants to be allowed one last trip to the Sokovian Memorial before some Hydra goon puts a bullet in his head.

What he does not expect though, is for Hydra to be stupid enough to send the actual Winter Soldier after him. They probably thought it would be a witty move to have him shot by the man he spent so many months hunting down, but all it takes for Zemo to disable their precious weapon is for him to recite a list of words in Russian and the Asset falls back behind him like a puppet changing hands.

He is surprised that the Soldier has never been found by Steve Rogers considering how much time and energy he spent looking for him. But again, the Soldier is still a living being despite everything, and he might have been wiped alongside half the population in the Blip. Now, with Stark being dead and Steve Rogers being an old man, there's nobody looking for him anymore. The new Hydra has dusted off their ancient armory and resorted to the good old methods. What a bunch of imbeciles.

Now the alarm is blaring and he has the burden of a Super Soldier awaiting his next order and not moving until he tells him to. Which is fine, now that the man has broken the prison's bars like you snap a stick in half, he is free to escape in his own fashion. He does order the Soldier to flee before he steals a previously knocked off guard's uniform and uses the chaos caused by the Winter Soldier break in and sneaks out.

It's not difficult in any way, he just walks out while the guards look for the mysterious visitor who triggered the alarms. He breaks in the window of one of the cars parked outside. It's a

grey Volkswagen like many others, which makes it easy to blend in within Berlin's busy traffic.

It's difficult for him to realize he is finally free after 8 years of solitary, and a little overwhelming too, but he manages to find his way back to one of his family's many holiday houses in Berlin's surrounding countryside, and only then can he rejoice in breathing in the fresh air and being able to look at the night sky.

The moon is full tonight, and Berlin is far enough he can make out the stars without the pollution obstructing the sight. It reminds him of his time in Sokovia, when he used to take his son Carl out in the mountains with nothing but a telescope and a few snacks. He finds in these memories a cathartic effect, like balm on a sore wound. He is still grieving, and he knows the pain will never go away, but at least he still has those quiet moments to cling to. Now that the anger has been replaced with longing, he has nothing but death to look forward to.

He parks the car in his garage and opens the backdoor using the key hidden under one of the empty flower pots. The adrenaline is starting to wear off, but he still has to call Oeznik and inform him of his impromptu escape. He will start planning as soon as he is in his right state of mind, which soon leads him to the unmade bed he immediately crashes into. The mattress is dusty and the pillows smell stale, but it is already much better than the prison's bunks. He falls asleep still wearing the stolen uniform.

When he wakes up, it's to a silhouette standing by the bed. Judging by the stillness of the scene, he guesses the man has been here for a while and he curses himself for not waking up immediately after feeling his presence. He makes a move to grab the pistol he knows is in the bed-stand and point the loaded barrel at the shadow bleeding out on his expensive carpet. Prison has made him soft.

The presence doesn't move, even after being threatened by Zemo's gun. It's not difficult to guess who it is, judging by the unnatural stance and the lack of reaction. Fuck. He had not expected The Winter Soldier to be so loyal to whoever speaks the words, especially after such a confused first approach.

« How did you find me? » He asks, annoyed by the unexpected turn of events and moreso by his lack of carefulness in his sloppy escape maneuver.

« Я следил за машиной. » (I followed the car.)

The words are muffled by the mask and Zemo's Russian is rusty, but he still manages to understand the rough words coming out of Hydra's Fist.

« Does anyone else know about my current location? »

« нет, сэр. » (No, sir.)

« Did you make sure of it? » He knows if the Winter Soldier assures him he has not been followed, then he has not, but he still asks.

« Я избавился от автомобиля и любого потенциального свидетеля. » (I got rid of the car and of any potential witnesses.)

Zemo can't say he is relieved with the implication that innocent people might have been involved with this rushed cover-up, but he feels somehow thankful towards the Asset for fixing his own mistakes without being prompted to.

There's a long uncomfortable silence hanging in the room, at least on his part since The Winter Soldier doesn't seem bothered by any social standards. Only then is he reminded that the man is still bleeding and does not seem inclined to doing anything about it. He sighs and sits up on the mattress, trying to determine where all that blood is coming from. « Вы ранены. » (You're hurt.) He switches to the little Russian he knows and gestures to the soldier to come closer. « Make a report on your physical health, солдат. In english. »

Hydra's soldier tenses at the order, like he expects to be punished for letting himself get hurt. Zemo knows he has been before.

« Bullet wound to the left leg. Right wrist is most likely broken. My thirst levels are unsatisfactory. My hunger levels are unsatisfactory. My hygiene levels are unsatisfactory. »

It is like expecting a malware report from a computer with a heavy Russian accent, and Zemo can't help but feel sick at what the Soldier had to endure to be dehumanized to this point. He already knows from the files that the Winter Soldier has never been more than a weapon to Hydra, but witnessing it is even more troubling.

« Okay. Okay, let's go take care of that then. »

He gets up and gestures to the soldier to sit on the bed while he goes and searches for the first aid kit that's been sitting in his bathroom for god knows how long.

« Undress. » he orders again.

The soldier does. Even though the man is beautiful, there's nothing erotic in the way he takes his tack and clothes off and folds them carefully on the bed, only keeping his underwear on. He hesitates before he takes the mask off, but Zemo nods encouragingly and he does. The mask has left a slight indent in the man's sweaty skin, which makes Zemo guess that he hasn't taken it off for a while now.

There's a slight flinch when he kneels in front of the man and carefully encourages him to splay his legs so he can inspect the wound more closely. He immediately takes his hand off. Like he said, he has read the files. He knows how uncomfortable it must be for the Soldier to be in that position.

« I'm not going to touch you without your consent, I just want to take care of that bullet wound. Is that okay? »

The Soldier doesn't answer, probably not expecting his approbation to have any effect on what is about to happen. Disgusting, Zemo thinks.

« I will need an answer, солдат. »

The Soldier looks right through him, empty eyes and a disconnected mind.

« Yes, sir. »

That will do for now, so Zemo gets to work. He has to take the bullet off before the Serum starts rebuilding tissue around it. He expects the man to have a reaction to the messy operation, but he stays painfully still and quiet. It's easy to sew him back up with how easy the Soldier is to work on, but that only serves in making Zemo more uncomfortable. He takes care of bandaging that wrist as well, and as soon as he is finished, he gets back up and takes a step back, giving the Soldier some space and making sure not to touch him unnecessarily.

« Alright. You can go wash yourself while I salvage whatever is in the kitchen. Don't wet the bandages. »

The Soldier seems confused at the order, like he doesn't exactly know where to go from there, so Zemo just points at the bathroom doors.

« Shower is this way. »

The Soldier obeys silently and Zemo has to take a deep breath before he heads to the kitchen to rummage through the kitchen in search of anything still edible. He finds an unopened pack of spaghetti and a can of peeled tomatoes and is set on cooking those when he hears some noise coming from the bathroom. He swears and heads directly there, only to be surprised by how much vapor is coming out when he opens the door. The Soldier is in the bathtub, using only the shower head and standing under burning water because he only bothered to open one of the taps, looking confused as to which soap to use. In his struggle, he has made the few bottles of shampoo fall to his feet and now he can't keep his eyes off of Zemo, looking like a child caught with a hand in the cookie jar.

When Zemo takes a step towards him to turn off the water, he flinches and almost hugs the tile wall, closing his eyes as if to expecting a hit.

« Sit down. Here, let me help you. »

The Soldier hesitates for only a second, and sits in the bathtub instead of simply standing under the shower head. Zemo is careful when he turns on the taps, and fills the tub with warm water and some slightly scented soap. He uses a different bottle when he pours shampoo in the Soldier's already wet hair and carefully washes them. It's nothing but efficient, but the slight massage is enough for the man to relax under his fingers. He then uses the shower head to rinse it all and makes sure no more soap remains in the long strands.

« Stay in here as long as you want. Food will be ready in the kitchen. I will leave clothes for you on the bed. »

The Soldier nods and stays awkwardly seated in the tub, confused and careful not to wet his right arm. Before Zemo leaves, he hears a quiet « Thank you, sir. » and that's enough for Zemo to offer a tight smile and close the door behind him.

Fact is, the man might be one of the 20th century's deadliest killing machines, he is completely useless without anyone to take care of him. Which makes Zemo's plans to leave the man to his own devices now obsolete. He can not allow the Soldier to go back to Hydra in need of some sort of guidance, and he clearly identifies Zemo as his new handler. He might as well use this to his own benefit and point Hydra's own weapon back at them. He is being hunted down anyway, a bodyguard will do no harm and he is certain the Soldier is better off staying with him until he feels independent enough to leave than back in the chair or on ice.

By the time the Soldier is finally out of the shower, food is ready and waiting for him on the table. He stands awkwardly in the kitchen, wearing clothes that are too small for him, and Zemo has to entice him to eat for the man to devour the entire saucepan of pasta and down two large glasses of tap water.

« Do you feel better ? »

The Soldier nods, looking like he wants to speak out but knowing better.

« What is it, солдат? » Zemo encourages.

« Permission to speak, sir ? »

« Of course. You don't have to ask permission for that. »

The Soldier looks even more confused at that, and frowns, not daring to look at Zemo in the eyes.

« Are you my new handler? »

Zemo doesn't actually know what to answer to that. In a sense, he has taken upon the role of the Soldier's handler by using the trigger words. But that doesn't seem right, and so he carefully chooses the next words to try and explain that to the Soldier.

« I am colonel Helmut Zemo. I am not part of Hydra. Actually, Hydra sent you after me because I know a lot about you and your programming. I used the trigger words to save my life and escape from prison. Do you remember? » He asks carefully.

« I ... I don't remember wanting to kill you. »

It probably goes against his programming to think of his handler as a target, so it makes sense he doesn't remember, Zemo thinks.

« I am not part of Hydra so I do not wish for you to see me as one of your handlers. You are free to leave whenever you want and do as you please here. As much as you are free to stay if you do not feel ready to go your own way. »

The offer seems to distress the Soldier. His eyes are wild and fearful, like he doesn't know what to do with being given an actual choice. Zemo puts a hand on his shoulder and tries to smile as warmly as he can. He feels like he is trying to soothe a wounded animal.

« I understand it might be a little overwhelming at first, but as I said, you are welcome to stay here with me. As long as you need guidance, I can give it to you. »

He has no doubt the surface programming will eventually fade away. He has read reports about the Soldier starting to remember bits of his past life and showing signs of « instability » after being left out of ice for a long time.

At this, the Soldier seems to relax just a bit and Zemo takes his hand off his shoulder and goes to the living room to improvise a bed on the couch for the Soldier to sleep on for the rest of the night. He provides a thick blanket and the less dusty pillow he owns which seems to be more than underwhelming when he notices the Soldier staring at the couch like it has offended him.

« Do you prefer the bed ? »

« I prefer the floor. » The Soldier blurts out. Then he seems to realize his mistake and bashfully adds a quiet « sir » to his protest. It's not abnormal for soldiers to have trouble sleeping on beds after coming back from war. Zemo himself had suffered from the overwhelming comfort the marital bed had provided, often preferring the couch over his wife's welcoming arms. He simply nods and sets the blankets on the floor, making sure it's still comfortable enough for the Soldier to have a decent few hours of sleep, despite everything.

His new companion quietly thanks him and settles in the makeshift nest that's been set for him. He doesn't close his eyes before Zemo leaves the room, and even then, Zemo doesn't know if the man will actually rest, but tiredness is catching up to him and contrary to the other man, he is not a super soldier and needs his beauty sleep. He takes off the uniform he is still wearing, takes a quick shower and settles in his own bed, ready to sleep through the rest of the night.

If he notices the soldier moving his blanket and pillow into Zemo's room to settle next to his bed a few hours later, he doesn't say a word about it.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

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

When Zemo wakes up, the Soldier is still sleeping.

He has moved his makeshift bed next to Zemo's during the night, and is now curled up on himself, hugging his knees against his chest. It's a pitiful sight and Zemo can't help but feel bad for the man. Hydra has carved him so deep, he wonders if James « Bucky » Barnes is still in there somewhere, or if he has been erased alongside any will or want. At this point, it probably is easier for both them to use him as a weapon than coax his humanity out.

Zemo is all hard determination and cold cruelty, but he has principles. No matter how bad they are, nobody deserves to be abused to this point. It's even worse to know that James Barnes was a good man, a good soldier, and according to Steve Rogers himself, a good friend.

He tries to sneak out of bed quietly, knowing that Oeznik is probably already on his way here to drive them to the airport. He somehow manages to do that without waking the Soldier up, which is no small achievement. His guest must be exhausted, which is the only reason he doesn't hear Zemo close the door behind himself to drown out the noise he makes when he gets ready for the day.

It's strange to step back into the role of Baron Zemo, and even stranger to see he still fits perfectly into his old designer clothes. He makes himself some out of date tea and drowns it with sugar just to quell the hunger in his stomach. He was so set on feeding the Soldier last night, he had forgotten his own needs.

His quiet contemplation of a newly acquired freedom and of a terrible tea he doesn't even finish is interrupted by the door bell ringing. He grabs the gun from last night and goes to open the door. He knows it's more likely to be Oeznik than anyone else, but he can not be sure and he would rather be ready to protect Hydra's stolen goods still sleeping in the bedroom.

Fortunately, all he sees in the peephole is his butler, and he unlocks the door to welcome the man inside. They share a hug, because Zemo can't help but feel overwhelmed by the sight of an old friend, and he quietly blesses the man when he notices the bag of take-out food he is holding in his left hand.

« I thought you might have been hungry, considering how I neglected to take care of this property and refill the cupboards, sir. »

Zemo snorts and shakes his head.

« Nonsense. You couldn't have known I would escape and settle here, Oeznik. »

They share some small talk about the butler's health and family before the familiar sound of a trigger's security clicking into place interrupts them. Zemo can't help but be annoyed at the interruption.

« Now, now, солдат. That is in no way how you welcome a friend. Lower your weapon. »

Oeznik has already been informed of his master's guest and politely greets the Soldier, unperturbed. The Asset however, doesn't look too eager to stop pointing his gun at the man's head. He obeys nonetheless, a big frown on his well-rested face.

« I didn't want to wake you up. Did you sleep alright? »

The Soldier grunts some answer and Zemo sighs.

« Use your words, солдат. »

« You should have woken me up, sir. »

« You needed the rest. » He answers peacefully, taking a cup of coffee out of Oeznik's bag and holding it to the Soldier.

« Come eat with me. We still have time to have breakfast before we leave. »

The Soldier obeys and comes to sit between him and Oeznik, not letting go of his weapon.

« You can trust him, солдат. He is a trustworthy ally. Oeznik has been serving my family for generations and has yet to disappoint me. »

« You flatter me, sir. » The butler answers, visibly pleased with the praise.

The Soldier frowns deepens at that. He glances at the man, obviously seizing him up, as if wondering what makes him better at servicing Zemo than him. That makes the Baron smile, amused by the silent defiance. He does have to cut their non-verbal conversation short to ask if Oeznik has brought everything he asked. The older man nods and brings the larger bag he has left in the entrance. He hands it to the Soldier, who doesn't make a move to take it from him.

« Don't be difficult, солдат. Those are clothes. We are leaving for France this morning. I have a safehouse there that even Hydra will struggle to find. We do have to get you dressed before though. My own clothes hardly fit you. » Zemo offers an encouraging smile and the Soldier takes the bag, already getting up to change. Zemo gently grabs his metal wrist and holds him back. That makes the Soldier freeze. He lets go. « Eat your breakfast first. »

He takes one of the viennoiserie out of the bag and slides it across the table towards the Soldier.

« A nusszopf. Try it. »

The delicacy disappears in two bites, which irks Zemo but he guesses that the Soldier isn't exactly used to enjoying his meals. Hydra probably fed him just enough to have him

functioning, not caring about tastes or enjoyment. It is fine, they will have plenty of time to work on that, along with other things.

While the Soldier changes, Oeznik and himself are set on getting rid of any proof that this house has been recently inhabited. Zemo does have to pause himself when he sees the other man coming out of the bedroom, looking terribly elegant with the suit Oeznik has picked up for him. His hair is still disheveled, but Zemo makes quick work of it when he crosses the room with a grin and clears his throat.

« You look good, солдат. Oeznik really does have good taste. Allow me ? »

The Soldier nods, squatting down just a little to allow Zemo to try and tame his unruly hair. He presses his fingers in between the messy strands and repeats his movements for a few quiet seconds, only satisfied when the Soldier feels relaxed and putty in his hands. He swears if the man could, he would be purring right now.

The moment is broken when Oeznik clears his throat to get his master's attention. Zemo takes a step back and frowns. Distraction isn't a thing he is allowed until they are out of the country.

« You're right, Oeznik, we need to go. I assume you already called someone to take care of the evidence of our stay here? »

« Yes, sir. Miss Catherine will arrive as soon as we leave. »

« A shame, I would have loved to see her again. How grown she must be now. »

« I will tell her you regret not meeting her, sir. »

The ride to the airport is long and boring. Despite being loyal and ready to serve his new handler, the Winter Soldier is not a great conversationalist. Zemo is set on reading a book on his newly acquired phone instead, and the Soldier is grateful that he is not trying to amorce any kind of small talk.

Eventually, they make it to a private airport, where a jet is waiting for them on the runway. Just how rich is this handler exactly? The Soldier has not dared asking yet, but now he is really curious about the man's situation. He did introduce himself as a colonel, but there must be more to it. It is not his place to question him so he doesn't ask, but he doubts he would be punished for his inquisitiveness.

He watches his handler hug the suspicious butler and thank him for everything, bidding him farewell for now. He doesn't trust the man, but again, it is not his place to question his handler's frequentations so he doesn't express his discontentment. All he does is glare at this « Oeznik », who approaches him after the handler has climbed up into the plane.

« I trust you to take care of Master Zemo. »

He doesn't answer, but the look he gives the old man is enough to make him understand that he would die before anyone even breathes wrong in the direction of his handler. Who does he even think he is? He is the Winter Soldier, the best trained assassin of the century. He is more than capable of protecting his handler.

The butler seems to understand that and smiles.

« I am getting too old to be of any use for our master, but I trust you will accomplish things I can not do anymore. »

The Soldier nods.

The butler leaves and he joins his handler in the plane.

The man is already sitting in one of the luxurious seats of the plane, a glass of champagne in hand and a grin on his face.

« Come and sit, my dear солдат. We will be taking off soon. »

The handler looks like he is in a good mood. He obeys and takes a seat opposite him.

« How are your wounds by the way? » His handler asks, looking actually concerned.

« Healed. The wrist still feels slightly uncomfortable but it won't influence my ability to fight, sir. »

He needs to prove himself valuable to the man. This is the best handler he ever had, it wouldn't do if he became useless to him. He doesn't want to go back to the chair and wait out for his body to heal under the ice.

Of course, his handler seems to be able to read into his mind, because he immediately answers:

« I cannot lie, your skills are valuable to me, солдат, but even if they weren't, I would not send you away until you feel capable of leaving on your own. » The tone is cold, but it is somewhat reassuring to hear how serious his handler is with the matter. « I told you, you do not owe me anything and you are free to refuse any suggestion I make you. More-so, if you ever need anything, you only have to ask and I shall do my best to provide it for you. »

The offer is tempting, and he wants to dig his claws into it and abuse the opportunity. There's a whisper in his mind that encourages him to put the limitations to the test and ask for something. It is not like he is not used to punishments, if the demand feels out of place or offensive his handler he will gladly endure it.

« Sir ? »

Zemo is back to reading his book on his phone, barely looking up before he answers the Soldier.

« Yes, dear? »

« Would you brush my hair again? »

There's no pause, no surprise that the Soldier can read on his handler's face. On the contrary, the man immediately scoots over and pats the seat next to him.

The soldier obeys the silent order and lets his head be guided onto his handler's lap. He doesn't even have time to think about what is happening before a hand is his hair, brushing out strands with delicate fingers. He stays still, too afraid to break the moment. Eventually though, he relaxes enough to allow his eyes to close.

When he opens them again, it's because there's the back of a hand brushing against his cheek and a voice calling out his name.

« солдат ? I'm sorry to wake you, but I'm afraid my legs have gone numb. Would you mind getting up for a bit? »

He feels mortified at his carefulness. Not only has he fallen asleep, leaving his handler without protection, but he also has inconvenienced him enough to cause discomfort. He has been punished for less than that before, and for a few seconds, he forgets how forgiving his handler is. He almost jumps off the couch, wild and panicked and ashamed.

« I am sorry sir, I should not have fallen asleep, even less on your lap. I will accept any punishment you see fit. »

Zemo might not have been surprised when he had asked him to brush his hair, right now he is looking at him with big brown eyes, head slightly tilted on the side like he often does when he tries to make sense of the Soldier's behavior.

« No. » He simply says.

The Soldier jumps slightly at the harshness of the word.

« No? Sir? » He asks, voice still heavy with sleep and anguish.

« No. I will not punish you for such a thing. You were tired and comfortable, it was only natural for you to fall asleep. » He sighs and discards his phone on the small tablet in front of him. « I already told you, солдат. I am not your handler, I will not discipline you nor will I punish you, even if you think you made a mistake. »

« I don't ... I don't understand. »

His handler gets up and steps in front of him, immediately squatting down to be able to look into his eyes. He carefully places a hand on the Soldier's knee and smiles. The position must be so uncomfortable with his legs previously rendered numb, but he doesn't show any sign of discomfort, or at least hides it well.

« You will, eventually. You are not Hydra's weapon anymore, солдат. You are free to take advantage of what is offered, as much as you are allowed to refuse to, as the Americans say, 'take shit' from anyone. »

It sounds scary, to be allowed to do so much without repercussion. The Soldier doesn't know if he likes this idea just yet.

His handler gets back up with a pained groan and shakes his leg to get rid of the numbness. The Soldier feels guilty but he doesn't try to apologize again. His handler doesn't like it when he apologizes so much.

« We will be arriving in less than an hour. You can go back to sleep, I will wake you once we have landed. »

The Soldier nods but he doesn't dare to close his eyes again.

They land in the north-west of France, in a city called Rennes. There is a driver waiting for them at the airport. The man leaves them in a smaller town near the sea and from there, Zemo has to pick up a new car and this time, takes the wheel to the small traditional manor they will stay in.

The place is clean and isolated, standing on top of a cliff that lets its inhabitants stare straight into the raging sea below. The Soldier might not be much more than a weapon to most, but he is still allowed to find some things beautiful. This place definitely is.

Zemo parks the car in the courtyard and produces a key from his pocket. He unlocks the door, and leads them inside the house.

The place is dark, like most houses from this area.

They were made to protect their inhabitants from the frequent storms of the region, which often leads to small, narrowed windows and heavy wooden doors.

The Soldier can not say he already has been in this peculiar area of France, but he likes the way the sky seems low and full, how the wind howls outside and how the waves are crashing into the rocks under them. He likes how the gulls yell as a storm is brooding and he especially likes how easy it is to defend this place.

Only one entrance, the windows small and old, the door impossible to break if you're not equipped or enhanced like he is. It's dark and lonely and terribly old, just like him.

« It is simple, but it is safe. Do you like it? »

The Soldier nods. He would not exactly call it simple, for it is still a manor from the 1700s, with a well designed interior and detailed renovations, but he does like it.

Zemo obviously wants to lead the visit and try to expand on the authenticity and the history of the place, but the Soldier is more interested in searching every room for weaknesses and places to hide. He is offered a bed, even though they both know he will continue to sleep on the floor, by his handler's bed, and once the tour is over, they enjoy the freshly replenished cupboards with Zemo making some fancy-smelling tea and the Soldier waiting patiently at the table.

It's quiet and domestic. The storm is already raging outside, and it seems they won't be able to get out for a small while. They will make do with what is available to them for the next few days.

The Soldier is learning a lot about himself in the short few days they stay stuck in the house, like how he likes his tea with milk and sugar but prefers coffee anyway.

Or how he loves when his handler brushes his hair with his fingers, and how he hates that it makes him fall asleep almost on the spot. He learns that he prefers it when TV is on just for the background noise it provides, and that no matter what his handler is cooking, it always tastes delicious, except when it has chickpeas in it, which he carefully discards on the side of his plate.

He learns that he sleeps better when he is close to his handler. They make progress with that, because he soon upgrades from a blanket on the cold hard floor to a mattress pressed between the bed and the wall, feeling enclosed and safe. It should feel claustrophobic, with him having been stuck in a frozen tank for almost seventy years, but instead it just feels familiar and so warm.

More importantly, he is learning more about his Handler. Baron Helmut Zemo. Not only « colonel ». The man is royalty, and immensely rich, which allows him to provide the Soldier, and even more, to spoil him rotten.

There's a full wardrobe waiting for him in the designated room he doesn't even use. Scentless beauty products are carefully exposed in the bathroom, and he doesn't dare to use them yet, but he likes the idea of doing whatever he wants with his own appearance. There are also plenty of snacks that Zemo allows him full access to, not caring the Soldier seems to always be gnawing at dry biscuits like a starving rat except when it's in the bedroom. No food in bed, that's one of the house rules.

There's nothing but quiet and the both of them during those couple of stormy days.

It doesn't last though, and his handler seems almost glad when they can finally step outside to enjoy the sunlight.

His handler is sitting outside, staring at the calm sea from the terrasse on the cliff, drinking that infamous cherry blossoms tea that the Soldier hates, when the subject is finally breached.

« Do you wish to know more about your former life, солдат? »

He doesn't like to think about it. Doesn't really care for it either. He doesn't need a name or a past to exist and enjoy the moment.

« Not really. » He answers, staring into the distance with a bored look on his face.

« I see. What about your name? » Zemo insists.

« My name is солдат. »

« Do you not wish to be more than just a soldier? »

« Not really. » He shrugs again. It is enough for him to be his handler's soldier, he doesn't need anything else. As if reading his mind, Zemo asks:

« What if I leave one day, солдат? »

That makes the Soldier freeze and his distant gazing becomes focused and sharp. He glares at his handler, as he often allows himself to do now when the man teases him or that he feels displeased. He has become much better at expressing himself since he knows there won't be any consequences for it.

« You will have to rely on someone else. You will have to rely on yourself, and how can you do that if you don't know who you are? »

« I know who I am ! » He snaps. He feels angry, the kind of rage that crawls through your throat and makes you spit terrible words at the persons you love. « I am the Winter Soldier, your солдат! I do not need anything else. I do not need to know whoever that man you keep mentioning is, because he is dead. Or maybe you would rather have him instead? »

His handler seems surprised by his burst of anger. He pushes his cup of tea aside and leans towards the Soldier. He places a hand on the metal arm and tilts his head again. Stupid gesture he is starting to hate, because it always involves uncomfortable questions he does not wish to answer.

« Or course not, my dear солдат. Why would you think that? »

The Soldier shrugs. His moods are like the winds lately, blowing in every direction, feeling too much and suddenly not enough.

« ... I do not want to disappoint you, sir. » He answers instead.

« How so, my dear? »

He basks in the nickname.

« If I ever come back to being the man I used to be, you might be disappointed in who I have become. Besides, you said I were to leave if I felt ready. I do not wish to ever be « ready », sir. »

There's a stupid smile on his handler's face, and the Soldier only calls it stupid because it makes him feel all giddy and exhilarated when he witnesses it. His handler's grip is tight on his metal fingers, and he carefully brings them to his mouth, kissing the artificial articulations one by one, careful and delicate, as if such a weapon deserved any type of kindness.

« You are sweet, aren't you, солдат? I almost wish to keep you forever. »

He inhales sharply at the idea that's now been planted in his brains. He presses his prosthetic's fingertips against the soft flesh of his handler's cheeks, draws lines over his closed eyes and crosses his lips from top to bottom with his thumb. Such a deadly metal against the fragility of his handler's flesh and blood, pure demonstration of trust in such an intimate gesture.

« There's no one else I would rather stay with, sir. »

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your feedback!

End Notes

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