Sarah “Gwen” Rogers was nineteen when she married Bucky Barnes, and she knew at the time just how stupid it was: it wasn’t exactly a brilliant move to marry a man who could never love her, even—or especially—when she knew that she was in love with him.

Neither of them could have predicted the war that came, and if they had, then they sure as hell couldn’t have predicted what would happen when Gwen volunteered for *Project: Rebirth*. 

---

**Notes**

Hello and welcome! It is 2 in the morning on August 18th, here, which means I can start to publish my Stucky Big Bang! I, as well as my absolutely brilliant artists, Esaael and Mamadonovan, have worked very hard on this Bang, and we appreciate you all at least glancing at it. You should also glance at their pages, which will be listed in the end notes.
This is a story with a lot of nuance in it. Or at least, I hope it is; I worked very hard to try to make it that way. As such, there are a lot of situations—and characters, and decisions made by characters—which are going to strike people as problematic. You may be rubbing your hands and saying, "Oh, goody!"—in which case, hurrah! This story is for you. If, however, there are situations you can't read about because they will cause you distress... Well, I'm going to put warnings on each chapter; please read them, and take care of yourself.

In particular, though, the two things I think people will have the most problems with, and I promise you that I am not doing either haphazardly; I put a lot of thought and effort into both! Problematic Thing A is the issue of Bucky's sexual identity: he identifies as gay, and Gwen identifies as both female and straight, but they still love each other, and much of the fic is about the two of them navigating that dilemma. Problematic Thing B is Howard Stark, whose character seems to range in canon from "quite charming" (in CA:TFA) to "probably abusive" (IM:2); I wanted to explore that character, and maybe try to reconcile the two extremes. If either of those things is a hard no for you, now would be a good time to Nope out.

None of my narrators is completely reliable—something to bear in mind as you read.

All that being said— There is a happy ending to this story, I'll tell you right now; I don't think anyone has an unhappy ending that didn't happen worse in canon. It also solves a lot of the problems of canon, largely because I can't resist leaving my babies a little happier than I found them. So while I can't call it fluffy, per se, it ends in a good place.
Bucky asked Gwen to marry him when she was nineteen years old.

He was twenty-one at the time, in that shorter, four-month period that made him seem two years older, during which he inevitably worked the age difference into every conversation. After Gwen’s birthday, she knew, she would have eight blessed months of Bucky only occasionally remembering that he was older before he became insufferable once again.

He was never a real jerk about it, though—the difference between teasing and mocking—so she pretty much just put up with it.

The only downside, she decided as she hustled through the streets—several hours before the proposal, and therefore while she was blissfully unaware of her impending doom—was that it made it especially hard to come chase after him when he was out too late in the bars.

She always knew when it happened, too. Winifred Barnes and her elder daughter Rebecca, both of whom were convinced Gwen was the devil come to capture Bucky’s heart and take him away—she had never been sure how to make it clear that she lacked some basic prerequisites for that one—wouldn’t have sent her after him if she were the only person left alive in Brooklyn to do it. But Bucky’s dad George and his second-oldest sister Beulah both liked Gwen just fine. So when Bucky was out too damned late, and Winifred was out of her mind with worry, George would send Beulah over to Gwen, and Gwen would go stomp into all sorts of interesting and alarming places to find him.

Luckily for Gwen, he had a pattern. There were only so many bars that catered to a patron like Bucky, although he was one of the more subtle ones. Finding him was as simple as just ticking down the list, even if it did seem to take all night, and even if there were a lot of places like that in this particular part of the borough.

Unluckily, though, Bucky had been deviating from his pattern lately. Gwen did not like this new change at all.

It was bad enough knowing why he was hanging out in those joints in the first place. Bad enough that she was perfectly able to look at the queens he picked—she got an awfully good look, far too often—and see how they were everything she wasn’t: tall, broad, unmistakably male no matter what kind of dress they were wearing. It wasn’t like there weren’t more feminine options available to him, even in the gay bars; Bucky had a type, and he went for the big ones.

So that was one thing—the thing where she had had to hope she could catch him (and his date) before they left the clubs, because otherwise she would be cooling her heels in a hotel lobby until
they were done.

Otherwise known as, the thing where she got to walk through a sea of people who were all looking at her and wondering why she was there, in order to find a man who didn’t love her and never could, no matter how much she might’ve loved him.

That was bad enough.

But this new thing was going to get Bucky into serious trouble, and she was waiting and waiting for it to break over both of their heads like the broom Mrs. Barnes used to use when they were younger. And the night before Bucky asked her to marry him, it finally did.

The thing was the alleys. That was what she couldn’t get over. Why do it? Had he exhausted the list of all the queers with access to an honest-to-God bedroom? Bucky still lived with his folks, and furthermore he still shared a room with his younger brother Bobby, who was too young to do that around even if he weren’t regrettably inclined towards tattling, so she could see why he didn’t go back to his place, but for God’s sake he used to find a room with the other fellow in a hotel. Hell, one of the bars he went to was the St. George, and they rented out rooms to just about anyone, no questions asked—and why did she know these things?—so why not just go there?

Instead, Bucky had started picking guys up, heading out to the alleys surrounding the bar, having what she wished she didn’t know was termed a quickie, and then either heading home or—worse—going back in and cruising again.

Gwen was just about done with it. Honestly, what was wrong with that man?! She was nineteen, almost twenty, and she’d never had sex in her life, so it couldn’t be that important. Not considering the way the cops could come after him, or worse—the street thugs, who knew no one was going to care if they rolled a fag. Or the thugs who didn’t care about robbing him, just beating him up for being queer. Or the neighborhood gossips, not all of whom were ladies like herself, who would cheerfully set it about if they knew what he were doing. Or—

But when something finally went wrong—which really hadn’t taken that long, all things considered; he’d only been doing this newer, more dangerous version for a couple of months—it was a lucky break, because it was just some jerks who wanted a fight and thought the fags would make an easy target.

The good news was, they’d been wrong about that bit. Bucky’s ‘friend,’ whoever he was, had left a very nice pair of extra-large heels behind, but otherwise gotten away clean; Bucky himself had managed to down one of the gang already. The bad news was, there were still two left, and while he was doing an okay job of holding them off, there was no way it could last forever.

Gwen waded in. Of course she did; she and Bucky had been wading into each other’s fights for over a decade, and the fact that he’d been doing something incredibly stupid right before this one didn’t change that.

She reached the knot of men right as Jerk A was pulling his fist back to hit Buck; she stuck her foot out and hauled on the back of his shirt, and the change in momentum sent him reeling backwards to trip over her foot, fall, and hit the ground hard. His head made a cracking sound where it smacked the pavestones.

Bucky turned his attention to Dope B, who had pivoted halfway around to see what had happened to his compatriot. Gwen socked Dope B in the jaw, which, she was pleased to see, was still effective. Dope B went reeling, too, only for Bucky to catch him by the collar, pulling him up to
meet Bucky’s powerful left hook.

After that, Dope B was pretty much done, slumping to the ground as Bucky let go of his shirt.

“And stay down,” Gwen muttered viciously.

Bucky stepped over the guys sleeping it off in the alley, only to stumble and almost fall, himself. Gwen caught him—she had gotten pretty good at hauling Bucky around, although the fact he was almost twice her weight never helped—and guided him backwards to lean against the dubious alley wall. There were all sorts of sordid substances on that wall, but she figured it was better than the ground, and—

—Oh, look; that particular splotch of liquid was fresh.

_Gross, Bucky!_

She shoved him back against the bricks, and didn’t feel bad about it at all anymore.

“What the Hell, Bucky?”

She was panting, furious, and probably more furious at the guys who had attacked him, but they were _down_ and Bucky _wasn’t_ and it wasn’t like he _didn’t have this coming_!

“What the Hell have you been _thinking_, running around like this?! Do you have a death wish? Do you want to make your mother cry? What about your father, you think he wouldn’t be ashamed of you? What the _Hell_ is wrong with you, Bucky?!”

Bucky panted, and didn’t answer, and even though he was enough taller than she was that his breath was mostly going over her head, she could still smell the alcohol on it. _God damn it!_

“You idiot,” she said, “God damn it, Bucky, how the _Hell_ am I supposed to take care of you when you do stupid shit like this?’

Bucky looked at her—mostly; his eyes weren’t too focused—and smiled with a kind of fondness that warmed her in spite of her rage—and broke her heart, too, both of them all at once. “You cuss like a sailor, Gwennie.”

God, she was exhausted.

“Yes,” she said, “I cuss. I cuss because I’m a sad orphan girl who’s had to make her own way in this world, Buck, with no father to guide her and no mother to gentle her, and her only ally has been her best friend, who is _too stupid to fucking live_ and goes out _fucking in alleys_ at night and his parents send me out to _find him_ which I can _do_ because he’s been doing this for _God damned months_, so don’t you talk to me about cussing, _Bucky Barnes_, because this whole situation is _all your God damned fault!”_

Her voice echoed off the bricks around them, and she realized, belatedly, that she’d been screaming. She pressed her hand against her face; her fingers, she noticed, were shaking.

“Let’s... Let’s just go home,” she said, her voice halfway between a compromise and a snarl.

“Mm-kay,” Bucky mumbled. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders and leaned on her, warm and strong and perfect, and she felt her heart give the familiar squeezing ache that it had been sounding for years as she guided them out of the alley, turning Bucky to the left towards her apartment when he started to turn right towards the bar.
“I was scared,” he announced to the street, a block later.

“I’m sure,” she said, taking another step with his weight pressing on her shoulders. “There were three of them.”

“No, not that.” He stumbled along with her, eyes fixed down on the uneven bricks of the pavement. “Going out like this, the alleys.... You hate it. The risk, I mean. But I did it anyway, ‘cause... ‘cause I was scared.” He shivered all over, and for a moment she was afraid he was either going to pass out or piss himself, but then he leaned down and breathed warm in her ear, and she found that she was shivering, too. “I’m not scared, any more,” he said, his breath tickling the fine hairs that always escaped her braids, and she patted his arm.

“That’s good, Buck,” she told him. “I’m glad you’re not scared. That’s good.”

She patted his arm again, and then focused on getting them home, and Bucky didn’t say much of anything for the rest of the trip.

She’d been living alone for just over a year, which he’d hated—he’d always maintained that she should be in one of the group homes with other ladies, to which she had insisted that those houses had rules which would prevent her from seeing him, and they had argued their way around to a standstill, again.

She figured she was going to have to have the whole argument all over again, though, because when she opened her door, her apartment had clearly been burglarized.

“What the fuck!?” Bucky yelled, and she shushed him immediately, because living alone or no, if her neighbors found out she was bringing a man home with her, she had a good chance at being out on her ear.

“What the fuck?” Bucky repeated in a whisper.

She didn’t have an answer.

“Gwen.”

“Someone must have broken in,” she said, trying not to cry. Her chest ached with tension, and she found herself taking a big gasping breath just to make sure it wasn’t her asthma.

God, she was just so tired. She’d worked all day, at a job she hated but it paid the bills so she kept it, and then she’d gone to visit Bucky only he was already out, and then she’d been sent hunting down his dumb ass because George Barnes had asked her to and someone needed to bring him in, and now she finally got to come home, after about fourteen hours, and this was what she found?! Her kitchen cupboards were all open, the dishes all disturbed. A goodly number had been dashed to the wood-slat floor, where, of course, they had broken. The kitchen table was on its side, and the delicate little vase that she had found in the pawn shop, the one she used to hold flowers tugged surreptitiously off the bush by the bridge, was shattered. The chairs were all either shoved into odd corners of the room or broken entirely, and her sofa—her prize possession—now had a long rip through the center of each cushion which would need to be sewn up. And upholstery sewing always made her fingers hurt terribly, too. She couldn’t see through the door to her bedroom, but it was ajar, which was not a good sign.

“It looks like they were in and out,” she said. In her wallet, worn carefully under her skirts, the wages she had earned this week felt heavy, and she knew exactly what they had been looking for.
so destructively.

She also knew that they have to have been watching her to know when she got paid—that money was going straight to the landlord in the morning—and that she was lucky she hadn’t been here when they came. They would have gotten the money, and—all things considered, including her own temperament and build—there was a good chance she wouldn’t have survived the encounter.

She shoved Bucky away from her and onto the busted cushion; cotton batting floated up into the air, drifting down in curling spirals like ribbons. Bucky pulled her down into his lap, and pressed her head to his shoulder. “There, there,” he said. “S’okay, Gwennie. It’ll all be okay. Don’t cry.”

He stroked her head, where her hair was still pinned up in its braids, and, finding the way lumpy, started pulling out her pins.

“I’m not crying,” she told him, and she wasn’t. She wanted to be, though.

She was just so damned tired.

“It’s okay,” he said. He patted her head again. He smelled like booze, still, the not-quite-minty sourness of gin, but it was still more comforting than disquieting when he brushed aside her bangs and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “It’ll all be okay,” he promised. “I have a plan, Gwennie. It’s a terrible plan, but it’s better than anything you’ve got.”

“Oh, god, please tell me you’re not going to kill people for the mafia.”

“I’m not going to kill anyone,” he said, his voice suddenly dark. Then he shook his head. “Just rest, Gwennie. It’ll all be okay.”

There was something sort of deliciously infuriating about him telling her that, she reflected, considering that the whole reason he was even in her apartment was that she’d been out saving his hide half an hour ago.

She pulled her head up off of his shoulder. It seemed to take an awful lot of strength. “Come on,” she said, blinking gritty-feeling eyes that wanted to water with exhaustion. “You’re spending the night with me, tonight; don’t want your family getting a whiff of you. Come to bed.”

She woke before Bucky in the morning—she always had, ever since they were little kids. For a moment, she almost managed to forget the condition of her apartment, but when she swung her legs over the edge of her bed, she sure remembered in a damned hurry.

It wasn’t too bad, she tried to tell herself as she stepped out of the bedroom. There was the little dining table she had gotten, that was mostly intact, although it was tipped on its side alarmingly.... The little pepper grinder she had picked up at the pawn shop near the park was cracked, though, and peppercorns had spilled everywhere. There was broken crockery spilling out of the kitchen, too. Her little living room was mostly still alright, by dint of having had very little in it that was breakable, but her books were spread around the place, lying with spines cracked open, pages crushed.

“God,” she sighed, letting her head fall back on her neck.

She let herself hang like that for a moment—just a moment—and then got on with it, edging her way through the room, picking her way on careful bare feet to the kitchen, where she started the kettle and dug up two clean mugs for coffee.
Bucky came in just as she was swirling in the powder. “Hey,” she greeted him. “Coffee’s almost ready.”

He was looking around the apartment. “I guess I wasn’t that drunk, after all,” he said. “I thought I must have imagined all this.”

She bristled. “It’s fine, Buck.”

“It ain’t fine.”

“It’s fine,” she insisted. “I’m not moving into some—some old lady home—”

“That’s not what they are—”

“—just because you’re a little worried about me—”

“—I’m more than a little worried—”

“—I can take care of myself—”

“I know, believe me—”

“—you don’t have to act like I’m hopeless and helpless and a—a wimp or a ninny or—”

“I know!” They stopped, breathing hard, staring at each other, the silence of the broken apartment filled with their harsh breathing.

Bucky broke first, flicking his eyes towards the cups on the counter. “Coffee ready yet?” he asked, voice tentative and uncertain, and she knew that whatever he said next, she really, really was going to hate it.

Bravely, she handed him a cup.

Bucky carried it over to Gwen’s little table, which she’d set upright while the water was boiling, but as soon as he’d set the cup down, he hesitating, tapping his fingers on the table a couple of time. “Wait here a sec,” he muttered, and walked quickish back to the bedroom.

A moment later, and he was back again, sitting down next to her at the table, watching her defensively over his steaming cup.

“Wow,” she said, watching his bizarre behavior, “I am really going to hate this, aren’t I?”

“Oh, God yeah,” he said immediately, “You might punch me in the face.”

“That bad?” she asked, relaxing, starting to take a sip of her coffee.

“That bad,” he agreed, smiling back at her.

It was heartbreaking, a little bit, to watch that smile, shining in the sunlight. No one should look that good, hungover and low on sleep and not having brushed their teeth yet. She slurped at her coffee, resentful and in love, watching as he carefully set his cup down.

Bucky rubbed a little at his temple, then began, “Alright, the first thing you need to know is that I’ve been thinking about this for a while.”

Gwen wrapped her free hand around the other side of her mug for warmth, and didn’t respond.
“I know... Oh, God, I know how this is going to sound, but just—hear me out, okay? I promise it’s not as bad as you think.”

“Uh-huh,” she said. She could just imagine the look on her face now, the highly skeptical slant of her eyebrows, the dubious backwards tilt of it.

“So, the thing is... I think we should get married.”

Her eyes widened, and she set her mug down with a thump. “Wow, you’re right,” she said, glaring, “I don’t like it at all.” The world was tilting around her, because—how dare he?! How dare Bucky Barnes, the only man in the world she’d ever been in love with in her life, the only man in the world who should fucking know better!

“No, and I get that, I do; I know, okay? But just—hear me out.”

Sullen, she snaked her arm across the tabletop towards her mug again, lifting it in a silent gesture:

*Go on, then; explain this nonsense.*

“So, there’s a lot of—I mean. Okay, there’s about three big reasons, yeah? The you-reason, the me-reason, and the—I mean, the third reason. Right?”

Gwen nodded, more to show she was listening than in agreement.

“Okay. And the me-reason is... I mean, it’s easy for me to say, and I know this ain’t gonna be enough to convince you on its own, because why should it be, yanno? It’s my problem, not yours, and I know that, but...” He grimaced.

She blinked at him, and said nothing, largely because, despite all the words, he had said nothing.

“But the thing is, it’d be... I guess it’d be a kind of protection. For both of us!—that’s the you-reason, too, kinda—but for me... Well, you know about me.”

He paused once more, and this time he seemed to be genuinely waiting for an answer. Gwen hesitated, but really, with this much honesty in the air, there was only one answer she could give. After all, she did know about Bucky. “I know you’ve never been interested in bein’ married to a woman in your life, if that’s what you mean.”

Bucky breathed out a relieved sigh. “Yeah! Yeah, that’s what I mean. The ladies... Well. They sure are nice to dance with, and I can take a few of ‘em out on dates that can give a decent conversation, but...”

“But you’re not exactly jumping to worship any of us with your body,” she finished for him, deliberately—cruelly—quoting the wedding ceremony.

It worked; he flinched. But he powered through anyway, saying, “So this would be protection for me, because when you’re looking for a fairy, you’re not exactly looking for the guy who’s been married since he was twenty-one.”

Gwen sighed, and drained her cup, getting up to pour more boiling water in while standing at the stove. “What’s the next reason?” she called, without commenting on the first. When she didn’t hear him answer, she turned around, ready to scold.

He was looking, pointedly, around her ruined apartment.
She bristled again, and Bucky immediately held his hands up defensively. “I know,” he said, “I know, I know, I know, Gwen, you hate it, you hate the whole idea that you might, at any time, at any point, ever, in your entire life, reach out to another human being and ask for help, but—honestly—this isn’t fucking safe, Gwen, you’re gonna die like this, you’re gonna come home one night and find another burglar, or worse, or you’re gonna walk down the street and run into one of the ten thousand guys you have at some point punched in the face, or you’ll even just run out of work one day—how many jobs have you lost, now, for insubordination? Was it three, or four?”

He pointedly didn’t pause long enough for her to answer. “And then you’ll be out on the street, and it’ll be winter because of course it’ll be fucking winter, and you’ll freeze to death, and then I’m never gonna be able to talk to my best friend again.”

Gwen stared.

Bucky waited for her to answer, and then, at her silence, sighed.

“I can’t lose you,” he said simply. “Don’t make me.”

Suddenly, she couldn’t look him in the face any longer. She cut her gaze away, focusing on the broken crockery she had yet to pick up, feeling her face light with a furious blush, and all because —how many years had she been waiting to hear those words? And they still weren’t quite right.

God, it felt like forever, but she knew the exact amount of time to the day.

It would be exactly eight years, one week from now, because it had been twenty-nine days before her twelfth birthday that she had looked at Bucky, standing tall and proud and perfectly formed at thirteen (if a few inches shorter than he would eventually wind up), laughing in the sunlight in the park, and realized that she was in love with him.

And then, one minute later, she had thought: If I ever tell him, he’ll never speak to me again.

Bucky had, eventually, figured it out; she knew that, and if she’d wondered before, she would know it for certain now, what with him sitting at her kitchen table, telling her all the incredibly stupid and irrelevant reasons why they should get married.

She never had told him, though.

She swallowed, hopeless and lost and bitter.

“What’s the third reason?” she asked.

Bucky shifted in his chair; she could hear it creaking over the wooden slats. “I, uh... I’m gonna need you to look at me, for this one.”

He sounded nervous again. She finished stirring her coffee—black, black, always black, because she used to splash milk in it and then one day she saw her mother’s face when she did it and had added up the cost, and now, taking it black was just habit—and carried it back to the table. She settled back into her chair, closing her eyes and leaning her head back against the top slat, feeling the oddly soft pressure on her head where it was pressed against the yielding ridge of her braid. She breathed deep, and then sat up again, meeting Bucky’s eyes.

“What is it?”

He swallowed, opened his mouth. Closed it, swallowed again. Looked away, and then back again. “So, the thing is—” he got out, before the nerves took him again.
He ran his open hand over his face, scrubbing at his mouth, and she could barely hear him mutter, “Step the hell up, Barnes.”

He puffed out a breath.

“Okay. You’re my best friend, is the thing, and I trust you, and I—I can’t imagine it being anyone but you,” he said, blurring it, all in a rush like that was the only way it was gonna come out. “I—fuck, Gwen, I love you. I—you know that. You do, right?”

She wanted to cry so much she thought her face was gonna break. “It’s not the right kind of love, Buck.”

He swigged from his coffee cup, spilling slightly, just a couple of drops on his chin, but it was like she couldn’t look away until he reached up with his fingers and brushed them away. “It’s as close as I’m ever gonna come, Gwennie.”

She sipped, saying nothing, and he added, “Besides, you love me, too.”

Well.

There it was, she thought.

All out in the open the way neither one of them had ever had the balls to make it before.

...She couldn’t say she liked the feeling, much.

“It’ll be enough,” he was saying confidently. “We can make this work. And then, I won’t have to worry—about you, or about losing you, or—or any of that. We’ll be best friends forever, this way, and it won’t ever change.”

Eight damned years, she thought.

_Eight damned years_ of watching, and wanting, and _not fucking having_.

_Eight damned years_ of watching Bucky, of watching _the person she loved_, turn from not-quite-man to perfect-specimen-of-masculinity. _Eight damned years_ of watching him smile and flirt with any girl but her and knowing that he wasn’t really interested in any of them. _Eight damned years_ of watching _him_ watch Kevin Foster and Jamie Nichols and Bertie Schuster and _hating_ how petty and jealous it made her feel.

And now he was inviting her to a _front row fucking seat_ for the entire _rest of her lifetime_ spent watching the same damned thing?!

And that wasn’t the worst part, either.

Oh no.

The worst part was realizing she was gonna do it.

Because here was the thing:

She had _also_ had eight years—more than _that_, even, really—of watching Bucky smile at Kevin and Jamie and Bertie, and feeling warmed by the sunlight of it, by how _happy_ he had looked.

Eight years of watching her best friend, who carried the weight of the world on his shoulders, slough it off for an hour or two while he showed a lady a good time. Eight years of having him at her side, eight years of knowing she could tell him anything, eight years of being there for him....
when he had bad news, or a hard day at work, or worried about his sisters...

She couldn’t do it.

She couldn’t look a lifetime of that in the face, and then turn away from it.

But she couldn’t step forward, either. Because it may be the best torture a girl could find, but it was still a fucking torture.

She started to raise her coffee cup to her lips again—stall for time—and had to set it back down: her hand was shaking too much to manage it, and miniature ripples were washing across the surface of the dark liquid. Bucky saw it, too; he reached out and gently cupped her hands in his, easing the mug back down to the table, softly unwrapping her fingers from it and twining them with his, instead.

It was really a very kind gesture, she thought, watching from a distance far within herself as her control shattered into so many shards.

“I hate you,” she said. Her voice was breaking apart, too. “I hate you so much. Damn you, Bucky Barnes.”

“Y’don’t hate me,” he said, vowels broad and nasal under the weight of his emotions.

Her shoulders shook, and she felt a spurt of real hatred—not for him, but for herself—as the first sobs burst forth. “I do,” she said, “I hate you, you’re terrible.”

“Aw c’mon, Gwennie, don’t say that.”

She pulled her hands out of his and hid her face in them, crying for real now, hiding from the world. Bucky pulled back and let her have her space, but it wasn’t long before she heard him shifting in his chair.

All the frustration and rage and grief crystallized into a tiny diamond inside of her. She snapped her hands down and glared at him, gaze steady even as the rest of her shook like she had a hundred degree fever. “I will tell you what, Bucky Barnes. My answer is yes.”

God, the look on his face was terrible, all sun-from-behind-a-cloud joy and relief so strong it was likely to burn her.

“If. My answer is yes, on one condition.”

He froze.

“Because when we get married, Bucky Barnes, we’re gonna be standing in front of that priest, and we’ll say our vows, and he’s gonna tell you to kiss me, and if you can’t do it then it’ll just be too damned late, Bucky Barnes, so if you’re gonna back out, you need to know now, you hafta tell me right the hell now, because I am not going to go through that, Buck, I just can’t.”

Bucky’s eyes were wide as the barrels Joe Middlebury sold sausages out of.

“So my answer is yes, if and only if you can prove to me, right now, that when the time comes you’re gonna be able to kiss me.”

Bucky laughed, the noise sudden and sharp and uncertain in the otherwise-still apartment. “You’re saying yes if I’ll kiss you,” he repeated incredulously.
Gwen couldn’t make herself say it again; she closed her mouth on the little hitching breaths sparked by her tears, and nodded.

Bucky blinked at her, and then shook his head. “Alright,” he agreed.

He stood up.

Her eyes widened, and she looked up at him questioningly.

He explained, “It’ll be easier to—the heads, tilting, it’ll be—here, just—stand up, wouldja?”

Gwen barked out a half-sob, half-laugh, and stood.

Pressed between the two wooden chairs at her tiny table, they were only a few inches apart.

It wasn’t the first time they had stood so close, of course. They had been friends for years, romping as kids, exploring as teens, rough-housing with each other as adults, fighting bullies together at every age... But, somehow, it had never felt quite like this, this electrified waiting awkwardness, composed of nerves and anticipation...

Bucky’s breath was coming in pants, now, and she thought in a small, abstracted corner of her mind that he really was nervous. It was a surprise. She really had thought he would just back down when she pointed out that this hare-brained plan of his involved touching her; failing that, she had been certain that he would just do it, perfunctory and quick.

That... That wasn’t exactly what was happening.

He reached out towards her, his movements slow, cautious. It was weird, she thought; they’d never been nervous around each other, but now, everything was suddenly uncertain again, the way it would be with a stranger. Except she could never, ever care about a stranger even a hundredth as much as she loved Bucky...

He cupped her face in his hands, which suddenly seemed impossibly big. Gwen wasn’t used to that; she was a small woman, barely scraping five-two, but she was tough like old jerky and she never felt small. She always felt like she had extra space around her, a secret person inside of her who was tall and broad and strong, and who was ready to take on the world, and all Gwen had to do was open her mouth and square her shoulders and this secret bigger self would come out, and the world would make way before her.

Big Gwen was nowhere to be found now, though. She felt tiny, delicate and fragile, and now she was just as nervous as Bucky was, swallowing and gulping even as her occasional tears crept down her cheeks.

“Jesus, Gwen. I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

And then he kissed her.

It wasn’t...

In the movies, the hero kissed the lady, and he bent her backwards over his arm, totally taking over, running the show, literally bending her to his will. It was one of the reasons Gwen had never been particularly interested in romance; even if she weren’t stuck on Bucky, she had a feeling she wouldn’t have been particularly interested in being shoved around by anybody else.

This wasn’t anything like that, though. Bucky just... just kissed her, really: soft press of lips on
lips, still and slow, and... it was sweet. She could smell the coffee on his breath, and a lingering
musty sourness from neither of them having brushed their teeth yet; she could feel her pulse racing
under his fingers as his thumbs brushed over her cheeks. It wasn’t dry, but it also wasn’t wet. It
was just... nice.

Most of all, it was very gentle—so gentle she could feel herself breaking into shards, so gentle that
she started shaking again, so gentle that the tears, which had slowed to a trickle, started up again, a
rain, and then a thunderstorm. Her lips under his twitched with her gasps, and he let her go, pulling
back to study her face.

*He looks worried,* she thought. *He looks like...*

Oh.

Well, okay; Bucky looked like the girl he’d been kissing had just started crying really hard.

And also like she was his best friend and he was worried that he had just screwed everything up,
forever.

“Sorry,” Bucky muttered. He shook his head, spooked. “Jesus. Gwen, I’m *sorry,* alright? I’m so
fucking sorry. I just—you thought—it seemed like...”

She cried and cried, but she also shook her head. “It’s not that,” she said. “I just... it was nice,
Bucky.”

That was probably the most miserable use of “nice” in the history of the English language, but it
was true: It *had* been nice.

It was just that *nice* wasn’t actually what she had been hoping for.

She laughed, and it sounded sick. “That was actually my first kiss,” she realized.

“Jesus, Gwen!” Bucky’s hands were still around her face, and he stroked her cheek with his right
thumb, watching her. Once, twice, three strokes... Then he shook his head, looking disgusted with
himself. “Jesus,” he said again. “I’m sorry, Gwennie, I really am, so sorry... You deserve
better’n me, for sure, but damned if I’m a good enough man to just let you go looking for it. I’m
sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

And then he took his hand away, and moved it to her waist. The other hand, his left, moved
backwards, wrapping now not around her cheek, but around the back of her neck, instead. He
pulled, gently, with the hand at her waist, until she stepped forward that last six inches, and
suddenly there she was, pressed against him, all up and down their fronts, and it felt *more,* felt
intimate in a way she had *never* been with Bucky—had never been with *anyone,* and Jesus, he
wasn’t even kissing her right now but she still felt *possessed,* and *oh,* suddenly the happy looks on
all those girls in the movies made *sense*...

And then he kissed her again.

Kissed her for *real,* this time.

*Oh my God,* she thought, and also, jealously, *Is this how he kisses his men?*, and then finally, *OH
my GOD!*

She had no idea how to handle this.
It was new, it was amazing, it was like being merged at the soul, it was Bucky Bucky Bucky Bucky Bucky—He had his tongue in her mouth and it should have been disgusting but it wasn’t, it really wasn’t, it was—

She whimpered and sucked, and shivered from something that wasn’t crying; he groaned and nipped at her lips and it made her shudder, made her weak, ribbons of senselessness running all up and down her arms and legs and collecting. They coalesced in her midsection, only not quite, it was actually a bit lower, in parts of her that she generally avoided thinking about because after all, what was the point? But oh, those parts were taking their revenge for that now, melting and warming and suddenly she couldn’t breathe, panting through her nose because her mouth was busy, high-pitched noises coming out of her that she couldn’t control, and it ratcheted up, and up, and up as the kiss went on and on and on...

And then, suddenly, Bucky was pulling back, pulling away. She said, “No!” and reached out for him, but it came out a wheeze, and he was taking her down, to her knees, and leaning her head back against his arm to open her airway, and it was because she was having a goddamned asthma attack.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, and he kept saying it, too, over and over as he stroked her hair and pressed empty, open-mouthed kisses to her forehead and her damp, salty cheeks.

And that was it, she thought; it was over. He was her best friend again, even though—for just a few seconds—he had been... something else. Something wonderful.

Still shaking, heart breaking, and barely able to breathe, she looked up at him. “Alright,” she said.

“You’re not alright, you’re wheezing. Come on, Gwen!”

She put her hand on his arm where it crossed her chest to hold her upright. “I meant,” she said—well, yes, okay, it was more of a wheeze, but it didn’t matter anyway—“I meant, alright—” wheeze “—I’ll marry you.”

He blinked, and then laughed, hollowly. “Thanks,” he said. “There’s a—I got you a ring, actually, I’ve been picking up extra shifts. It’s at home, I’ll bring it by tomorrow.”

She nodded, then tipped her head back and closed her eyes before any more tears could leak out. “Thanks,” she echoed.

He stroked her hair again silently in answer, hand soft and careful.

It was almost enough.
They were married five weeks later, two days before her twentieth birthday. She signed her name, *Sarah Rogers Barnes*, except that wasn’t her name because her *ma* was Sarah Rogers, *she* was Gwen, *Sarah Gwen Rogers*, except she wasn’t *that* anymore, either.

For a moment, she was disoriented, her head spinning. She didn’t know *who* she was, now.

Then Bucky took her hand, and she looked up into his face—worried, caring, he knew she was feeling odd almost before she did, it seemed like—and something clicked in her head. No matter who *else* she was, now—*Sarah* or *Gwen* or *Pipsqueak* like Bucky’s da used to call her—she was definitely *Mrs. Barnes*, and as disorienting as everything else about this was, *that* felt right.

It felt like coming home.

Bucky did, in fact, manage a believable kiss in front of the priest. It was a lot more like the first kiss he’d given her than the second, but Gwen was pretty sure that was for the best, anyway.

The thing was, Bucky had been living at home, with his parents and sister—that was why he had
always gone over to Gwen’s place when he found himself too blotto to walk home, and it was why
he had been at her apartment that morning in the first place. But Gwen, that stubborn brat, had
flat refused to move in with his folks, only partially because she was too proud to stomach the idea
of depending on them; mostly, it was because Bucky’s sisters, while still his family—and therefore
now her family—were loud, and best dealt with in small doses. Especially Becca, who was pretty
darn bad for the integrity of Gwen’s dental enamel. And besides which, Bucky’s younger brother
—Bobby, only six this year—shared his room at home, so where exactly would Gwen have slept,
if she had come to stay with them?

So when they got married and were going to be living together, it was Bucky who moved into her
home, instead. It was a little odd, and Bucky got plenty of teasing, but it was also very them, and
he couldn’t bring himself to regret it.

There was even something comfortingly familiar about it, because it wasn’t like they hadn’t shared
her bed before. They’d been doing this for years, since they were kids, because right around the
time an adult would have put a stop to it, Gwen’s ma had started working more and more overtime
and hadn’t been around to notice it was still happening. And then, by the time Bucky had realized
he was sleeping with a woman and it could have consequences, they had been so firmly established
as best friends that no one batted an eye. Sometime Bucky thought Gwen was more pissed off that
no one objected than she would have been if someone had tried to put a stop to it.

But the upshot was, here they were, all those years later and still getting ready for bed together,
only they were different now, because they were married, and Jesus, he had maybe not thought this
through at all—he froze mid-disrobing, hands spasming around the buttons of his good shirt—
because now he was getting into bed with his wife, who was Gwen, and that was... what the fuck
did he do with that?!

It hit him like a lightning strike—now, too late, when it was already done—what exactly he had let
them in for. They’d talked about sex before they got married—of course they had; it had been
necessary, and anyway that was part of the reason he’d married Gwen—but the thing was, they had
talked about him having sex—with other men, and yes she knew it would be happening, and yes
she had “accepted that years ago, Barnes, it wasn’t like this changed anything”—and he had
floated the idea that she might find someone who sparked her interest, and while she had expressed
her feelings on the subject concisely (“Doubt it.”), she had allowed that she would pursue,
discreetly, if she felt her suit was reciprocated.

But what they hadn’t talked about was whether the two of them would be doing it.

Specifically, whether she even would want to.

_Gwen’s face in the broken kitchen, sunlight on tears, the shiver as he pressed her against him, the
relax and give of her as he kissed her for real, the frantic clasp of her hands against his shirt,
twisting it until the top button came off—he didn’t even think she’d noticed—_

Scratch that.

She definitely wanted to.

But...

He tried to imagine her spread beneath him the way Mitch was two weeks ago, and couldn’t do it.
He tried to imagine feeling the same wave of heady desire which had swamped him then, only for
Gwen, and he couldn’t do that, either. Couldn’t see kissing his way down to her navel. Couldn’t see
grabbing her by the hair and moving her down. Had no fucking clue what a handjob would
even *look like* on her.

Slowly, terrified, he turned his head to look at her, standing on the other side of the bed.

Her hands were on her hips, and she looked *exhausted*. She also looked like she knew exactly what he was thinking just from the look on his face, which—given that they’d known each other for years—in all likelihood, she actually did.

She rolled her eyes. “Get in the damn bed, Bucky Barnes.”

Bucky gulped, and finished shucking his clothes, reaching for his PJ’s which were kept carefully in the closet, right next to hers.

“Don’t.”

He swung his head around, fast, staring at her with wide-open eyes.

“I just... Just get in the damn *bed*, Bucky!”

“Yeah,” he said, and wet his lips. “Okay.”

Nervously, he went over and sat on the edge of the bed, on the opposite side from her. She sighed, walking around the edge of the bed, and—oh, God, she was completely naked—sat on his lap. She sat with one leg on either side of him, so that she was—uhhhh—*spread*, and that was just—

He made some kinda high-pitched noise in his throat, and clutched at her, less holding her close and more *holding on for dear life*.

She knew it, too; she sighed again, running a hand through his hair in the way which had comforted him ever since they’d been kids. “Just relax,” she said, her voice tired, but soothing. “It’s okay, Buck. I promise. Just... relax...”

She pressed her lips to his forehead, and surprisingly, it actually *did* help. He let one of the hands clinging to her back release, and moved it up and down in a soothing sort of stroke. (And if it was more soothing to *him* than it was to *her*, well... he didn’t think either of them were gonna tell anyone.)

She was still sitting on him, though. Still open and right there and oh God now what did he do?!

“You’re such a little *shit*, Bucky Barnes.”

He ran the hand up and down her back again. “Oh yeah?” he bluffed. “Why, and what did I do?”

She kissed him again, on the cheek this time, and he wasn’t *stupid*, okay, he could tell she was getting closer and closer to a real kiss, but it was kind of *nice* to do it slowly, and anyway, she had a *right* to a few kisses.

“I can’t believe you’re making *me* be the calm and reasonable one with this,” she complained. Then she spoiled the effect by kissing him, oh so gently, on the ear, and making a tiny, happy little “mm” sound that he wouldn’t have even heard if she’d been more than an inch away when she made it. “I am a *girl* on her wedding night, Bucky, I shouldn’t have to be in *charge*.”

Bucky pulled back, studying her face suspiciously. And there it was: She was nervous, yes. She’d never done this before, she didn’t know what she was doing, and unless she knew something Bucky didn’t, she couldn’t even be sure it was going to work; of course she was nervous. But she
was also—he gaped and smiled, both at the same time, to see it—she was also very happy. Her face was nervous, but her body was relaxed, and that—

Bucky let himself sag a little in relief, taking his other hand out of it’s clutching posture and propping himself up on the bed. “Sarah Gwen Rogers, you have never not wanted to be in charge in your entire life,” he told her, and she flashed a surprised grin at him.

“You’re going to have to practice that.” She sat back on his legs, confident now that he was confident in her.

“Practice what?”

“My name. That’s not what it is, anymore.”

It actually took him a moment to get it. “Damn! Sarah Barnes?”

“Yes?” She smiled, a shy, teasing edge to it, as if it were different hearing him say it than it had been to think it. “Was there something else you expected it to be?”

“I dunno.” He shook his head, smiling back at her. “Oh, it’s not Gwen anymore.”

“Yeah, that was what I said.” She brushed her hand through his hair again, scratching lightly with her short, blunt nails so that he shivered.

“That is... odd.” Although not as odd as having this conversation fully naked on the edge of a bed together.

“Yeah, but you know what’s even odder?” His thoughts must have shown on his face, because she lightly cuffed him in the side of the head and clarified, “Nice, but odd?”

He leaned back a little and asked, “What?”

She smiled, deliberately wrapping her arms around his neck, sliding forward until she was pressed against him in a way that sent little sparks (Desire? ...Panic?) up his spine. She leaned in, pressing her lips to his neck just below his ear, and whispered, “Mrs. Barnes.”

He shuddered all over, clutching at her again, and she threw her weight to the side so that they wound up rolling across the bed together, naked and pressed close. He felt his lungs squeeze on nothing, and then they were still again, the only noise the rapid breathing coming from both of them.

Well, at least it wasn’t just him!

She leaned up a little, propping herself on her elbows, which were crossed over his chest. He could feel her, pressed against him from bellybutton to hips, including the place that he could not stop thinking about, where her thighs spread to fall on either side of his own. It just—it was—

“Oh god,” he said, his voice very small.

“Shhh,” she answered. “It’s okay.” She smiled bravely. “We’ll be okay, Bucky. We’ve been friends for ages, it’ll take more than this to mess us up.”

“Right,” he said, grabbing her logic like a lifeline. “Right. Okay. So we’ll be okay?”

“We’ll be okay.”
“Whatever happens?”

“Whatever happens.” She stretched out a hand and brushed his hair out of his eyes, still somehow looking way more fond than he had any right to expect a woman to look. “I love you, Mr. Barnes...”

He shuddered as the import of the form of address hit him.

“...and I have done for most of a decade. I’m not going to change my mind on that just based on one night.”

“Okay. Right.” He closed his eyes and breathed for a second, then opened them and faced his biggest fear with her, squarely, the way they’d done to all the other, smaller fears over the years: “What if I can’t get it up?”

He saw the hurt in her face, but she covered it bravely, her voice firm. “If it doesn’t happen, it doesn’t happen. We’ll deal with that as it comes.”

Then she added, shrugging, “There are half a dozen saints on the calendar that would have prayed for this very situation.”

Bucky cracked up. He wasn’t religious—and she wasn’t that religious, either, but she went every Sunday, and Bucky didn’t go if he could help it—but even if he were religious, he suspected he would have a tough time picturing Gwen Rogers—damnit, Barnes—damn it, Sarah Barnes—as a saint.

“Yeah, okay,” he agreed, smiling up at her. “If it doesn’t happen, it doesn’t happen?” God, what did he do to deserve a swell dame like her?

“I love you,” she said. “I just... I want us to be happy—”

Her voice broke mid-word, and he remembered that, for all she was the strongest lady he knew, this was still her wedding night, and anybody would be scared.

“Okay!” he said, cutting it off before she could start crying. “Okay. Here, just—”

He leaned up and kissed her, gently, on the mouth. She kissed back, just as gentle, just as not-quite-sure-of-herself, following him down when he leaned back against the bed. He let his breath out, and deliberately relaxed. “D’you wanna just... just kiss? For a while?”

He could feel the tension leave her, just as his had left him, and she rubbed her face against his, gently. “Yes,” she agreed. “Please, let’s just... do that... for a while.”

Bucky ran his hand along the lower edge of her jaw, then frowned. “Do you want your hair down?” he wondered.

“Not really. I took all the pins out—” It was back in its familiar braid, fallen from the ornate, wrapped style it’d been in at the church. “—if I let it down any more and it’ll just get in the way. Do you want it down?”

He shook his head. “Doesn’t matter to me, I guess. I just thought you might be more comfortable.” In the movies, ladies in dressing rooms and what-have-you always had their hair loose, but, he reasoned, that might have more to do with someone thinking ladies looked good with their hair loose than what ladies in real life actually did.
She smiled, looking a little touched. “Thanks, Buck. I’m good, though.”

“‘Kay,” he mumbled, then leaned forward and kissed her.

God, it was weird kissing her, kissing his best friend, kissing a girl, kissing his best friend who was also a girl... Kissing his wife, even, and it went back and forth like a teeter-totter, whether or not that was the weirdest part.

It was nice anyway, though.

As surreal as it was, at the same time, it was also... right? It was like a key fitting into a lock, or hearing the last line of the chorus of a familiar song... He knew Gwen, knew her for decades in a way no one else could duplicate, and it was like some part of him was waking up, and stretching, and uncurling its little claws, saying, “Finally!”

Like he said: weird.

At first, Gwen rested on top of him, just like she had been; after a minute or two, though, she grimaced and put a hand to her lower back—Bucky carefully did not look down during this maneuver—and rolled off him to the side, instead. That was better; more comfortable, they could lay on their sides and neck lazily. It was also kind of new to Bucky; most of his... encounters... had been a lot faster, and usually someplace a lot less comfortable, too. Even the ones who did have a room they could use, they didn’t have an equal parcel of time...

So back and forth they went, slow and easy, and at some point Bucky started to actually get into it, winding one hand up around Gwen’s neck—she moaned—and leaning into her.

And then she wound a hand into his hair, and pulled.

Bucky cried out instinctively and bucked under her grip. He still wasn’t getting anywhere on the rising to the occasion front, but for the first time, caught in the pull of hair and the tilt of a pulled-back neck, he wanted to. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the look on her face, the hot, tight focus, the banked arousal, the insistent desire...

“Gwen,” he gasped, confused.

“Bucky.”

Her voice was entirely different from his, dark with passion, greedy in some way he couldn’t look at too closely.

“Gwen, Gwen, what do you need?”

“You, Bucky.” Her voice came out choked and cracked, falling over full, trembling lips. “I need you.”

He rolled over her, pinning her down, and he didn't miss the way she gasped, wasn't blind to the way her back arched and her chin tipped up, couldn't ignore the way her nipples were solid as rocks against his chest. He paused for a moment, brushing his fingers over her face—she leaned into the touch—taking stock.

Then he groaned and let his head fall to her heaving chest.

“I can't do it, Gwennie.”

“What?” She knew what he meant, though, because she shuddered all over and then went very still. “Bucky...”
“I can’t,” he repeated.

She gasped, and then breathed harshly. “Maybe if you...” She trailed off in the face of his shaking head, didn’t say anything as he rolled off of her and onto his back.

He pressed his hands into the bed on each side of him, arms straight, like it was going to brace him against the ugly truth of it. “Gwennie, I’m limper than a dead cat, over here.”

Gwen didn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry,” he added, and meant it. “I really am. I wanted to be... for you...”

She snorted, and he looked over sharply. She turned her head to meet his eyes. “A dead cat?” she repeated, madness and humor fighting in her gaze.

Bucky felt something tight and hard in his chest unclench, a chant starting up in the back of his mind: still friends, still friends, still friends!!! “What,” he asked, bluffing, “you’ve never seen a dead cat, before?”

“I’ve seen a dead cat, yeah. I just don’t know why we’re going feline at all, here. You couldn’t have said a dead snake?”

Bucky stared at her for a moment, wanting to laugh. “...Have you ever seen a dead snake?”

“No,” she said, in a voice that asked why, what’s wrong with ‘em?

“Neither have I,” he shrugged. “I went with what I knew.”

She thought about it.

“Could have done a worm,” she suggested.

He looked offended, mostly for show. “Excuse you, I most certainly could not!”

That did it; she burst out laughing, and he laughed with her, and she was right: they were still friends, after all.

Then she turned her head away, looking awkward. “Well, if you’re done...” she said.

Bucky nodded, mostly relieved she wasn’t pressing him any further. “I am, yeah.”

“...hold me while I do this, then?” She looked back over at him, expression hopeful.

Bucky blinked. “Do what?”

She wrinkled her nose and didn’t say. “Here, just—on your side, maybe? Behind me, and I’ll—”

She scooted around until they were spooned together, then huffed. “Damn, now I’m pinning my own arm. Maybe try the other way?”

She started to try to crawl over him, and he stopped her with a hand on her arm. “Hold on, I’ll sit up,” he said, and did so, propping his bent legs out in front of him as he leaned back against the wall behind them, since Gwen had never bothered with a headboard. He pulled her in so that she was lying back against him, feeling oddly vulnerable—she was lying pretty directly over his junk—but also... Close, he decided, then remembered something a priest had said once: the closeness of the marriage bed.
He wrapped his right arm around Gwen, under her own arm and then—he gulped—under her small, rose-tipped breasts; with his left, he pulled her braid to the side until it fell over her shoulder.

“This about right?” he asked, and watched, fascinated, as she shivered.

“Yes,” she said, and there was something strange in her voice, almost drunk, not-quite slurring. “Yes, this is—ooh, perfect.”

Her right hand was moving.

“What are you—?”

“Mm. Well. Ethel from church told me.”

“You talked about bed stuff with Ethel?” Ethel had only a couple years on Bucky, but she already had three kids. She was one of the most wholesome people Bucky knew—the kids were healthy, she talked all the time with her mother and mother-in-law, and she and her brood attended church like clockwork every Sunday.

And, more importantly, he was guaranteed to see her if he ever set foot in the goddamned church again!

“Of course I did, I couldn’t exactly talk about it with my ma, could I? Anyway. I asked—not like I thought it was likely, but like I was worried, ’cause I figured any new bride would be —about what I could do if it, you know... didn’t go well.”

“Jesus, Gwen!” Bucky covered his face with his hands for a second, but only a second; then he pulled them down and peeked out at her again.

“And she said—” Gwen’s hand was still moving, her left running up and down the surface of her thigh. Her voice was a normal volume, but a little breathy. “—she said, if I am at all less than satisfied with the experience—”

“Christ Jesus,” Bucky moaned.

“—then, once he’s done, I should roll over and do this.” She let her head roll back against his chest. “Mmm. You were done, right?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said quickly, “I was done. What’s it... you know... what’s it do? You’re not going, uh... in, right?”

“No. It...” She paused, breathing a little harder, and his arm tightened around her instinctively. “…It feels... good. It...” She pulled her hand out, grabbed him around the wrist. “Here,” she said, and tugged his arm down until his fingers were—oh, shit—buried in her folds. “Just—rub, back and forth, right—yeah, right there!” She huffed out a breath, and then kept doing it, breathing heavy. “Christ, it feels even better when you do it!”

Bucky felt his skin prickle all over his shoulders when he worked out what that meant, and he suspected his face was turning red. “You, uh... You’ve been doing this... a lot? Before tonight, I mean?”

“Yeah.” Her hands snuck up her body, playing with her—oh Christ Jesus Bucky had no idea if he was even allowed to look at this—with her breasts, her nipples, pulling and rubbing, rubbing and pulling, and once she even pinched and twisted. “Rosie Baker—”
“You talked to Rosie Baker about this?!”

Rosie Baker was sixty-five years old if she was a day. Jesus wept.

“Ethel called her over. She said, practice at home, before the wedding, so I could be really good at it come tonight.” Her hips shifted, twisting under his fingers, and he almost couldn’t believe it was happening, that she was—that she had been—Christ, what did you even call it for a lady?

You couldn’t say jerkin’ it, she didn’t have an it to jerk!

“Jesus, Bucky... Here—”

She pulled his hand out of... where it had been... and plopped it on her breast, instead. “Do... something with these. What I was doing,” she ordered, then returned her own hand to her... area... and started working away.

Faster than he’d been going, too, it looked like.

He looked down at his hand where it molded against her left tit. His fingers were glistening, he noticed, and before he’d even thought about it, he raised it to his mouth to taste; it was salty, mostly, a little tangy; definitely wasn’t the worst taste he’d ever encountered. “Oh,” he said, not even sure why he was surprised.

“Bucky,” she said, only it came out half a whine, half a puff. He put his hand back on her breast, tried to do what he’d seen her doing: rubbing, tugging on the nipples. He also tried cupping it, like he’d heard boys talk about doing—usually with emphatic gestures ill-suited to the mosquito bites Gwen was sporting—but she seemed to like that, too, especially when he shifted her weight a little and got both hands in on it. Remembering what he liked, himself, he also set his mouth to her ear, kissing and nibbling at it.

That was what did it, it seemed like; she started gasping, almost sounding like the terrifying wheeze that signaled an asthma attack—although, not quite, thank goodness—and squirmed hard, which seemed like a great sign, so Bucky kept doing it. She shook, and shook, and then a minute later, she thralshed, bucking between his legs, arching her back, hand working furiously as her left hand gripped his thigh for purchase, thin little fingers squeezing tight enough to leave bruises.

It was beautiful, honestly, watching her move like that; like the ocean, or the sky, or something. Almost too much, for a moment, and he had to squeeze his eyes shut, letting the feelings well up and rush over him.

He rubbed her down, gently, like a groom with a horse, as she collapsed back on top of him. She nuzzled, too, shoving her head up under his chin like a cat, practically purring, and he couldn’t help smiling. “Wow,” he said.

“Wow,” she agreed. She sounded smug.

Well. Fair enough, in his opinion.

“You are officially welcome to do that any damn time you want,” Bucky told her. “That was amazing—you’re beautiful, Gwen, you really are. I could watch that all day.”

Her face changed, at that, getting a little bit sadder. Only a little bit, though, and then she smiled. “Thanks,” she said. “Same to you.”

Bucky had absolutely no intention of masturbating in her presence anytime soon, and by that he
meant not ever, but he nodded anyway. “Right,” he said.

She smiled wider, and also sadder. “Right,” she repeated.

The room was silent, except for the traffic noise on the street outside.

Bucky gave himself a shake. “Well,” he said, “I’m getting pj’s. You want yours?”

“Yes, please,” she said, sounding grateful as she slipped out of bed beside him. “I’m getting a glass of water, should I get you one, too?”

“Please,” he said, because god, his mouth was like the desert, water sounded great right about now.

Her eyes lidded as she watched him move to the closet, and then she slipped into the kitchen.

This marriage thing, Bucky decided... All told, it wasn’t half bad, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Religion: Church for Gwen carries both religious and social aspects; the latter are positively featured in this chapter.

Sex: Bucky, who identifies as a gay man, proposes marriage to Gwen, who identifies as a straight (cis) woman. They kiss, and later attempt to have sex. The sex is unsuccessful due to Bucky’s inability to achieve an erection with Gwen, who then proceeds to masturbate while Bucky holds her.

Homophobia: Bucky gets into a fight in large part because of his sexuality; many of his actions are strongly motivated by fear of further homophobic violence. Self-directed hatred as a result of inability to have sex with a woman.
Married Life

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings discussed more explicitly in the endnotes: Religion. Extensive discussion of crossdressing (not for kink) (mostly). Sexual situations some may find disturbing. Dom/sub undertones.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bucky didn’t go to church every week, not like Gwen did, but she put her foot down and insisted, so he went with her once a month, at least.

She wasn’t a cruel woman, per se, but she did enjoy the look on his face when he came face to face with Ethel Proctor and Rosie Baker for the first time after their wedding night.

She herself had had a good little coze with Ethel two weeks previously, on the day after the wedding. Ethel had cornered her at the social after the service, pushed a teacup into her hand, and asked how “everything was going, Gwen, and don’t you go feeding me nonsense, either.”

Gwen blushed—Irish skin, of course she blushed—and hemmed and hawed, and Ethel had chuckled and bumped shoulders with her. “Did you take my advice, at least, Gwen?”

Gwen coughed, looking up through her lashes because she couldn’t quite say it looking straight at her, and admitted, “It did come in useful...”

You probably could have fried an egg on Gwen’s face by this point, but that was alright.

Ethel cackled, patting Gwen on the back, obviously misinterpreting.

The thing was, Ethel’s advice hadn’t been about how to find satisfaction when your husband couldn’t provide it. If it had been, Gwen wouldn’t have been half so red over it, and she wouldn’t have admitted to using the advice, either. Ethel’s suggestion had been more along the lines of, how to make it clear to your man that he should damned well be doing better.

In other words, rolling over and taking oneself in hand wasn’t intended as a way to solve the, er... problem, although that was how Gwen had used it. It was intended to shame your husband into solving the problem for you.

Bucky, of course, had not been susceptible.

Gwen had no intention of ever, ever, telling Ethel that.

Besides, the discovery that she could bring herself pleasure had almost meant more to her than watching Bucky face her while she did it. And anyway, Ethel had meant the suggestion kindly enough.

So Gwen let Ethel think what she was clearly going to anyway—and let Ethel report what she would to Rosie Baker, too, that meddling old busybody—and ducked and blushed just as much as her Catholic mother would have wanted her to.
Ethel laughed again. “Glad to hear it!” she declared, and slid two of her tea cookies over to Gwen’s plate. “Have a sweet, there’s not enough meat on your bones. And speaking of, what do you know about pregnancy...?”

Gwen was completely certain she didn’t need to worry about contraception, but she let Ethel tell her anyway. There was no such thing as wasted knowledge, after all.

Christ almighty, but it wasn’t until he got married that Bucky really noticed how much men talked about girls! What they looked like, what they smelled like, what was fun to do in bed... If I wanted to do that, I could be doing it, he didn’t say, and smiled, and nodded, and listened, and tried to look like he knew or cared what they were talking about.

If pressed, he could participate, fairly convincingly, by telling them how sweet Gwen looked when she got off. He tried not to do that, though; he didn’t think she would like it.

Bucky got a second job, running “errands” for the mob. Gwen hated it, but it paid twice as much as his regular job. He kept that job, too; Gwen was going to art school, by God, if he had to run the soles off his shoes to make it happen.

Gwen also hated that damned attitude, but she couldn’t deny that she didn’t hate art school. She loved it, in fact, loved the feeling of creating, loved the triumph of getting better, loved the discovery that she could make someone see something in a new way. For two years, she was as happy as she ever thought she would be in her life.

Gwen stopped going to art school when she got into a fistfight with a guy from uptown about the propriety of ladies learning to paint, and Bucky just laughed and hugged her tight when she told him. “That’s my Gwen,” he said, and neither one of them knew if it was more fond, or more proud.

After Gwen got kicked out of school, though, Bucky politely declined to carry messages for the mob any more. He phrased it as a temporary leave, and—whether because of his charm, or because they didn’t really need him—the men he reported to let him go.

Gwen said her prayers of thanks every night for a month.

After that first night, they did not attempt to have sex again. Gwen did continue to rub one out at bedtimes, and they both liked it when Bucky wrapped his burly dockworker’s arms around her and held her through it. But he never reciprocated, and she never asked him to, either. Instead, he went out to his clubs, once every two weeks or so—which Gwen would take, honestly, because that was a lot less often than he had been doing it. He never brought his fellows home, even though he no longer lived with his family and Gwen sometimes went to dinner with her church friends to give him the space. He couldn’t bring himself to use those opportunities, though, even when she flat-out said he could. It just didn’t feel right.

Their routine in the morning was that Gwen would wake first, and would get out of bed to start coffee. A handful of times, though, she gave in to laziness, rolling over and snuggling back down under the covers—Gwen was always cold.

On those mornings, usually sunny Saturdays when even the neighborhood dogs sounded lazy, she might reach a hand out to snuggle Bucky, only to encounter the predictable morning erection...
instead. Two times, he let her bring him off with her hands while he kissed her, and kissed her, and kissed her.

Mostly, though, even on Saturday mornings, they just spooned each other and went back to sleep.

December 7th, 1941 came, and went.

Everything changed, of course.

The problem was, they both knew Bucky was going to enlist, and they both knew Gwen wanted to. Gwen was resigned to the former; Bucky was dead set against the latter, especially since Gwen wasn’t actually looking at the WAACs.

“I could pass for a man,” she insisted. “What are they gonna do, look at my chest and know? Oh, wait!”

Bucky did not roll his eyes because she was right, she was flatter than a lot of guys he knew. “No, but the docs are supposed to check your shorts, too, I think. For disease, and stuff.”

“Not if I find the right doctor,” she said confidently. “Then it’s just a matter of getting together the money for the bribe.”

“Christ al mighty.”

“I’m gonna try,” she said. Her pointy little chin was jutting forward, and he felt his heart sink. “I’ll make it, you’ll see.”

When the day came, though, Bucky was not the one who saw. Instead, he walked in and found the apartment dark, but with the close feeling of breathed air that let him know Gwen was still home. No sign of her in the living room or kitchen, though, and that was disturbing, too; usually, when she heard the door open, Gwen would come out from wherever she was to meet him.

“Gwen?” He called out as he paced further into the apartment. Gwen wasn’t answering, but he could hear muffled sounds coming from the bedroom.

His heart sank. It sounded like crying.

“Oh, shit.”

He eased open the door, poking his head around it before following with the rest of his body. “Gwen?”

She looked up from where she was lying, cross-wise across the bed, with a guilty expression on her face.

Otherwise, she looked... odd.

It was her clothes, Bucky realized. She was wearing a men’s suit—shocking that she had even managed to find one that small—and trousers, neither of which fit well, and her hair was all pinned up on top of her head in a bizarre sort of style that mostly just pulled it all back, except for her bangs. After another moment, he spotted his favorite hat, dented and dusty, rolled away under the nightstand.
“Damn,” he said softly, crossing over to her. “Wouldn’t take you, huh?”

She buried her head in her arms again immediately, but couldn’t hide the way her shoulders were shaking. “Leave me alone, Bucky Barnes.”

“Not gonna happen, Mrs. Barnes.” He sat down, gently, beside her, putting a hand between her shoulder blades, as comforting as he could be. He rubbed her back as she shook—cried, if he was being honest about the situation—and looked out their shitty apartment window at the cracked facade of the building across the street. It was one of those old brick ones where the bricks were huge, and it had some kind of growth spreading across it which was probably moss but looked like fungus, instead. Gwen shook again beside him—as much rage as hurt, unless he missed his guess—and he marveled, all over again, at how fragile she felt under his hand. He could feel the bones of her back, the spine and shoulder blades, and the flesh stretching over them felt impossibly delicate, like the last scrape of gelatin left in the mold.

Not that she would ever hear that, of course, not even from him.

“ Wouldn’t let you in, huh?” he asked when her crying slowed.

She peeked out of her hands, mostly so that she could glare at him. “Didn’t even try,” she said stiffly.

Lying.

“Bullshit,” Bucky called her out on it. “You tried. You mighta stopped early, though; what happened?”

She looked away, the pins in her pulled-up hair glinting mockingly at him. “Medical history,” she said shortly.

“Well, I don’t think you’re dumb enough to have told them you don’t have a weiner,” he said bluntly. “So what happened?”

Her shoulders hunched around her ears. “Ma,” she said, her voice thick with anger and hurt—and now grief, apparently; Christ almighty, couldn’t his girl catch a break? “They asked what my parents died of, and I said—”

She broke off, but Bucky could fill in the truth well enough, because Gwen was a fundamentally honest person, this little adventure aside, and she would have told the truth about this: Mustard gas, at the Somme.

And TB.

“He didn’t even write it down,” she said miserably. “Just shoved the paper back at me and told me to get out. ’You’ve got a lucky break then,’” she imitated, “’little scrap of a man like you wouldn’t make it through training camp, much less the war!’”

And just like that, Bucky was angry. He didn’t want her to go—of course he didn’t!—but goddam if some snot-nosed bureaucrat who had probably never even seen the front was gonna sneer at her, was gonna talk down to his Gwennie, to his girl who had more fight and more spirit than any dozen other recruits, who had every excuse in the world to just stay home and mind her own business but who wouldn’t, who couldn’t, because that wasn’t the way she was built.

“Yeah, well fuck that guy,” he snapped.
Gwen’s head whipped around.

“Look, you know how I feel about this, but you should also know—and I kinda don’t think you do — that you’re worth ten of him, alright? You are amazing, and as much as I hate to say it you’re right, you should be fighting. God, I’m gonna regret this for decades to come, but—look, tonight’s Tuesday, right? Don’t try again yet. I’m gonna talk to someone. We’re having a guest next Friday, alright? We’re gonna talk about this then. In the meantime...” He took a deep breath, because this was the part it was gonna be hard to sell her on. “In the meantime, don’t try again for a while. I mean like for a couple of months. If word gets out that there’s a girl tryin’a enlist, it’s gonna be that much harder for you to make it.”

She nodded slowly, accepting what he was saying as good sense. That was always the way they had been; Gwen was passionate, Bucky was good sense, and together they balanced her recklessness and his reticence.

They made a good team.

Still, Bucky waited until she had verbally accepted the bargain before he gave her the rest of the bad news. “Okay. And while we are killing time, I’m gonna enlist. No, I don’t want to hear it!”

He held both hands up defensively, stalling her.

“I know, you don’t want me to go, either, and I’m kind of touched by that, but we both know I’m gonna go sooner or later anyway, so I might as well get in early and hope to stand out.”

She stared at him, her jaw working. Her eyes were burning, full of emotion but so red they had to feel gritty and painful, and Bucky just sat there and let her work through it. It took a minute; first she was furious—feeling tricked, probably, ’cause she kinda had been, and also betrayed by life, because he could enlist and she couldn’t, properly. Then she was hurt again; that one was there and gone again in a flash, because that was his Gwennie, she always walked off her hurts. Then defeat, and god, he hated to see that there, hated to see the slump in her shoulders and the way she turned her face away again. He didn’t say anything then, though, either, letting her feel it and deal with it however she would.

Finally, she turned her head back towards him, and her face was completely blank. For a second, Bucky felt his heart clench, worry flooding through him.

She blinked slow at him and said, “You always stand out, Bucky Barnes.”

It took a moment to understand the words, and then he felt himself melting like hot wax, touched by it. “Gwennie...”

“Just don’t take your pants off,” she continued, “Or you’ll stand out a lot more. I mean, a monster like that, I’m guessing most of them have never even seen one so big!”

Bucky burst out laughing, and tackled her, both of them sprawling diagonal across the mattress. “I’ll show you a monster!” he crowed, digging his fingers into the sensitive spot beneath her ribs.

“No!” she shrieked. “No, not tickling, noooo!”

But the howl she gave was playful, and a couple minutes later, when he had her pinned and panting, she looked up at him with a fondness that thanked him for the distraction.

He started pulling pins out of her hair, piling them in his left palm while carding through her hair with his right. “I love you, Mrs. Barnes,” he said, and she smiled shyly up at him. Her hair was
sleek and thin, he noticed, not for the first time in four years of marriage. It slipped through his fingers like expensive silk ribbons. “I’m sorry you had a bad day. And they shouldn’ta blamed it on your ma like that.”

“Thanks, Buck,” she said softly, and relaxed underneath him in that way that always made him feel privileged. Like when his Gwen was having a bad day, he got to help, and every other bastard in the world had to watch. “I’m glad I’ve got you,” she added. “I can’t imagine doing this without you.”

She brushed his fringe out of his eyes. “I’m a lucky woman,” she said, and her voice was husky.

He put the last pin in his palm and captured her hand in his, bringing it to his mouth to press a kiss against it. “Same here,” he told her. “I’m goddamned lucky. Same here.”

Later, Bucky would look back on introducing Gwen to Marty as one of the best parts of joining the army.

He’d joined up the previous Saturday, making careful mental notes on the process—Gwen was not gonna like this, she was going to have to do an awful lot of lying—and asking carefully idle questions about what kinds of things got a man 4F’ed. It turned out, a lot of things—Gwen’s asthma was problematic, her heart even more concerning, but the TB was the real killer; she was going to have to straight-out falsify that one. Hell, people even got barred for flat feet! At least that was one thing she didn’t have to worry about.

Now, Friday, ten days after Gwen’s ill-fated attempt at enlistment, he came home early, shucking his shirt and changing clothes quickly into something that would be acceptable in the clubs. Gwen was there already—her job as a receptionist usually let out early on Fridays, one of the things they both agreed was worth the crappy pay and irritating boss, since it gave her time to paint—and she gave him an odd look when she saw him cleaning up. “Didn’t you say we were having a guest tonight?” she asked, frowning over a dinner she was obviously putting some effort into preparing.

“We are,” Bucky said. “That’s why I’m heading out; can’t issue an invite through the mail if I don’t have a body’s address, can I? I’ve gotta go in person.”

“Oh.” Her eyes flicked towards the stove.

“Stop worryin’, Gwennie.” He finished settling his jacket and stepped towards her with quick, long strides. He pressed a kiss to her forehead—Christ, sometimes it killed him how much shorter she was! Like she was a kid, or something, someone he needed to protect—and then headed for the door. “Dinner was never part of the plan, anyway.”

She scowled and hollered after him as he closed the door, “It was gonna be delicious, Bucky Barnes...!”

An hour and a half later, he was back, walking through the door with Marty Richardson at his side, feeling smug as a pig in a mud pit. “Gwen?” he called, unlocking the apartment.

The patter of her tiny feet always sounded like welcome home. “Bucky,” she said. “I saved you some stew.”

God bless her and her pointy little wit; he was starving. “Gwen, this is Marty Richardson; Marty, my wife Gwen.”
Marty was tall, with a horsey face and bushy caterpillar eyebrows; she had a lanky figure in a well-tailored suit, and God knew how big her bosoms usually were, but suffice to say Bucky had never seen hide nor hair of them. (Not that they were hairy; or so he assumed, anyway.) She was wearing a hat, but not a large one, and her tie was loose around her collar. Her shoes were, as always, perfectly shined.

She held out one hand towards Gwen, who took it. “A pleasure to meet you, Mrs...?”

“Oh, shit, sorry,” Bucky said as he realized he’d never used his full name with her. “Barnes, Marty; m’last name’s Barnes.”

“Ah! Mrs. Barnes, then.” And then Marty, that suave motherfucker, brought Gwen’s hand up to her mouth and kissed it.

Gwen blushed.

Bucky almost kicked Marty right back out again, although only for half a second.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Richardson. Would you like something to drink?”

“I’d love some,” Marty said. She managed to make it sound filthy, too, and Bucky realized he’d better clarify why the hell she was here before everyone involved went too damned far in the wrong direction.

“Gwen,” he told Marty significantly, “wants to join the army.”

Marty raised her eyebrows. “I’d be happy to talk about it,” she offered, and—thank god—backed off a bit with the flirting. “I haven’t joined up yet, but I probably will, and I have half a dozen friends who are getting into the Auxilliary Corps.

“Oh,” said Gwen, sounding embarrassed.

“Yeah, that’s the thing,” Bucky told Marty. “Gwen ain’t interested in the Auxilliary Corps.”

Marty should, by all rights, have been offended, but there was a reason that Bucky was bringing this to her, and not one of the other girls: Marty was a good egg... and had been arrested for throwing bad eggs at a crooked politician on not one, not two, but four different occasions. Marty, Bucky was sure, would Get It.

Which she did, it turned out.

“Well,” she said, turning a critical eye on Gwen, considering her now in a completely different light. “Hmm. You’ve got a ways to go.”

“I can do it,” Gwen said fiercely, and Marty nodded, accepting that at face value despite the fact that she had almost as many inches on Gwen as Bucky did, and despite the fact that she outweighed Gwen by at least fifty pounds.

Yeah... Marty was on board.

“Alright.” Marty pulled a cigarette out of an inside pocket, waving it, unlit in the air. “Mind if I smoke?”

Gwen hesitated.

“No is the answer; no, you don’t,” Marty instructed. “In fact, you’d like to bum one yourself if you
can.”

Gwen blinked, then, silently, held out her hand.

Marty gave her the cigarette, then leaned in and lit it for her like she was Gary fuckin’ Cooper or something. “If anyone gets close and you don’t want ‘em to,” she instructed, “blow smoke in their face. If you can make the switch to cigars, do it; I can’t stand ‘em, personally, but there’s nothing so masculine, apparently, as holding a tobacco roll that looks like a dick in your hand. Do you usually wear makeup?”

“She does,” Bucky called, moving towards the kitchen because *damn* that stew smelled good.

“Not much,” Gwen protested. “Just some lipcolor, honestly, and only that because my boss made it clear he expects it.”

“Well, we’ll work on it. If you can hide your kit, you can use some cosmetics to make yourself more masculine, just like most gals use ‘em to make themselves look more feminine.” Marty put her hand under Gwen’s chin, turning her face this way and that. “The problem,” she said, slipping behind Gwen and starting to pull her braid out of its pins—Gwen jumped, but permitted it—“is the hair. That’s always the problem, really; how do you have masculine hair at night and feminine hair during the day? I use a hat, of course, but you can’t do that in the Army, can you? And you can cut it all off, but then if you don’t get in, everybody gives you some very funny looks.” Marty tipped her hat off into her hand and flipped it into a chair with a flourishy move designed to impress, then gripped Gwen’s shoulders and leaned around to smile into her face, the tight bun at the back of her head glinting in the lamplight. “My Christian name’s Susan, by the way, since we’re going to be talking about the masks.”

Gwen’s smile was sunny, delight and surprise, and for a moment she looked as beautiful as Bucky’d always thought she could be. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Susan. Thank you for helping me.”

Marty grinned, wolfish. “My pleasure,” she purred, and her hand slipped down to Gwen’s hip. Gwen rolled her eyes.

“Alright, alright—Bucky, you have a hell of a woman, here—now, do you know a good doctor?”

“And by good you mean bad? No, I haven’t found one, yet. I’d heard that the uptown recruiting station had a slovenly doc who took bribes, and I’d even scouted out how much he’d need, but…” She shrugged and grimaced at the same time. “Apparently, the rest of the recruiting station aren’t nearly as poorly run.”

Marty was already shaking her head. “No, I’ve thought about this,” she said. “You don’t want a bribable doctor; you want a lazy one.”

“Lazy?” Gwen laughed in surprise. She was, Bucky noted, looking right into Marty’s eyes, totally absorbed in whatever Marty was saying; her posture was slouched into Marty’s embrace.

You told her to go ahead, he reminded himself. *If she ever found someone she wanted, you said she should feel free to take.*

But his heart felt hard, like an orange which is so far past edible that it’s too dry even for mold.

“A corrupt doctor, you’ll have to meet his price,” Marty was saying, “and maybe keep meeting it, and honestly it’s either going to be money or sex; I have no interest in sharing either one with an
“asshole like that, do you?”

Gwen flushed. “No, of course not! But—”

“Right! But a lazy doctor... I’ve staked this out. The recruiting centers, they have you wait in your skivvies, but the recruiting fairs, they don’t get as many people in, so they can put you in a little stall to undress. So here’s how we run it: You go to a fair, one we know is stocked with a lazy doctor. You go into the little stall, but instead of getting down to your shorts, you just take off your shirt and pants; leave the undershirt on, that’ll hide the binding. He checks you over, quick because he’s a schmuck, and doesn’t bother to correct you about taking off the next layer because he wants to get back to not doing much. He declares you good to go, and poof! You’re in!”

“Until boot camp,” Bucky called from the kitchen. “Where there are communal showers.”

They both turned and stared at him. He shrugged. “I thought you should know before you got arrested.” He flicked his eyes up at Marty. “Both of you, apparently. How long exactly have you been planning this, Marty?”

He hadn’t known, when he had first invited her over. In retrospect, he probably should have.

She shrugged, looking shy for the first time since Bucky first met her, four years ago. “A while,” she answered, and they all jumped at the suddenly-higher pitch of her voice. “My father fought the Germans in the last war, and he always did want a son.”

The apartment was silent for a moment, and then Gwen said briskly, “Well, I’m small enough, I shouldn’t need a binder. I’ll still take that fair over the center, though, so thank you for that heads up. How do we know when the fair doc is lazy? Do they rotate the assignments?”

“That’s the bad news,” Marty said. “They do. This is where the second story work comes in...”

“Oh, Christ Jesus!” Bucky exclaimed, rolling his eyes melodramatically. “I just had to introduce you two, didn’t I?” But it was hard to get too upset, when they both looked so purposeful and happy planning their caper, so Bucky brought his bowl of stew—and the promised drink for Marty—over to the sitting room, occasionally putting in suggestions as they plotted.

The good news was, Marty—or Susan, apparently—had found a doc who was lazy as hell, and Gwen pulled off the part where she broke into his house and copied his next two months itinerary without a hitch. But Bucky got called up to Basic before either woman could take a shot at getting in, and had to sit through the whole mess wondering anxiously how they were doing.

He turned out to be good at it—at being a soldier, that was; worrying about Gwen was an art he’d perfected years ago. But he was a damned good shot, even though he hadn’t touched a gun outside of Basic, and he was able to strike a balance between learning all the rules quickly and knowing when to disregard them. He was popular with the men, too, although he was willing to bet that would change if any of them ever found out he was queer. Not that they ever would: he wasn’t stupid enough to hit on his fellow soldiers, not considering the potential for disaster.

It was strange; after so many years of hiding what he was, he was finally in the one place where it didn’t matter.

It such a damned relief he almost cried, to tell the truth.

Marty got in.
I don’t recommend it to our mutual friend, though, as while I have devised my workarounds, they are unpleasant, and I think ill-suited to one of such a nature. Perhaps some alternate route will reveal itself to one of our company; else I fear some rash action will jeopardize our whole lot.

Marty’s letter was easy to read, in a clear, minimalist handwriting with fancy wording because Marty had had some college, but it was less helpful than it could have been, really.

Still, whatever Marty wrote to Gwen, it must have worked; she was still there when Bucky got back from Basic, going quietly crazy writing correspondence for the stuffed-shirt who had hired her as his secretary, fractious enough to be contemplating the Auxiliary even without them seeing combat. She greeted Bucky when he showed up back at home with a kiss so hard and bruising that he fell, dropping to his knees beneath her, letting her bite his mouth and pull his hair until she was satisfied that yes, he really was home.

“I’ve got to find a way,” she moaned later, curled half over his lap on their sofa. “I can’t do what Marty did...”

Bucky didn’t ask.

“...but there’s got to be something I can do!”

He couldn’t say anything.

Having been there, now—having seen the camps, and worked with the men, and gotten some idea of what it would be like in combat, even if he hadn’t been deployed—he was certain, completely sure, that she’d be an absolute disaster. And not just for bad reasons, either.

Sure, the asthma and the ticker would slow her down, and her size was problematical at best; her gender was a stumbling block, too, and for all he rather thought it shouldn’t be—a lifetime of friendship with Gwen Rogers had taught him that woman could fight just as fiercely as men—the fact was, as things stood the problem was a real one.

But she also had a fierceness to her, and independence of both spirit and mind, which would be a cock-up waiting to happen in the military. How could a man follow orders and follow his heart, both at the same time? He couldn’t; he absolutely couldn’t, and Gwen—Christ, but they already knew this—Gwen couldn’t not follow her heart.

But Bucky couldn’t just say that to her, either; she wasn’t in a place where she could hear it, too full of rage, full of destructive fire, to admit to such petty human traits as limits. It was one of the things he loved about her, if he was being strictly honest.

So he held his counsel and bit his tongue. He rested a hand on her hair, and made her promise not to try until she knew how to get through the camps. He told her about his own time there, slumping more and more sideways until he was resting on her as much as she was resting on him, and both of them were breathless from laughter at the stories he told—carefully picked to be humorous—and at the antics of the other men.

He said nothing, and watched her go on hoping.

He said nothing.

The order to deploy came like a fist in the goddamned gut.

One moment, he was standing in the LT’s office at Fort Hamilton, reporting in. He’d been
stationed near home—most of the Brooklyn boys had, the camp was right there—and, like most of the others, everybody was fine with him going home to Gwen when off-duty. There was a lot more nodding and winking than Bucky strictly considered necessary, but that was alright, it was good cover. Maybe he could persuade her to see a flick; a new animated film was supposed to be coming out soon, and Gwen had loved the last one, so maybe they could go see that—

—and then no, no he couldn’t, unless they did it that night, because suddenly it was time to roll out, and he was done, they were out of time.

Christ, he thought, and breathed calm, like he’d trained Gwennie to do during asthma attacks.

Christ, no time left, what can we do? But he received his orders with a clear and level head, and by the time he was done talking with the other sergeants, they all knew how it was going to work.

They rode back to the city in a group, nearly twenty sharp-dressed young men, all wild about the eyes, all ready for a last-night carouse of freedom before boarding the ship to Hell. The one good thing—the only good thing—about deploying was his pay was going to increase, and he wouldn’t be home to spend it, so he felt no compunction at all about the idea of getting all fancy and going out for the night. For once, they could afford it.

And what exactly am I earning my raise with?

He shoved the bitter thought aside.

He found Gwen at the apartment, face smudged and eyes dizzy from painting in the bathroom. (She did all her painting in the bathroom, because it was easier to clean, but it did lock the fumes in with her.) He walked over to look at the dark swirls spiralling around the central point of light, at the angry eyes glaring out at him from a nonsensically-designed not-portrait—only it was Gwen, so it wasn’t nonsensical at all, really, just indecipherable—and then turned away, resting with his back against the wall just outside the bathroom door.

“Come on,” he called to her, and watched her eyes snap up to him in the mirror, watched them widen at the sight of his uniform.

She knew, then.

“Get dressed,” he continued.

“Why?” she asked. But she was swirling her brushes in the turpentine, which meant she was doing it. “Where are we going?”

“The future.”

It would have been a lovely evening if it weren’t for Tommy Mathison, whom they had both known since they were ten, and who had been a colossal jerk the entire time.

There they were, talking about the flying car—Gwen thought it was a neat idea, and it’d be lovely when it worked; Bucky thought it was brilliant, but that it was never gonna work, the floating had been a stunt or an effect—when the crowd slowed, eddying to try to exit the park, and their walking pace perforce dropped to a stand-and-amble.

That meant they were pinned in place when Tommy fuckin’ Mathison started running his damned mouth.

“Don’t be stupid, of course I’m not going! Like I couldn’t get outta that? I just said my dad died
of TB, I was outta there faster than you can snap your fingers!”

Bucky had always thought Tommy was a damned idiot, but he’d never hated him so much as when Gwen went very, very still on his arm.

“What kind of a chump,” Tommy went on, and now Bucky had shifted his weight, he was behind Gwen, he was ready to hold her back, “would join the Army, anyway? Go over to Europe or the Pacific, get shot at for some nonsense that doesn’t even affect us? Pfft! I’d rather stay home and make time with the ladies who might suddenly...” There were suggestive pauses and then there were blockheaded pauses, and oh, god, but this was one of the latter. “...need some company.”

“Bucky,” Gwen said, her voice level and conversational, “Do you mind letting go of my arm for a moment?”

“Yeah, I sure would,” Bucky said immediately. “Hold your damned temper Gwen, Jesus Christ.”

“No, I really think you should let me go—”

“I said no, Gwen, we are in the middle of a crowd—”

“He shouldn’t be allowed to say those things!” she hissed at him, and out of the corner of his eye—over her head—Bucky saw the crowd swirl, and Tommy Assface Mathison was out of the park, and if he could stall Gwen for one damned minute he could give him time to get away. “Not about you, and not about me, Bucky.”

“Yeah? Well, you can’t go knocking sense into every dumbass that ever crosses your path—”

“I can damned well try!” She paused, and her eyes narrowed, her jaw setting in renewed fury. “God damnit. He’s gone, isn’t he?”

“Thank god,” Bucky snapped.

She pulled back as if he’d slapped her, except that he’d seen her fight and he knew she would’ve reacted better to that. “You know,” she said viciously, “if you’re going to just be sniping at me, maybe you need to go off and let off some steam.”

He wasn’t fast enough; he thought, I need to let off some steam?, but didn’t say it, and before he could open his mouth she went on, “Maybe you should go out tonight, find yourself the kind of company you’re really looking for.”

It was low goddamned blow, and he felt cold all over as if she’s splashed him with a kettle of water. “What the hell, Gwen.”

She jerked her chin up and glared, but said nothing. Around them, the crowd proceeded to leave the damned park at a crawl.

“That’s not fair.” His hat felt heavy on his head the way it hadn’t since the second day of training, and suddenly the brim wasn’t protective or sharp, it was just limiting his visibility and he was penned in. “How could you—how could you say that?”

Her eyes sparkled with tears, but she was too mad to swipe at them, and he was too mad to let them soften him one bit, and all of a sudden he had to get the hell out of there. “I’m here with you. I had one damned night left,” he hissed, grabbing her by the arm and tugging them back into the line for the gate, “and I chose to spend it with you. Not with my folks, not with my sister; not with the guys from camp; and sure as hell not with any other guys—” The line moved, and suddenly they
were clear of the bottleneck, out of the scrum and into the open parkway; he pulled her off to the side so that no one would run into them or eavesdrop. “—but with you, and do you know why that is?”

“Why.” She damn near spat the word, which he ignored. He was flying high and fast, now, too furious—probably because he was too damned scared—to stop talking and just shut his damned fool mouth.

“Because I wanted to be with the one person in my entire life with whom I can always have a good time, without getting into a—into a fight or a situation, or—I wanted to be with someone I love and still be safe,” he bit out, letting her arm go with a jerky, angular sort of motion.

She stepped right up into his space, because of course she did, and hissed back at him: “If you wanted to do something safe, Bucky Barnes, you could home and make love to your wife!”

His jaw dropped, and he stared at her, pinned and gutted all at once.

The enormity of it, the unfairness of it all, hit him like piledriver, and suddenly it was like a streetlamp had blown out or something, the way she seemed to change before him. All of a sudden, the only thing he could see was the look on her face when she’d said, “That was my first kiss, actually,” or the way she had smiled, shy and sly all at once, when she told him Ethel Proctor had taught her how to masterbate; the way Marty Richardson had looked at her like she was freshly-ripe plum, and the way his own heart had clenched when Marty had done it.

The way her smile lit up his morning as she handed him that first cup of honestly godawful coffee.

The way there had been another reason, the reason he never mentioned, locked behind his teeth when he had proposed.

His hand was numb, his fingers tingling with a cold sort of fear and with suddenly-extinguished rage, but he reached out and took her hand again, anyway. “C’mon,” he said, and noticed that his lips were numb, too.

She shook her head, jerked out of her rage by the emotional numbness of his own tone. “Where are we going?” she asked, but she followed, thank god, arm stretched out in front of her as they made their way along the street.

“Home,” he said. He sounded like a poisoner or something, he knew, some kind of crazy man, the way his own voice came out flat and devoid of any sort of joy or affection. But god, he was so tired all of a sudden! Tired, and terrified, and yet riding a thrill, too, a birdsong that sang out like a whippoorwill inside of him: Finally, finally, finally—

“Why?” she asked.

Her voice sounded cautious, and befuddled, but under that—of course—she sounded frustrated and angry. At this point he was greeting those emotions in her like they were an old friend, to tell the damned truth.

“Taking your advice,” he said, and then felt the tug on his hand again as she stopped dead.

“What?”

“Taking your advice,” he repeated, turning back to her, looking her in the eye. He was only a little ashamed that it had taken this long, but it was there in the bend of his neck; his sense of daring, he knew, was hovering around his mouth, making it twitch on his cheeks like the tail of a stalking cat.
“You were right, Gwen. You were right about the whole damned fight, but by God you were right about the last bit.” He shook her hand where it still hung in his grasp. “Let’s go home.”

He watched the incredulity be replaced by joy on her face as she realized what he meant, and furthermore that he really meant it, and then she was running, barrelling down the street and tugging him after her in her wake.

When they got to their walkup, she took the steps two at a time, her skirt tugged up to scandalous levels to keep it out of her way. But Bucky won’t care, she thought like a mantra, because Bucky’s taking me to bed, Bucky’s taking me to bed, Bucky’s taking me to bed—

And then, cold and curdling in her belly: He wouldn’t have said it if he couldn’t do it, would he?

Surely not.

Surely.

He couldn’t be that cruel.

Her traitorous mind instantly responding by delving into its archives for ways he had, in fact, been cruel—she’d known him since grade school, of course there had been some—but luckily—finally!—no, luckily, he pinned her to the apartment door before opening it, smooshing her against the wood as his clever, clever, sinful mouth worked at her ear, making her gasp, and gasp, and gasp, and then fall flat on her face as the door opened under her and she tripped over the sill.

“Ow! God damn it!”

It was not the most romantic moment ever.

Bucky helped her up, though, tugging her upright to lean, gasping, against him, as he locked the door from the inside and turned them both towards the bedroom.

His shiny uniform hat made it onto the living room chair; so did his emblazoned jacket and wide uniform belt. The gloves were less lucky, landing in a pile on the floor of the bedroom, next to his shoes and socks, and her dress, which fell beneath his shaking—shaking!—fingers as he popped the plaquet on the back.

He pulled her hair down next, and she wondered about that, a little, remembering how he hadn’t known if she would want to that first night. She wondered how he had figured out that it was more comfortable down, but by then he was kneeling at her feet, gently removing her shoes and stockings, and she rested her own hand—also shaking—in his hair.

He looked up, at that, and pressed a shaking kiss to her right knee, on the inside so that he had to practically lay his head against her lap, or what would be her lap, to do it. “Bucky.”

He nuzzled his way up, nosing at her—also trembling—thighs, pressing kisses against them, his head rising higher and higher as her breath came faster and faster, until he was shoving aside her slip with his mouth, and she was hyperventilating.

“Bucky,” she said again, but this time there was a word to come after it. “Bed.” We need to—“We need to get in the bed.”

He pressed his head against her panties as if she were precious. “Yeah,” he said. His voice was husky, like he’d been drinking whiskey and smoking all night, but she knew he hadn’t done either.
He’s going to be the only man in his platoon without a hangover tomorrow, she thought, irrelevantly.

He guided her backwards three steps, and then she was sitting on the edge of the bed, and he was lifting her up at the hip and trailing his mouth over her lower stomach until she arched her back and he could pull her underwear off. It went in the pile of laundry on the floor, and she thought, That’ll stain, before she actually put together what he was doing.

Oh. My. God!

He put his mouth directly on her and sucked, hard—too hard, actually, but the intensity was almost worth it. She arched off the bed like she’d been electrocuted, her voice scraping out of her throat in a cry much louder than those she had ever given before. His hands came under her, supporting her and shifting her legs around, until one was wrapped around his chest, splayed out to the side, and the other was hanging over his arm, toes pointed towards the ceiling. Oh, God, she felt ridiculous, spread out and akimbo like this, and how could he even be interested in—

“Oh, GOD! Bucky, Bucky—too hard!”

She blinked away tears from her eyes as his mouth gentled, and gasped up at the water-stained ceiling. “Oh, God,” she whimpered. “Bucky, Bucky, Bucky, Bucky—oh damn, oh God—” It would have been humiliating except that it was too good for that. She felt like a boat on a stormy sea, or a bird in a thunderstorm, overwhelmed and buffeted, and she decided to just go with it and ride it out...

The pressure built, a familiar waxing urgency that was almost a relief, a temporary stay against the reef of questions she was going to have once this all ended. She was thrashing above him, now, the leg wrapped around his chest tensing and tensing, pulling him closer and then squeezing against him, over and over, as her hips worked and she climbed towards a climax. Her cries got higher, in pitch and also in where she felt them, rising from her chest to her throat, from her throat to her mouth, and then spilling over out over her lips in what was almost a squeal as she came, and came, and came.

He kept his mouth on her as she floated down. She wondered if maybe that might be considered some form of gentlemanly. After a while, though, it became too much, and she found herself twitchy, so she leaned up and pushed back on his forehead. “That was it,” she told him. “You—we’re good. That was—that was the...”

It was extremely difficult to talk about these things.

“Not all of it,” he said, and she couldn’t help looking at his mouth. It was red and swollen, flushed with activity and wet with the mingled juices of his spit and her sex. She watched, feeling something dangerously like paralysis, as he—apparently without knowing he was doing it—reached out with his tongue and cleaned off a small, glistening spot just to the left of his lower lip.

“...What?”

It was also being very hard to focus, for some reason.

He smirked a little, bringing up his right hand—the one not pinned by her leg, and oh, God, she was completely open to his gaze—she tried to close her legs, but she couldn’t, of course—up to press, gently, against her folds. It was almost a mesmerizing sight, seeing his long, work-rough fingers touching her, tangling in the mousey curls. “The guys talk, you know,” he said. Then he pulled a face. “They talk a lot more when you’re married.”
“Or maybe you just pay more attention,” she snarked, then instantly regretted it.

He just laughed, though.

“Probably both,” he said easily. He looked down—Gwen froze—and then ran one finger down the inside lip, delicately, pulling it out a little bit from its fellows.

He bit his lip.

A knot of confused desire and panic in her chest, Gwen bit her lip.

Bucky shook off whatever fugue had briefly touched him. “Anyway. The guys said, ladies could go again.”

Gwen shook her head, not comprehending his point. She had gone twice on a couple of occasions—both of them on days when he was away from the house for the afternoon, when she had been able to take her time—so she knew this was true, but it would be some time before she was interested again.

Wouldn’t it?

“Like, right away, go again,” Bucky clarified. Then he dipped his head to the side in wry suggestion. “Even if they’re wrong, it’s hard to see any problem with spending the night trying... right?”

He ran his finger down the inside lip again, and Gwen shuddered in mingled pleasure and confusion. “I suppose...” she said. “...Oh, God.” He’d put a finger inside, and he wasn’t looking at it, he was looking at her face, but she was certain he knew exactly what he was doing. Maybe because he was looking at her face. “You’re not just doing this because I was a bitch in the park, are you?”

He didn’t deny it, exactly, but his smile was fond, and he shook his head. “Last night here before I deploy,” he reminded her. “If the last thing I do before leaving to die is showing you I love you...” He dipped his head to the side again, and he still hadn’t looked away from her. “...that’s a pretty good way to go, don’t you think?”

Gwen bit her lip again, then leaned forward, propping herself up on her left arm as she reached out and grabbed his a-shirt, pulling him forward and kissing him. He kissed her back, which was a relief; at the least they hadn’t ruined that, she thought, although the taste of him was strange, tangier and saltier than usual and—

Ohhhh!

She whimpered into his mouth, then whimpered again as his fingers moved once more, sliding deeper inside her and flexing, pressing in a way nothing ever had before. She let herself fall back to the bed as he lowered his head back down, and the build-up began again.

__________________________

There were, it turned out, limits.

“Bucky... Bucky... I can’t. Oh, God... Bucky! It’s too much, you have to let me—”

But not particularly hard limits.

__________________________
He found was almost like a meditation after the first couple times, and also something like a game: press here, lick there, put your shoulder into it, and you’ve grabbed the copper ring. How many rings could he grab?

Good question.

It was like he was floating, bobbing on a lake of Gwen’s pleasure, just going and going and going, trying to get her to go higher, just a little bit more, just a little bit—Yeah, just like that. God, she was beautiful like that; now do it again. He could have done this forever, he thought, and then thought it again: forever, keep going, forever, keep going...

And who knew, he could’ve been right, because the limiting factor turned out to be not his own capacity for it, but Gwen’s.

Not that he was counting or anything, but by round eight she was sure she couldn’t go any more. She shoved him away, hard enough that he sat back on his ass and gave himself a bruise he was never planning to explain.

“Jesus,” he said, letting his head fall back as he looked at the ceiling for a moment.

There was a water-mark up there; she should probably tell the landlord.

“Jesus, Bucky,” she echoed, panting. It sounded like an agreement about something. She didn’t move, and for just a while, he didn’t see any damned reason why he should, either.

He took the moment to take stock of himself.

He had traces of Gwen on his face, from his cheeks to his chin, and even a couple smears of liquid on his forehead. His lips were numb, his tongue sore. His nose was red and very lightly abraded from how much he’d rubbed it against her minge. He felt a little dizzy, probably from how he’d been breathing, and his neck and shoulders were sore from the repeated motion, but the opposite of tense. His chest felt light and empty, his limbs leaden, and—

“Holy shit!” He picked his head up to look down his body, only just becoming aware of it for the first time.

He was actually hard.

“How in the hell...”

“If it’s not a fire,” Gwen said, sounding drunk and happy, “I don’t care.”

Bucky blinked at himself, then scrabbled to his knees. He touched her softly on the inside of the thigh with his sticky left thumb. “It... might be a fire,” he told her.

She groaned, propping herself up on her elbows to look at him.

He gestured, stroking lightly from base to tip with his fingertips to keep the erection alive.

She frowned, raising herself further to look past the edge of the bed.

Then she jerked back in surprise and flopped to the bed again. “Holy shit!” she exclaimed, echoing him.

He couldn’t think of anything to say, and stroked it again, instead, shivering at the sensation.
Gwen wrestled herself upright, leaning on braced arms which were locked and fully extended. She studied him, then reached out and tugged a little at his hair. “Come on, then. Don’t waste the damn thing!”

He laughed, and moved up towards her.

He wasn’t floating, now. He felt almost shy, and if it weren’t her—if it weren’t Gwen, his best friend Gwen, who had known him for ages, and vice versa—he was sure the damn thing would have wilted right away again. But the look on her face wasn’t crazy, it wasn’t—wasn’t anything but her, expectant and matter of fact and fond, and that, more than anything, let him line up with her—holy shit, she was wet!—and nudge inside.

Gwen gasped, her eyes going wide and vulnerable.

So did he, to be honest.

It’s not like it is with men, was his first thought. Followed by, of course it isn’t, dumbass! Physically, it was different—of course it was; looser, wetter, and softer in a way, too—but also, on a different level... It wasn’t a quick screw. This was Gwen, who he had known forever, and loved, as much as he could—and he was always guiltily aware that it wasn’t quite the same way that she loved him—and...

Her hand tightened in his hair, bringing him out of his thoughts, out of the downward spiral he had started on. “Do it,” she told him, her head lolling to the side. “Just go. Do it.”

He pulled back, and pushed into the gripping slickness of her again.

She was gasping above him with every move, he noticed, half looking in ecstasy, half looking about to cry. She moaned, too, like a dying woman, although which emotion was responsible for the noise he wasn’t sure. Her legs tightened, although they, like the rest of her, had to be exhausted. Her left hand came up, gripping his upper arm so tightly that she left little crescent-shaped welts in it, and he moved faster, closing his eyes for a second to slam into her.

It wasn’t bad, it really wasn’t. He had to open his eyes and watch her face some more, though.

After a couple of minutes, he started to worry that it wasn’t going to go anywhere—usually there was a building-up sort of feeling, an impression of added weight, an added impetus to the act, and it was missing here—but he needn’t have worried. She pulled at him, closer and closer, then dropped her left hand down, clasping at his buttocks and urging him on.

She took the hand out of his hair, dropping it down to the nubbly part of her he had been working for the last few hours. It had to hurt to touch it, but she did, anyway, bringing herself off with a few light touches. Bucky watched the way her back arched and her head went back, and, for one confused moment, imagined trading places with her, imagined lying on the bed as she plunged into him, and that was it, he was tensing, and thrusting, hard and short, finally rooting as far down in her as he could reach, and then his toes curled and he whited out for a minute.

Gwen guided him gently down to the bed.

She didn’t say anything for a minute, which was probably for the best, because he wouldn’t have been able to answer. She did flip a blanket over them both—he had been shivering, he realized—and wrap her legs around him. She also rubbed his back, like he was a nervous racehorse or something. And me without my familiar goat, he thought, at first sarcastically, and then realizing the truth of the metaphor.
“Fuck,” he said aloud.

Gwen started to say something, then stopped and giggled.

She wasn’t really a giggler, his Gwen, but when she did do it, it meant she was in exceptionally good spirits.

Well, good. She deserved it.

“Yeah,” he agreed, smiling with her. “Yeah. We can tell all the bad jokes now, huh?”

She giggled again, then erupted into full-out laughter before stopping and pressing a hand to her stomach. “Ow,” she said.

He sat up immediately. “Oh, shit, did I hurt you? Oh, shit— it always hurts the first time, doesn’t it? Fuck! What do you need?”

She shook her head. “I need you to get back under the covers,” she said firmly, tugging until she was able to wrap her arms around him again. “You didn’t hurt me—or, at least—well, I mean...”

She stopped.

Took a deep breath.

Winced.

Tried again.

“The first time with a man usually hurts, yes, but not always, and it was—I mean—” She bit her lip, embarrassed, but plowed through it, anyway. “I think the things that usually hurt, the uh, actual entering bit—that didn’t, and the thing that does hurt—my stomach, my legs—it’s from tensing up so much, and then letting it go, all over again. It wasn’t—you know— that, exactly.”

She smiled, shy and relieved to be done saying it all at once. “My muscles are sore, is all. I liked it,” she confessed, shrugging excitedly. “Um.” She knocked her head into his shoulder. “I liked it a lot, actually. I don’t expect it, exactly...”

He laughed, low and baffled. “But you wouldn’t mind doing it again?” he filled in for her incredulously.

She grinned at him, sunny and relieved. It almost ruined the afterglow, seeing it, because it made him think how awful she must have felt about it for the last four years or so. “At least I won’t have to think what to get you for a welcome home present,” she joked.

He stroked her hair and tucked her in closer under his chin. “Hell with that,” he said. “All I want is to make it back. If I can just do that, we’ll be okay.” He brushed a kiss over her mouth, then shifted so that they were pressed together with him on his back and her on his chest: their sleeping positions. “If I can just get home to you, we can do anything,” he said.

The room was quiet as she snuck her palm up between them, pressing the palm down against Bucky’s forehead. It was a position they often took for cuddling, especially when he had a headache. “Just... be careful?” she asked. She bit her lip, looking up at him.

“Can’t promise that. You know it, too; and you know why.”

She turned her head away. “Yeah.”
He watched her, feeling heaviness lidding his eyes. “I promise to do my best,” he said finally. “That when I think I can’t any more, I’ll think of you, and think of now, and try anyway.” He tangled their fingers together. “It’s all I can give you.”

She looked sick, but she nodded. “Tha—”

—*nk you.

Her voice cracked, and she mostly wound up mouthing the words she couldn’t quite get out.

There had only been a handful of time when Bucky had awoken before Gwen in the morning, but he must have tuckered her out last night, because by God this was one of them. It was strangely peaceful, watching her sleeping. Hysterically, her hand—at the end of an arm flung across Bucky’s chest—was curled in a loose fist, as if she had fallen asleep plum in the middle of punching someone. Bucky felt his cheeks crease in a smile at the thought, and he ducked his head towards his chest as his shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. In the early morning sunlight, her face was still and relaxed, shedding the years like a heavy coat; her mouth was slack, relaxed, her cheeks flushed. Her eyelids looked thin, he thought; tiny and fragile, just like her.

Only she *wasn’t* fragile, not really. It just felt that way, sometimes. Times like now.

Bucky sighed, and rolled out of bed.

He had a train to catch, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Religion: Church for Gwen carries both religious and social aspects; the latter are positively featured in this chapter.

Extensive discussion of crossdressing: Gwen decides to join the army in the guise of a man. Bucky introduces her to a "King" character, a lesbian who habitually wears the garb and affectations of a man, to aid in this process. The caveats on "not for kink" are because that character, Marty, flirts with Gwen, and Gwen's reaction is influenced by the fact that Marty is crossdressing. It's a pretty minor aspect of the warning, though; mostly, it's the other stuff.

Sexual situations some may find disturbing: Essentially, Gwen dares Bucky into having sex with her, and to her surprise, he takes her up on it. This IS consensual. After performing extensive oral sex on her, he develops an erection, and they proceed to have penis-in-vagina sex. This does not change his sexual orientation within the fic—he continues to identify as gay.

Dom/sub undertones: I headcanon Bucky as fairly subby in this fic (a term he never once uses to describe himself). During a couple scenes in this chapter, Gwen exhibits dominating behaviors to which Bucky responds positively. This is not discussed in so many words, but it does play a role in the events which occur.
Rebirth

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings discussed more explicitly in the endnotes: Religion. Miscarriage, including medical examination and treatment. Period-typical racism. Human experimentation (typical of canon).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It probably would have been better if Gwen had given up getting into the Army at that point, but of course she couldn’t. Marty was gone—successfully, though at what price Gwen wasn’t sure—but Gwen still had the list of slovenly doctors that she had put together, and the wig they’d found to cover the length of Gwen’s hair. (She could cut it, of course, once she got in, but it was less conspicuous to keep it until then.) A man’s suit which would accentuate the more masculine features of her body was hanging in the closet; Marty had tailored it herself, claiming that it was easier and cheaper than finding a good one on market.

So really, Gwen was all set, just as soon as she was able to find a recruitment fair.

The problem was, with Bucky gone, it was awfully hard to find the time to research it. Gwen went to work; she came home; she ate; she slept. She painted whenever she had the energy, although that was less and less often these days. All the chores that Bucky had done (the scrubbing, the sweeping, and oftentimes the dishes, simply because he got there first) she was now doing herself, in addition to cooking and mending and laundry which she had done all along.

She had forgotten, she reflected, how much time simply being single ate up. Being married had sucked up time, too—of course it had—but that was time spent with Bucky, and that was qualitatively different.

With so little time to spare, and Bucky out of the house, she found herself terribly lonely. So she did what she had always done when she was lonely: she went to church.

Bucky had never understood this: she didn’t go to church to find God. She looked while she was there, of course—it did seem rather silly not to pray, since she was in a church anyway—but she had always found God best hiding in the wrinkles around smiling eyes, and now was no exception.

Ethel Proctor, with her earthy good sense, and Rosie Baker, with her widow’s reserve and her string of progressively younger gentlemen friends; Gwen would never have made it through the early days of her marriage without them, she was sure of it.

Bertha Liebowitz, who had looked so ragged after the declaration of war—half of her family was still in Germany—and Gertie McDonald, whose husband, father, brother, other brother, brother-in-law, and eldest son were all somewhere in France. It was easy to feel sorry for herself, Gwen found, but a lot harder when she was too busy taking care of the other women.

Josiah Campbell, who told her the funniest stories about the holy texts, usually based on mistranslations; Michael Duggy, who at eighty-nine had to stop and gasp while trying to read the verses because he was so out of breath, but who put his whole heart and soul into them, anyway.
Fathers of the Faith, who had never looked at Gwen as anything other than a daughter, God bless them.

Lucretia Miller, who had taken Gwen under her wing when Gwen confessed one afternoon that she “felt a little silly praying, I mean it’s almost like talking to yourself.” Lucretia had guided her away from the group and sat her on a bench beside her, taking her hands.

“The problem,” she said, “is that you are spending so much time talking, and so very little listening. Here... Listen with me.” And they had, sitting together, hand in hand. Just listening, to the world, to the silence, to the nothing, to the void.

Gwen never did hear the voice of the Lord. Sometimes, though, if she listened enough, she would discover within herself the knowledge that it had spoken.

So yes: she went to church.

Which was where she was when the bleeding started.

Thank goodness, she noticed it first as a wetness in her undergarments. Appalled at the thought of incontinence, and not suspecting anything else—her courses were late, but that was hardly unusual; when they came after only a month, then she would be alarmed—she went to the restroom.

The first trickle of fear came when she lifted her skirt and saw her shorts. Even then, though, she thought merely that her courses had come at last. She pulled a handkerchief out of her bag, stuffed it into place, and stood, heading out to listen to the choir before the service.

Not that that was a particularly thrilling activity.

(For a moment, she remembered her mother—mouth sad, eyes wry, or maybe the other way around—commenting on her decision to switch denominations when she came to America. “People here don’t trust Catholics,” she had said—and she had been right, too. “I’m sure the Lord cares more that we love him than that we do it in Latin. I’ll miss the music, though.”)

Gwen’s friend Ethel wasn’t a huge fan of it, either, although she gamely sang along with the choruses as though her voice was silver instead of coal, bless her. She wasn’t so into the music, though, that she didn’t notice it when Gwen, finding herself tired and overly-irritated by the noise, discreetly stood to leave, only to collapse back into her seat again.

In less than a minute, Ethel had her out of there, supporting her with an arm at her side as the cramping began, and the creeping sensation Gwen was mostly used to became an alarming wet seep instead.

Still, she decided, “No, Ethel, I’m not going home—I just got here, for heaven’s sakes.” She tried to pretend her bravado wasn’t undermined by the way her hand was pressing into her stomach as if to put pressure on a wound, but Ethel was a clever woman, and she probably wasn’t fooled. “We haven’t even heard the sermon, yet. At least let’s get through that, please.”

Ethel gave her a look that she probably, in all honesty, deserved. “Absolutely not. Georgie!”

Ethel rarely summoned her husband in public so peremptorially, but when she did, she was absolutely obeyed. Georgie had Gwen loaded into a cab in a jiffy, and then transferred from the cab to his apartment just as smoothly, all without letting her feet touch the floor. It was both helpful and kind of him, and Gwen found herself tearing up from more than pain as he laid her on the bed in the younger Proctor girls’ bedroom.
Ethel was still back at the church—the Proctors had four children in the Sunday school, they couldn’t have both left with Gwen—but she was a resourceful woman, and had promptly deputized the indomitable Rosie Baker to go with Gwen and Georgie in the cab.

This, it turned out, was a very good thing. Rosie had age on her side, and a take-charge attitude, and a complete lack of shame, so as soon as they were all in the cab, she started asking rapid-fire questions that made Georgie Proctor and the cabbie both turn funny colors. (Red and green, respectively.)

Little by little, it all came out. No, this was not a normal course for Gwen. No, she was not expecting a monthly visit any time soon, although they were irregular. “Honestly,” Gwen said, as poor Georgie stared out the window and tried to pretend he was deaf, “they’ve never come more often than one every other month. And usually they’re quite heavy, but over quickly, only five days or so, even with the trickles— you know.”

Rosie did know, bless her.

“And when was your last one?”

Gwen counted dates, then wrinkled her nose. “Five... no, six weeks ago? I had a light one just after Bucky went off, but they usually... They’re usually quite heavy, and that one was quite light, only a day or two and not as much blood as I would normally have expected. I thought I got off easy because of the stress; I’ve missed periods before, because of that.”

Rosie made a tutting sound.

Gwen bit her lip. “It wasn’t stress, was it?”

“Probably not, no.”

She pressed a hand into her stomach at Rosie’s answer.

She hadn’t felt any different, these last two months. More tired, maybe, but that was attributable to work; more emotional, but that she had chalked up to loneliness. But I haven’t been glowing! She thought rebelliously. And I haven’t been tossing my cookies every morning, or anything!

But now she was bleeding, and there were really only so many reasons to be doing that, especially in that particular location. “Rosie,” she asked, as the cabbie pulled up to the Proctors’ building, “am I going to keep the baby?”

Georgie was lifting her out, though, and Rosie was paying the cabbie; neither answered.

She asked again once she was in the bed with a small mountain of toweling around her and a basin beneath her, then winced at the shrill note of her own voice. Rosie hugged her—it was like being hugged by an enormous teddy bear who smelled of lavender and gin—and then patted her hand. “Most likely not,” she said straightforwardly. “I’ve sent the cabbie to my current beau, though; he’s a doctor, he’ll do what he can.”

She stayed beside Gwen throughout the morning and afternoon, telling her stories both grim and humorous as the day progressed. Gwen appreciated the grim ones more. They were honest; tales of women who lost babes, women who lost everything, women who only thought they had lost everything only to get pregnant again. (The humorous ones were more of a toilet humor, and under the current circumstances, it was hard to appreciate those as much.)

The doctor arrived at one, a average-looking, middle-aged man who, nevertheless, was clearly
more than a decade Rosie’s junior. It made Gwen smile, the idea that Rosie, indefatigable, dough-shaped Rosie, was still captivating the hearts and minds of princes a fraction of her age. Gwen courteously looked aside when the doctor kissed Rosie on the cheek in greeting.

He proved to be polite, soft-spoken, and fearsomely intelligent. He was a researcher more than a medical doctor, it turned out, but he did practice, as well—employed by the Army, as she realized when he was introduced. He didn’t cite his employer, but she remembered his name from the list Susan Richardson had given her. In fact, his name had been circled, and marked, don’t even try it!

But if he was too good at his profession to be useful to a Gwen who was trying to sneak into the military, then he was exactly what she wanted, here, with his round glasses and fuzzy hair and disarming charm.

“Ah,” he said, looking down at her where she sat in a nest of towels and a shallow basin, an embarrassed expression on her face. “I take it the matter is a feminine complaint.”

“Yes, Dr. Erskine. Thank you for coming.”

“Well, you don’t need to worry about that. My Rosie has asked me to, and we do like to trade favors, she and I.” He had a faint accent, but not so faint she couldn’t hear the German origin clearly. He smiled and pushed his glasses up his nose, leaning towards her conspiratorially.

“Between you and me, it would be my greatest pleasure to marry her and make favors a matter of inconsequence. But she has rejected my suit soundly, and so—favors it is!” He pulled up a stool and sat cheerfully, close enough to Gwen that she could look him in the eye without bending her neck, while Rosie made faces in the background.

“Now,” he said. “This being a feminine matter, I will need to examine—”

Gwen winced.

“—and you are welcome to have my Rosie stay with you, or not, during that procedure. For now—we will talk.”

And talk they did. How much had she bled? When did it start? When was her last cycle? Had she gained or lost any weight? Any nausea, vomiting, dizziness, restlessness, irritability—did you know you were pregnant, Mrs. Barnes? She cringed, but answered honestly.

He was particularly interested to learn about her long cycles, and then concerned when she listed her comorbidities: asthma, exposure to consumption, heart disease—“What kind?” he asked, leaning forward, and checked her pulse before she could answer. Then he nodded and leaned back again, looking grim.

Other than that one moment, though, he didn’t touch her until she had described her condition thoroughly. “So what do you think?” she couldn’t help asking.

He met her eyes evenly. “I think what we all knew already: you are losing your child, Mrs. Barnes.”

She nodded, and looked down. She could feel her lips pressing together, feel the tight, pinched expression on her face, and was suddenly reminded of her mother, over a decade ago, bearing the same expression as she looked, once more, through empty cupboards. We endure, she thought, in a voice that sounded like Sarah’s. We are lonely, we are afraid, we endure.

She looked back at the doctor. “What can be done?” she asked, straining at—but succeeding in—keeping her voice level.
Something approving flickered behind his gaze, something that warmed her gently from within. Then his eyes flicked over her, up and down over her form, and the warmth was replaced with something else, something speculative, before that, too, was locked away.

“Well! First I must examine to confirm the diagnosis. I am afraid that this will be most unpleasant.”

“For both of us, I’d imagine,” Gwen said grimly. “It appears to be rather a mess down there.”

“Ah,” he coughed, eyes widening before he hurriedly continued, “And then we will monitor the blood loss. If you are, somehow, mistaken, and it is a small amount—well then, congratulations!”

It fell rather flat; they both knew that she was not mistaken. “If it is a moderate amount, however, then we assume that you have had a—tragic, but—commonplace miscarriage. You will be able to resume your employment in a few days. For sexual relations, some months—your husband...?”

“He’s deployed,” she answered steadily. Then she laughed, only a small bit brokenly. “The baby—the night before, actually. That’s when it—”

She shook her head, feeling foolish and raised a hand to rub at her eyes. Hide her face.

“—That’s when it has to have been.”

“Ah.” Dr. Erskine nodded. “So perhaps you do not need to worry on that front.” His tone was delicate, and trying very hard to be polite, which she gave him credit for. “Now, there is a third possibility, which is that there is a lot of blood. The pain would most likely be...” He dipped his head to the side as if he were understating things. “...severe, and your history suggests—it is unlikely. However...” He motioned towards her lap. “...I think it is time to look.”

She nodded, and together, they moved the blankets down, allowing her to rise out of the basin and onto hands and knees. Rosie tucked a towel between them to catch any drips—Gwen winced, mentally, at how disgusting she felt—and Dr. Erskine examined the basin.

“Ah,” he said again.

“Which means what?” Gwen asked, working hard to keep her tone at least a little bit respectful.

“I will need to wash my hands thoroughly,” he told Rosie, completely failing to answer the question.

*I’ll just stay here like this, then*, Gwen thought sourly.

It took a minute or two for him to return to perform the examination, which was, as predicted, unpleasant, primarily done manually, and painful, involving pressing on her belly until her cramping womb was dislocated into his fingers. He also shoved to each side, although what he was searching for Gwen couldn’t have said. Finally, he pulled his hands back, urged her back down in the now-emptied basin, and went to wash up again before returning to give her his verdict.

“You were pregnant,” he told her, neither sugarcoating it nor dithering. “You are no longer pregnant. I am very sorry for your loss.”

She felt the tears well up and stubbornly blinked them away. “Thank you for telling me,” she said, and then had to stop before she could get anything more out.

“You are welcome. And you should not be alone. I will stay with you?” He raised his eyebrows and inflected it like a question, though, and didn’t seem surprised when she shook her head. “Ah.
Perhaps, Rosie?”

“I’ll stay.” Rosie said loyally. “I know your mother is no longer with us, God rest her soul...” She looked sympathetically at Gwen. “...but would you like your mother-in-law, or sisters...?”

Gwen shook her head, trying not to imagine the look of horror on Winifred’s face at being presented with this situation. Winifred and Rebecca Barnes had been united in their conviction that Gwen was not nearly good enough for Bucky; they would be neither surprised nor sympathetic to learn of her miscarriage. “No, thank you,” she said politely. “I’ll be—”

—fine.

Her voice strangled and cut off; she couldn’t quite make the last word emerge. The tears welled up again, and she dashed them angrily from her eyes, refusing to break because she was Sarah Rogers’ daughter, and they didn’t do that.

“I’ll be fine,” she snarled, but the hitch in her throat belied it.

Dr. Erskine politely left them to it.

Around seven-thirty, long after Gwen had exhausted herself with angry tears and the flow of blood had begun to abate, Dr. Erskine took over for Rosie with firm instructions that she go home and rest. “You have done your bit, my Rosie,” he insisted. “I am here now. This is my profession.”

Rosie allowed herself to be convinced.

Dr. Erskine closed the door behind him when he came back in, sitting down on the far side of the tray of food he had brought up an hour ago. “You should eat something,” he told her, nodding at it.

“Thank you, doctor.” She pasted on a politely grateful expression, but neither of them were foolish enough to think she meant it. “I’m not particularly hungry.”

“I understand that,” he said, “but you will need your strength.”

It was the odd tone in which he said it that drew her eyes to him.

“What do you mean?” she asked slowly.

“Mrs. Barnes, how did you know my name?”

She panicked, and bluffed—which was never good, because she was terrible at it. “You introduced yourself.”

“Yes, certainly; and when I did so, you recognized my name. Now, how was that?”

Damn it.

She really shouldn’t have bothered bluffing.

Gwen turned her head to the side to think of an answer. She actually knew it from Marty Richardson’s list, but the last thing she wanted to do was get Marty in trouble.

Also, she clearly couldn’t lie to this man for beans. So whatever she said, it was going to have to be the truth.
She took a breath. “If you want to get into the army, and you’re not particularly...” She gestured down her front. “...made for it, you pretty much are going to have to bribe a doctor. I was given a list—all the docs in the area who work with the army—with notes on it, saying which ones I would be able to bribe, which ones were just too lazy to check.”

Dr. Erskine raised his eyebrows, affronted. “And which did they say I was?”

She smiled, a little, just a little quirk at the side of her mouth, but with her pounding pulse and the tragedy of the day, it felt bizarre on her face, no matter how small it was. “They basically said you were, no way in Hell, sir.”

“Hrumph! Good!”

He settled back in his chair, studying her. Then he pulled out a packet of cigarettes. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

She remembered Marty’s advice, months ago. “I don’t, although as a doctor you may care that I have asthma. If you’re going to, though, I’d like to smoke one, too.”

He duly passed one over and lit it for her, then lit his own. She had the strange impression that he was using the ritual to stall, to give him time to think over some critical decision. Once he was seated again, though, and everything was squared away, he had apparently made his decision.

“There is the matter of payment,” he said evenly. He regarded her over the stream of smoke coming from his roll.

Gwen froze. “I thought you said it was a favor for Rosie.”

“Oh, it is! And if you wish to leave it as such, then that is acceptable to me.” He puffed from his cigarette, then tapped the ash onto the edge of the tray beside her. “I may be mistaken, of course. It is just that it seems to me that you are not a young woman who is happy when other people pay her debts.”

Gwen’s heart pounded hard in her chest, probably not from the smoke. She knew she was being manipulated; she knew it, recognized it even as it worked on her.

The doctor was not being particularly subtle.

It was just that he was also right. Gwen hated having other people pay her debts; hated it. Hell, half the reason Bucky had married her was so that he could pay some of them for her without her blowing up at him, and that had worked, too.

If there was a way to pay him back—a way she could take without spending money she didn’t have, without relying on Rosie’s generosity—then yes, absolutely; of course she would take whatever he was offering.

“If you are so inclined,” the doctor said, after a minute of silence in which she didn’t answer, “then please, come to this address within the next twenty-one days.” He passed her a card. “This is my home address, and I have a proposition for you.” He smiled, eyes once again gentle and sympathetic. “That is, assuming that you are upright and walking around again, by then.”

Of course she was. Honestly, she probably could have leaped out of bed the next morning, although the doctor’s excess of observation for her did seem prudent. Still, although Rosie and Ethel both begged her not to, Gwen went to work the next day. It was uncomfortable, and she
changed her knickers twice, but she made it through. She made it home, too. Made it through washing her underwear in the kitchen sink and drying them at the table where Bucky had proposed to her. Made it to bed, made it to sleep, made it through the night.

Made it to work again the next morning.

One day down.

She showed up at the address on the card two weeks and six days later, on a Saturday in September when the sun was working hard to make it feel like July. She was nearly sweating through her calico dress, and her hair had already fallen twice from its pins; at this point, she was resigned to letting it cling, limp and sticky, to her neck.

Hopefully Dr. Erskine’s proposition—whatever it was—did not depend upon her maintaining a conventionally attractive appearance.

But apart from the heat, it truly was a nice day; the birds were pleasant instead of obnoxious, the streets were mostly full of children—Gwen quickly moved her thoughts along—and, best of all, she had finished her last painting the night before. There truly was no reason to continue to put this errand off, although she supposed she could have left it another day if she had wanted to.

Erskine lived in Queens, in an honest-to-God house, and Gwen was so startled by it, so astonished that Rosie hadn’t let him marry her, that she stood in the walkway and gaped for a moment before going up to find the knocker.

The doctor answered promptly and waved her in with a tiny little gesture, one primarily composed of eyebrows. “Through here,” he said. “If you would care to walk with me, I will pour us some lemonade.”

“If you would like me to wait somewhere—”

“—in fact, I would not,” he interrupted her. “I apologize for any inhospitality, but this house contains—not many, but some—classified documents. You may not remain in it unaccompanied.”

“Oh,” she said, feeling awkward. This was, as the little girl said, getting curioser and curioser.

They made their way back to the kitchen, and Dr. Erksine poured them both cool lemonade topped with soda, then led them into a comfortable-seeming sitting room that did not—Gwen couldn’t help but notice the lack—smell even a little bit like smoke. She remembered him fussing over cigarettes a few weeks ago, and pressed her lips together cynically; she knew that had been a stall! He gestured her into a chair—quite a soft armchair, as it happened—and smiled his somewhat doofy-looking smile at her as he passed her a cup.

She was not fooled, not even for a second. This whole situation was alarming, the peculiarity of it rising over her suddenly like a tidal wave. She was tired, exhausted, wanting nothing so much as to go home and mourn some more, as she had for the last three weeks.

And, being tired, she did what she always did when frustrated: she snarked.

“Would you like a cigarette?” she offered him, pointedly.

She hadn’t brought any. He got the idea, though, and chuckled, sitting back in his chair. He did not comment on her sarcasm, instead asking, “Are you quite recovered from your ordeal, Mrs. Barnes?”
“Sufficiently.”

Physically. It would be good enough.

“And do you still desire to serve your country?” The ice chunks in his drink made clinking sounds when he idly swirled the glass.

She raised her eyebrows. “I do,” she answered, more slowly, more cautiously, than she had before. “Are you offering me that chance? Because I was told that my health would keep me out even if women were allowed in.”

“I am,” Erskine told her. “Drink your lemonade, please. It is very hot out.”

She drank.

“There is a program,” he told her. “It is... under development. A small pool of applicants are to be trained in a camp not so very far outside of this city.”

She drank again, waiting.

“The applicants are both men and women, all within a certain age range—” He had learned her age, along with her medical history, three weeks ago. “—all reasonably, although not overly, educated. It is a special program, and candidates are likely to drop out at a prodigious rate. Those who remain must be willing to go to Europe and fight against the greatest evil that has ever threatened our race.”

She blinked, and said nothing, and yet again sipped her lemonade.

“Ah. You think that hypocritical coming from me.” He seemed unsurprised.

Gwen thought about Bertha Liebowitz, and all the brothers and sisters she would likely never see again. “No,” she decided. “Or—not after the initial surprise.”

Erskine laughed softly through his nose. “And are you willing to fight, Mrs. Barnes?”

Gwen shook her head, impatiently, and cradled her glass in her lap. “Dr. Erskine, I’ve been fighting all my life, and always the same people: not Germans, not Japs, not even just men... Bullies. Hitler and his men are acting as bullies, that’s all. They pick on the weakest and the marginalized, on those with few to defend them, and... and I’m against that. It’s not complicated,” she protested. “I just... don’t like bullies. I never have.”

It’s how I met my husband, she didn’t say, even though it had been.

He smiled at her like she’d passed a test. “Those who do not enter the final stage of the program,” he said, “will be assigned to the S.S.R., where they will serve the war through intelligence work. It is not the army, Mrs. Barnes, not quite; but it is the front.” He pulled an envelope off of a nearby desk and held it out to her. “Are you in?”

She swallowed, trying to think it over. But really, there was nothing to consider: she wanted to help; she wanted to go to war; she needed to make a damned difference. “Where do I report?” she asked, reaching out to take the envelope.

He didn’t let it go, and her fingers slipped off the paper again in surprise.

“There is one more thing—a caveat, of sorts.” Dr. Erskine pulled an abashed sort of look, fuzzy
head ducking to the side. “This program... It was not my decision, but... they will not take married
women.”

*I’ll bet they take married men, though.*

The thought flashed through her mind too fast to stop. She didn’t voice it, though; she nodded, instead.

“What is your maiden name...?” Dr. Erskine prompted. He opened the envelope and pulled out a pen, going to fill in the blank places. She guided him through it, squashing the feeling of betrayal as she did so. *They wouldn’t have let me be married to Bucky if I were a man, either,* she reminded herself. *Denying our marriage... it’s not like this is something he wasn’t telling me to do.*

Actually, an experimental program with a high dropout rate sounded like *exactly* the sort of thing Bucky wouldn’t want her to do.

She squashed that thought, too.

“And that explains the source of the mysterious ‘Gwen’ my Rosie was using.” Erskine smiled at her as he filled in the final blank. “Report at dawn to the train station, ‘Miss Rogers.’ A representative of the S.S.R. will be there to take all of our trainees in hand.”

She weighed the envelope in her hands as she stood to leave. It seemed heavier than it should have been, only paper and ink but leaded with significance. She tapped it against her palm. “This doesn’t feel like me paying a debt,” she pointed out. “It actually feels like you doing me another favor.”

Dr. Erskine regarded her with amusement. “Have you met the other entrants in the program?” he asked.

Obviously not. “Noooo...”

“Then believe me,” he said, dismissing her concern with a wave of his hand, “it will not feel like a favor for very long.” He clasped her by the shoulder and accompanied her to the door. “Besides,” he added cheerfully, “there is always the chance that the process will kill you!”

Gwen blinked up at him—he wasn’t an enormous man, but he was still a head taller than she was. “Oh,” she said blankly. “Well, yes; I guess there is always that.”

And then she turned and started walking for home; it seemed she had a lot of packing to do.

The camp itself was uninspiring—an Army camp, but the last batch of recruits had been sent to the front, and the next batch wasn’t due for another month. In between, the S.S.R. had the run of the place, and also the unenviable task of changing the stream of oddballs Gwen was grouped with into a pack of trained agents.

Gwen kind of felt sorry for them, to be honest.

She wasn’t the only one there who wouldn’t have passed a physical: Sal Vitucci only had one arm, Morgan O’Hare couldn’t run even as much as Gwen could—they got paired together every day, twice a day, and both of them agreed that they hated it, as their lungs seized up and their vision grayed over—Midge Caerdollan (or at least that was what Gwen thought he had said; it was Welsh, so there were probably another ten silent letters in there) had been exposed to TB just like Gwen had.
She also wasn’t the only girl: Maria was pretty and sharp and venal, Elly was empathetic and soft with a brilliant head for numbers, Other Sarah was brassy and angry and (Gwen privately thought, just a little) fantastic, although, to be honest, she was probably just a little too interested in the heavy ordinance.

But Gwen was the only one who was sick as a dog and a girl, and she was certain she was also the only girl who had snuck her wedding ring in on a chain, claiming it was her mother’s.

Gwen wasn’t stupid; she knew that Erskine had already selected her for the final portion of this program, whatever it was.

What she didn’t know was why.

Peggy Carter was God damned revelation.

Agent Carter was everything Gwen admired; beautiful, strong, fierce, and clever, she could knock a man in the dirt without smudging her lipstick. Gwen watched, almost able to feel the stars leaping into her eyes as Agent Carter shot down the first uppity jerk to come after her. Carter pivoted, eyes sharp as pen-nibs; she called him on his nonsense and then she punched his lights out. That was all it took: after that, Gwen was gone. Peggy Carter was the new moon to her sky, the flower to her thicket, the cream to her berries. She was everything Gwen wanted to be as a woman, and everything Gwen wanted to be as a person, too; an already-flying rocket fueled by hutzpah and armed with a payload of danger. Gwen thought she was amazing.

It didn’t take Peggy long to figure it out, either.

She had been making the rounds of all the recruits, to a greater or lesser extent. She wasn’t the commander of the camp; that was Colonel Dalton, who was coordinating the training of all intelligence operatives, including those of the S.S.R. And she wasn’t the commander of the project, either; that was Colonel Phillips, who, in addition to being in charge of whatever top-secret program Gwen was auditioning for, was also in charge of coordinating the actions of the S.S.R. with those of the regular Allied forces. No, Peggy was the next level down, the experienced agent who would be pairing the new recruits up with other experienced agents—and also taking on a partner herself.

Gwen’s newfound case of hero-worship wasn’t bad enough that she was hoping she would fail out of the main project, because Gwen was very much not a quitter. But she sort of thought that if she did somehow end up doomed to spend the rest of her tenure with the S.S.R. at Peggy’s side, she maybe might not have minded.

It would have struck her as ironic that, although she was only tangentially aware of it, Gwen herself was something of the same sort of inspiration to the other female recruits.

Although there were exceptions, the boys in general were quite dismissive of the girls in the program. There was a great deal of unpleasant jeering involved, to be quite honest; still, Peggy Carter just punched her detractors and then henceforth ignored them, and Gwen was quite happy to adopt the same strategy.

(Shes particularly enjoyed the look of surprise on the jerks’ faces when they figured out how hard she could punch.)

But if all she did was punch the guys who were jerks to her, that would have been the end of it. Instead, Gwen was... well, she was Gwen: Sarah Rogers’ daughter, Bucky Barnes’ best friend.
long before she was his wife, and well-known for years for getting into fights in every back alley in
Brooklyn if there was a girl, boy, general principle, or particularly charming example of wildlife
there which needed to be defended. So when the boys came after the other girls—Elly or Judith,
who the boys thought were too soft, or Other Sarah, who everyone thought was too hard... Well,
when that happened, Gwen was usually right there, too.

And more than willing to put herself in the way, and be the one who took whatever-it-was on the
chin.

Peggy Carter walked in on them, once, Judy carefully sewing together the cut on Gwen’s chest
with too-perfect-for-the-army stitches. They were tucked into a storage closet, Judy’s medkit—
carefully acquired and stockpiled, because so what if she was a poor girl from Yonkers, Judy
wanted to be a doctor and, knowing Judy, that probably meant she would— spread out on a shelf.
Judy turned when the door opened, and Gwen, facing it, felt the blood drain out of her face.

Gwen had half a dozen idiocy-induced bruises by that point—the boys, it turned out, did not enjoy
being shown up—and oodles more wounds of the spirit, from the most vicious things certain
imbeciles could think of to say. But this was the first time blood had been spilled, and from the
look on Peggy Carter’s face, there would be no blarney here, no dissembling or sparing anyone the
blame.

Her mouth worked, but it wasn’t like she had ever been good at lying. In the end, she didn’t say
anything, looking down and letting Judy’s deft fingers push the needle in and out of her skin.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Judy said, tying off the last knot. “It wasn’t even a blade, just a fancy
ring. Gwen’s skin is pretty thin.”

She shot Gwen a dark-humored quirk of the mouth when she said it, and Gwen had to answer in
kind at the truth of it.


Gwen flushed. “I can’t—”

“I don’t believe I was asking you,” Carter said pointedly. “Your desire not to bear tales is
admirable, but misplaced. This sort of thing just isn’t acceptable, here.”

Could’ve fooled me, Gwen thought rebelliously.

Unfortunately, Carter caught the thought, possibly because Gwen didn’t actually have a poker face.
She stiffened, turning to Judy with an imperious eyebrow, and Judy gave up the name promptly,
shrinking back slightly against Gwen as she did so. Without a word, Carter turned and left.

Gwen hadn’t even managed a full sentence. Carter probably thought she was an idiot.

She moaned, and let her head sink towards her chest. Judy slapped a bandage over the stitching,
then squeezed her shoulder sympathetically as she packed up her kit.

“Thanks, Judith.”

“No problem,” Judy said, rolling her eyes. “Now maybe try to be less of a dummy next time,
okay?”

Gwen laughed weakly and slid out of the closet, only staggering a little as she came to her feet.
She figured out quickly which of the other participants who had caused Erskine such despair. Jasper was devious and as trustworthy as a snake; he was kicked out of the program in less than three days when he was discovered stealing from the pantry. During the second week of the training—out of three, with a last week of specialization for those who would work with the S.S.R.—the Agents devised a competition among the students. But although they stressed that one could only win by working together, five students sabotaged the others, and were eliminated from the program with an especially wondrous dressing-down from Carter. And Natty Friel was mostly harmless, and was chosen to remain with the S.S.R. due to his loyalty and incredible intelligence, but everyone avoided working with him, anyway, because he wouldn’t shut up about his damned intelligence.

So Gwen did, grudgingly, come around to the conclusion that Erskine was right about it being a fit repayment.

And that was before she was officially chosen as the first test subject for Project: Rebirth.

It wouldn’t have been so embarrassing to be found dressing her wounds if she hadn’t been found in the same damn closet as she’d been in the last time. Carter didn’t even bother to scold, this time; she just leaned on the frame of the closet and sighed.

“I know,” Gwen said before she could get a word out. “Not acceptable behavior, we’re to work as a team, et cetera, et cetera. Right?”

“Well, actually... What I was thinking was that he was an arse who rather had it coming,” Peggy said.

Gwen froze, wrapping the knife wound that ran along her leg from the outside of her ankle to her knee. Peter Christchurch had not taken any more kindly to her telling him off than any other man ever had, but—unlike most of the other men here—he hadn’t chosen to solve his problems directly. Instead, he had waited, and when they were learning to use the knives they had all been issued, he had managed to be paired up with her for sparring practice—at which point, he had begun seriously trying to injure her, and had gotten within half an inch of succeeding. She had only barely managed to drag her leg back so that the wound ran over the skin, not through it.

So Gwen had broken his nose.

It had been rather satisfyingly spectacular, at least; blood gushing everywhere, both from him and, since he had nicked one of the baby arteries in her ankle, from her. He screamed like a girl, and now, she thought with satisfaction, everyone knew it.

Until this second, though, she had been rather assuming that she was going home, right along with him.

“Do you know what Peter’s problem was?” Carter asked her. She sounded genuinely curious, like she really wanted Gwen to answer, so Gwen did.

“He wasn’t happy being shown up by a girl?”

Carter didn’t smile, but her eyes went very warm. Gwen basked in it, like it was a pool of sunshine or something. “You’re close,” Carter said. “His problem was that he assumed he was smarter than everyone else. That was why he wasn’t willing to be shown up... but it was also why he picked that fight in front of half the command.” Her eyebrows drew in, indignant that he would underestimate them in such a way. “As if we couldn’t see what he was doing!”
Gwen ducked her head, feeling the smile spread across her face. Heaven forfend some idiot man should underestimate Peggy Carter! “So I’m not out of the program, Agent Carter?” she asked, hopefully.

“He tried to kill you, and you disarmed him without killing him, while escaping permanent damage yourself, while having an asthma attack. For Heaven’s sake, Sarah—” No one here called her Gwen, and early attempts to convince them to had only resulted in jeering. “—you must know by now that you have risen to the top of our list.”

“Oh,” Gwen blinked.

“And when we’re in private,” Carter added with a smile, “You really must call me Peggy.”

Gwen beamed, and accepted.

The summons came in the next day, just after lunch.

It was never a good sign to walk into Commander Dalton’s office to see not only him, but also Peggy Carter, Abraham Erskine, one unknown gentleman in a suit, and Colonel Phillips. Gwen’s heart sank. Peggy must have been wrong, because this was surely what it looked like when you were about to be kicked out of the program.

Still, there was no use volunteering for that, so she planted her hands by her hips and raised her chin in the closest the S.S.R. got to a salute. “Gentlemen,” she greeted them, “and Agent Carter.”

She wanted to smile at Peggy, but it seemed imprudent given the company, so she settled for singling her out by name. Peggy’s lips didn’t twitch but her eyes warmed fondly.

“Miss Rogers,” the Commander said, indicating a chair in front of his desk. Everyone else in the room was standing.

Gwen swallowed, and sat.

“Have you been informed regarding the nature of the project you have volunteered to participate in.”

Gwen’s eyes tracked around the room, then settled back on the Commander. “Not with any specifics, sir.” Although with Erskine in charge and the warning that it might kill her considered, it seemed obvious this would be some sort of medical experimentation. Still, she let her eyes flick down and her lips twitch up the way Peggy’s would. “There are, of course, rumors.”

Nothing elicits intel so well as the implication one already has it, Peggy lectured in her head. Although, when she looked around the room, Dr. Erskine looked like he was trying not to laugh, so maybe she was overplaying it a bit.

“Christ almighty, Carter, you couldn’t have found me a normal-sized guy? Or even just a guy?” muttered Colonel Phillips under his breath.

“Not if you wanted a success,” Carter replied just as softly. Erskine held his counsel. The Commander, meanwhile, was glaring at Phillips, and Gwen remembered an offhand comment that suddenly twisted and slotted into place, making a lot more sense.

The Commander hated Colonel Phillips. They worked together; they both put the country first; but they could not stand each other, and it was obvious that, where they could spite each other, they
would. Maybe she still had a shot at this, Gwen thought suddenly. She could do this, she could manipulate them; maybe, if they tried to kick her out, she could use their enmity to wangle her way back in from the other side...

But even as she was planning how to worm her way to success, they were telling her she didn’t need to: outstanding performance in the training, said Commander Dalton, performing beyond expectations—“It would have to be,” grumbled Phillipps—but before you agree to participate in the project, we have to explain what’s involved—

—And then they did. And no matter what Gwen had expected, this wasn’t it.

“No, sorry, sirs— what?”

Carter leaned her hip into the Commander’s desk. “This is why we needed your consent first,” she explained wryly. “Can’t very well prep you for surgery only to have you change your mind when you get down there.”

Gwen felt like her eyes were huge, and she had to struggle hard to get her face under control.

It was one thing, she felt, to volunteer to become a spy. Not as honorable as the army, perhaps, and not as direct, but there was no doubt she would be helping the war effort. It had been made clear to all of them, her and her fellow candidates, that they would be spreading out across the European theater, playing their hands carefully and gathering more cards for their deck. There was danger; real danger. Gwen felt needed.

Bucky was out there. Her Bucky. She had to go help.

But this? To be a damned lab rat? She might as well be starving herself out in Minnesota, and she was opening her mouth to tell them that when she caught the looks on Carter’s and Erskine’s faces. Slowly, she shut her mouth again.

The thing of it was, she trusted Carter, the way she would’ve trusted a sister, the way she had trusted Ethel. Carter was solid, she knew that, and Carter was begging her with her eyes to stay, because she thought this project was important.

Erskine... he was a more unknown quantity. But the look on his face wasn’t urgency; it was desperation. Gwen knew, suddenly, just from the doctor’s face, that if she didn’t agree to this project, it would stop. Completely. Maybe for good, maybe not, but it wouldn’t be done in time to help the war, that was for sure.

And it was so important that she help the war, after all.

“...Alright,” she said slowly, hoping she wasn’t making an enormous mistake. “Alright. I said I would give my life for the war; if it happens during this Rebirth, then...”

She looked at Erskine, who had recruited her, who knew about her family... who knew about Bucky. “You’ll get my ma’s ring sent to my...” She trailed off. No one here knew she was married, and they couldn’t; they would take her off the project. “...my brother?”

He smiled, hope and relief blending in his face until he almost looked on the verge of tears. “I promise,” he swore. “I will get the ring sent to him, and I will tell him that you went bravely towards the future in a war where so many think only of the past.”

“I guess I’m in, then,” she said, hoping desperately that she wasn’t making a terrible mistake.
Peggy smiled.

There were a lot of things she could have anticipated about Project: Rebirth, and most of them were unpleasant. The cold temperature of the room where it was held, the being part-naked so they could access all the parts of her skin they needed, the secrecy, the part where the whole place was hidden right under the nose of where she’d grown up... But the thing she didn’t see coming, the thing that put her totally off balance and threw her head into a whirl, was meeting Howard Stark.

“Abraham’s told me so much about you,” he said, taking her hand.

But apparently, Abraham—Dr. Erskine—hadn’t mentioned that she was married, because Howard Stark proceeded to flirt like crazy with her the entire time they were setting up the apparatus.

Gwen found it completely befuddling. She knew what she looked like: not much, basically. And she knew the kinda girl he could get: better than her. But his smile was warm and genuine and focused when he looked at her, intense in a way that stole her breath and sped her heart and, most of all, confused the hell out of her.

There was also a round of introductions, mostly a bunch of muckety-mucks who had come up from the Capitol to supervise, as if they could have any influence on the procedure.

They had starved her the night before; to ‘prevent aspiration of fluid should unfortunate events occur,’ they said, which she was pretty sure meant so that you don’t choke on your own vomit. Now, they also had her release her hair from its pins, and although they allowed her to leave it braided, they requested that she forfeit the ribbon for the time being, along with her belt, socks and shoes, dog tags, and overshirt. She typically went without a brassier—in her case, the only point to wearing one was stuffing it, just about, and she never bothered with that—but it was still awkward to be given a man’s sleeveless undershirt and instructed to change into it.

Also, without a belt, her trousers were prone to slipping down over her hips, and she found herself constantly grabbing at the upper hem of them to keep them in place.

Once she had changed, Erskine settled her onto a medical bench and began the checkup. She had already been measured to a fair-thee-well in every conceivable respect for the two days before the procedure; now, he listened to her heart—“A little fast,” he said, and smiled reassuringly—and checked her blood pressure, listened to her lungs and tested her grip strength on both sides. Then he injected her with the last of the precautionary measures—penicillin, he said—and they were fitting her into the machine.

“How do you feel?” he called.

“A little nervous,” she answered dryly.

“Ah,” he agreed, “I feel much the same. But don’t worry, it will all be over soon.”

“One way or another,” Stark agreed with morbid cheerfulness, slipping his goggles down over his eyes.

By the time she stumbled out of the machine, her trousers were in no danger of ever slipping down again.

Her hips had expanded so much that the buttons had all popped off her flies and flung themselves around the machine—she had a small burn on her foot from where one of them had landed, super-
heated by the energy coursing through the apparatus until it melted itself around her toe—and her trousers were so taut even without buttons that they clung to her hips like sinners clutching their last hopes of salvation.

She was deeply, pathetically grateful that the men’s undershirt she had been given had been a couple sizes too large, because it most certainly wasn’t now; it stretched across her chest, clinging to the curves that had sprung into existence in under a minute.

No wonder it had hurt, she thought wildly; they already tended to ache every other month, and they weren’t even doing anything, then.

“Good heavens,” Stark breathed, staring at her. He whipped off his lab coat and wrapped it around her shoulders, arms held out straight as if he were afraid of offending her with his touch.

“Thanks,” she said, gasping and trying to get her bearings. It was hard to focus, so hard—after all that pain, to have it stop felt amazing, like flying and orgasming all at once. Her chest heaved with her breathing—she had a minute of concern that the shirt wasn’t going to make it, and hurriedly did up the top two buttons of the lab coat—and everything seemed so bright, as if someone had finally turned on the lights after she had lived in the dark all her life. After a moment, she realized it was the colors which had changed, becoming bright and varied in a way they never had been before.

Oh, she realized, I was colorblind all this time. She immediately felt the urge to go dig up all her old paintings and wince at them.

She scratched at the base of her braids—her entire skull itched horribly, but she thought her hair might stay in place if she only scratched the looser area around the braids themselves—and looked around the room, focussing on the various face. Erskine was exultant, Peggy wide-eyed and with triumph in the twitches of her lips. Stark was talking a mile a minute—to himself, she discovered after listening for a second—and the butter-and-egg men supervising were all fluttering at each other like a flock of pigeons who had found a bakery.

Apparently, she was a success.

Naturally, that was when the shooting started.

The assassins didn’t get more than a block away before she and Peggy had them. The weeks of training together had taught Peggy when Gwen was going to close, and had taught Gwen when to back off and let Peggy take charge.

There were still things Peggy could do which surprised her, though.

“I can’t believe you!” Gwen exclaimed, catching her breath. She wasn’t wheezing, wasn’t even breathing heavy, but she kept expecting to be, and it kept making her throat close on gasps that she didn’t need to heave.

Erskine would have been ecstatic, had he made it. If only... Gwen cut the thought off with a sharp shake of her head. No use in if only’s, after all...

Someone would have to tell Rosie, though.

“Really? You can’t believe me?” Peggy’s eyebrows had rocketed upwards.

“You shot a car!”
“It needed to be stopped,” Peggy shrugged. “You ran after a pair of hired killers minutes after a revolutionary medical procedure! And furthermore, you did it without shoes!”

Gwen ducked her head. “Oh, damn,” she said softly. She smiled ruefully at Peggy. “My old shoes probably won’t fit anymore now, will they? Do you think maybe I could borrow a pair?”

Colonel Phillips and the congressman worked their way through the shattered room to meet the women. “Well, at least the damned man didn’t manage to destroy the sample,” he groused. “What a shitshow! Pardon my french.”

“Pardoned,” they chorused, speaking in the accomplished, indifferent voices of women who used the same words.

“Were you seen?” he went on to ask them, and Gwen could tell that was the question he was really worried about.

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

“Yes,” said Peggy.

Gwen glanced at her, surprised.

“There was a man with a camera there—I think he was doing art photography, but he was fast enough to catch a snap of Sarah here leaping at the spy before he got into the car. I’m sure she must have been midair when the camera clicked.”

“What a shitshow,” Phillips repeated. “God damn. Well, here’s hoping it was blurry, I suppose.”

The picture did not come out blurry.

It captured Gwen in mid-leap, all right. Her arms were stretched out before her, looking almost entreating—actually, she’d been trying to tackle the guy—and the coat, so hastily buttoned across her newly-formed bosom, flared around her almost like wings. Her hair, escaping from her usual twin braids in wisps and locks, spread out around her head like a halo. Even her strange attire didn’t distract from the illusion that she had stepped right out of a renaissance painting because, as she commented tartly, “That shirt was plastered to my skin so tight I might as well not’ve be wearing anything.”

The photo was published by the press the next day, part of a front-page spread bearing the headline, “WHO IS THIS ANGEL!”

Chapter End Notes

Religion: Church for Gwen carries both religious and social aspects; BOTH are positively featured in this chapter.

Miscarriage, including medical examination and treatment: Gwen suffers a first-trimester loss. She was unaware of her pregnancy prior to this loss. She is examined by a doctor in a deliberately-awful scene, although I was not particularly explicit (if it were a sex scene, I’d rate it M not E). She grieves, but less than might be expected (because she basically learned of the pregnancy while losing it).
Period-typical racism: Use of the word “Japs” from POV character.

Human experimentation: Super-soldier serum / Project: Rebirth.
Azzano

Chapter Notes

Chapter warnings discussed further in end notes: Canon-typical violence and injury, coupled with torture. Burns. Religion. Sexual situations some may find disturbing, with self-directed homophobia and self-hatred. Dom/sub undertones.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The problem, they told her, was that without Erskine to replicate the serum, they weren’t going to be able to push forward with the project, after all—or at least, not in time to help with the war. "It was lucky you managed to rescue that sample," Peggy told her in private that night, exhausted and with dark circles appearing under her eyes. A clear, fizzy drink was clenched tightly in her left hand, and her hair was beginning to escape its rolls. "Otherwise, you would most likely have been stuck in a lab in Alamogordo for the entire remainder of the war."

Gwen leaned her head back against the wall behind her bunk, scraping it back and forth against the wall because her head was still itchy, hours after the damned procedure had ended. "I would have hated it," she said, envisioning a lifetime of waking up, doing calisthenics, giving blood draws, and then being bored out of her mind. And then repeating it the next day: wake up, calisthenics, testing, repeat. "I would have gone absolutely insane with boredom."

"Hmm..." Peggy said, watching her steadily. She sipped her drink thoughtfully, then made a moue at it and set it on the desk. "Yes, I believe you would have. But more importantly, Sarah, I would have lost my new junior agent. I can't be having that."

Gwen's head snapped up, and a spring of excitement coiled tightly in her heart, ready to let go as soon as Peggy said the word.

"New junior agent?"

"Well, not if that's the best poker face you have—surely I taught you better than that."

Gwen felt the smile spreading across her face, bizarre and foreign after such a trying day. "Peggy. Come on."

"Oh, very well." Peggy sat down—she had been pacing the room—and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of the desk, offering it to Gwen before taking one herself. Gwen, the habit well-ingrained by now, took one. "Given that you are obviously an unusual specimen, and given that I am more familiar with your abilities, as one of the agents assigned to this project, than an outsider would be; and given that I am also more familiar with you, personally—"

"—and probably more able to monitor me for personality changes such as those the good doctor predicted," Gwen offered in a cynical murmur, leaning forward to light the cig for Peggy.

"Oh, good, you haven't been transformed into an optimist, at least—given those things, and also the necessity of my various assignments to the success of the war effort, you, Agent Sarah Rogers, as well as three other candidates from your cohort, have been assigned to active duty, under my command, for the foreseeable future." Peggy took an enormous drag off of her cigarette as she
finished this proclamation, either in triumph or because it had been quite a long speech and her breath was going—Gwen wasn’t sure which.

Or because she had damned well earned it, after today; that was possible, too.

"Wow," Gwen said, and sucked on her own cig to buy time. "So we're going... where? Europe? That's what creating me was about, right, countering some German technological group?"

"Hydra, yes. And also yes to Europe, although precisely where in Europe will be determined by Colonel Phillips. At any rate, pack a jumper and a raincoat; we will almost certainly be staged through London, where you will be the hit of all the drunken and disorderly sailors, and I will be required to visit my mother."

They did, in fact, go to Europe by way of London, and any doubts Gwen had had about Peggy's assessment of her attractiveness to men—namely, that she had any, no matter how large her bosoms had suddenly become—were laid to rest.

It wasn't just the shapeliness of her figure which had changed—although it had.

Gwen had always had a fullness to her shoulders that most young ladies lacked; it was now coming into fashion, but where had that been ten years ago when no boy had so much as glanced her way? Her chest, of course, had previously been famously flat; not even Bucky trying his best to cheer her had ever been able to ignore that, and her waist had been best described as "sturdy," in that it had done well at supporting her no matter which physical challenges she had embraced, but had done very poorly at appearing neat in a nipped-in dress. Her hips had been much the same—well-muscled enough to do whatever she needed them to, unless that need was to appear dandy in a tight skirt—and her legs, unfairly, had seemed boney-kneed and scrawny, despite the amount of strong and wiry muscles lining them.

Now she was a built like an honest-to-God angel, though.

More specifically, like the kind of angel that came pre-equipped with a flaming sword.

Her body was still as functional as it had ever been, but now also a great deal more. Her shoulder caps were larger than some of the men in camp had, and her stomach was clearly divided into segments of muscles that made her instinctively clench up every time she viewed them in the mirror. Her chest—there was no avoiding it, it was the most noticeable change—was hardly ridiculously big, it wasn't like Rosie Baker’s had been or anything, but it was quite respectable, now. She certainly was no longer going to be able to pass them off as pectoral muscles!

Her waist was the same size it always had been, which, since the rest of her had grown several inches in every direction, gave her something of an hourglass figure. As Peggy had said, she was shaped like an X; specifically, a capital X, because she was taller than Peggy now, too; taller than almost anybody. The doctors said she was six-foot-two, and well over two hundred pounds, much of it in her hips and powerful thighs.

But it didn’t stop there, because she gained another pound in the first day after Rebirth, in the last place anybody would have expected: specifically, on her head. Her hair grew out thicker, more lustrous, and golden, a richer shade than it ever had been before. "I look like Daisy Buchanan!" she had exclaimed, and Howard Stark had laughed at her.

"You cost about as much," he had joked, and then shepherded Gwen into the next set of tests.

Her arms and legs were both now covered with a thick layer of thankfully-blonde hair; her armpits
—and other areas— were, by contrast, almost denuded, with the small amount of hair there being almost impossibly fine. Her face was much the same shape, but the addition of strong muscles going down the back of her neck made it seem wider, more stubborn. (“Truth in advertising,” Peggy had snorted when she mentioned the difference.)

When they cut her—a neat, surgical slice with a scalpel along the front of her thigh, to test her healing and recovery times—she was shocked to see how dark the muscle was underneath: a red deeper than blood, so dark it was almost purple. “That... That isn’t normal, is it?” she had asked, but she needn’t have; the looks on the doctors’ faces would have been enough to tell her.

And there were a few more differences, as well. Her breath no longer gave out after running; her muscles no longer tired. She found her digestion more noisy, but hunger no longer troubled her, although she could eat far more in one sitting than ever before. Her hearing, eyesight, night vision, and senses of touch, balance, and timing were all improved. Her memory, always good, was now eidetic, and her judgement of distance and things like trajectories and ricochets was now impeccable.

Her voice, thank God, was still hers. There was at least one part of her which was completely unchanged.

So, yes: Given all of the above, Gwen was a hit with the men of London, much to her own befuddlement.

And even more confusingly, she didn’t like it one bit.

"I always thought I would love it," she confided to Peggy on their boat to France the next week. "I thought... Oh, I thought it must be a lovely thing, to be someone whom men liked to look at."

"Oh dear," said Peggy, and yes, that did rather cover it.

"It doesn’t feel lovely," Gwen said. "It feels... slimy." She couldn’t help but remember that Bucky had never looked at her like that. It was both better and worse, that way.

She thought he would love her new body, if he ever got to see it. She was sure he would appreciate that she was taller, broader... He would love the new, more defined muscles, and would tolerate the larger bosom. But the part he was going to like best—she was nearly positive—was how healthy she was now, how she wasn’t asthmatic any more, no longer had her crooked spine, couldn’t possibly still have TB lurking as the ever-present spectre behind her...

If he ever came home, that was.

He had been at war for almost a year, now; had been in the trenches—more or less literally—for months. She knew he had seen some terrible things; he had carefully avoided describing them in his letters, so obviously she had instantly known. She had written back, at least at first—she hadn’t been able to write from the camp, hadn’t been able to think how to tell him what she was doing, and anyway it was classified. She supposed his mother would inform him for her.

She had never told him about the miscarriage, either. By now, she wasn’t planning on it.

She refocused on Peggy, whose mouth was quirking upward, unaware of Gwen’s thoughts. "I suspect that you are feeling the effects not so much of adoration, but of avarice," she suggested, gentle and amused both at once. "After all, are they truly looking at you and desiring to know you?"

Gwen huffed. "I suppose that depends on your definition of the word know," she said tartly, and
Peggy laughed out loud.

"Well, at least that's one thing I won't have to teach you. Come with me, we can go over our plans before we dock."

“This is your badge.”

Agent Carter eyed the three of them—Gwen, along with Midge and Elly, who had also been assigned to Peggy’s command—as she slapped a badge onto the table in front of them.

“You’ll note that it is shaped precisely like a military police badge. This is not an accident; there will be situations in which the target to be infiltrated appears to be one of our own; however, rest assured, our assignment there will not be accidental. It will be to our advantage to appear to be exactly what we are: the ranking individuals in that particular situation. If there ever should come a challenge, then you should know that as agents, you hold a rank equivalent to that of a captain.

“These are your guns.” Revolver and semiautomatic, paired up into three sets and already in holsters. “Each of you, I am sure, will find a favorite, one over the other; however, you either are or will be proficient with both before you enter the field.

“These are your knives.” Multitool and Bowie-style. “I want this to be the last time I see them. If I can spot them, so can the enemy, and you will find them confiscated at the moment you need them the most.”

Peggy was sorting through a pile, one of four identical stacks on the table; with each item she named, she lifted a piece off of her pile and placed it on the cleared desk beside it. Now, the stack she had been working from was down to its last three members: a pin, a scarf, and a patch. “You have all been issued leather jackets,” she said.

They nodded; they had.

“You will ensure that this patch—” It had an American flag insignia, under which the letters “U.S.ARMY*S.S.R.” were embroidered in gold silk thread. “—is securely attached to that jacket. If you are not wearing the jacket, then the pin and the scarf must be on your person, at all times.” She pursed her lips, and for the first time, did not look them in the eyes. “A person found with their insignia on them is an enemy combatant, and will most likely be treated as such. A person found without it is a spy, and will also be treated as such.” She paused for impact. “Usually slowly.”

The silence curdled amongst them, but before they could become too apprehensive, Peggy cleared her throat and continued with her lecture.

She sat down in her chair, then, pushing each of the stacks of supplies towards them. “The last thing I will be giving you,” she said, “are these.” She pulled a small device, roughly the size of a child’s fist, out of the drawer beneath the desk, holding it clenched in her own hand in front of her chest. “These are your radios; they are tuned to a unique frequency untraceable by our German counterparts. Your codes you should have already begun memorizing.”

They nodded; the codebooks had been passed out before leaving America.

“The essence of our work here,” she told them, her eyes serious, “can be summarized by these radios. We are communication; we are knowledge. With the codes, we are secretive, and yet, the key function of our unit is sharing—with each other, and with the greater war effort. We are essential.” She turned her wrist so that the radio, previously held towards her, rotated upwards,
They all fumbled their equipment into place, the items being secreted away on their persons each for the first time, in movements which would become well-familiar to them within days. When all was in place, Peggy handed out assignments. Midge had an infiltration, a village in France; Elly was taking over a resistance radio station for the next two months. Both of them would be in south-eastern France, pushing towards the Swiss border.

“And me?” Gwen asked when the other two had been dismissed.

Peggy smiled the smile of a woman who was going to play an awful trick on a man who thoroughly deserved it. “You’re going to be with me,” she said whimsically. “We’ll tell them you’re my sister.” Her eyes darted down, and then up, along Gwen’s now-enormous frame. “In-law,” she added.

“And what will we be doing?” Gwen asked. “And how soon do we leave, and for where?”

“Well, you are going to draw all the attention of the locals,” Peggy told her. “Be nice, drink anything they buy you, and pretend you only speak Swedish; you’ll be fine.”

“What if they speak Swedish?”

Peggy shrugged. “Then we won’t be fine. Oh, relax!” She swatted Gwen’s arm casually. “No one is travelling for fun these days! We’re here to find your husband—”

Gwen jumped, but then Peggy continued, sweeping her into the tale she was building, “—my brother, remember?—who is supposed to be doing business in town. We leave in the morning.” Peggy smiled again, and it wasn’t any nicer this time. “It’ll be... Nice.”

“So when you said it would be Nice,” Gwen fumed, “I take it that was all pun and no fact?”

“I don’t know what you’re complaining about, I had a fabulous time.” Peggy reapplied her lipstick in the mirror while Gwen drove. “Faster, darling, they’re far too close behind us, and it’s not like you don’t have the reflexes.”

“You also didn’t mention all the kissing,” Gwen shouted above the wind, furiously pushing on the accelerator.

“Would it have mattered?” Peggy shouted back, her perfect curls ripping out in the breeze. One of them stuck to her lipstick, and she reached up to pry it off, laughing at the horizon as she pulled out her gun. She checked the mirror again, looking for all the world like she was merely worried about her eyeliner, and then whipped around in the seat and got off a shot.

Behind them, the windshield of their pursuers shattered, and the car screeched to a halt as Gwen whipped them around the curve, banishing their enemies into their dust.

Gwen’s particular stature was both a boon and burden in this work.

A boon, because it made her much more able for the physical elements of the work, such as the altercations that would occasionally break out, or the running, or the climbing, or-- and Gwen did feel a bit guilty that this particular incident had occurred in an old abbey-- the busting down of doors.
However, it also meant that she stood out like a sore thumb. Even if she stood out in a good way, she still drew attention, and that was usually the last thing they wanted.

She had begun to notice, though, that Peggy did seem to take a particular delight in propping her up as a handy-dandy distraction whenever things looked like they might get hairy. She would have minded more, except that she usually got to punch people in those incidents, and furthermore, they were inevitably people who badly needed punching. And anyway, punching people was a lot more fun now that she could flatten a man with one blow and her knuckles always healed cleanly.

She was in France the first time she noticed the discontent. She was running between two resistance outposts—physically, literally running back and forth, because planes were too noisy and there weren't any roads. It was the sort of thing which would have more than exhausted anyone else, but Gwen was well able to do it. She kept her pace to an average of about ten miles per hour, which was far from the fastest she could run but did allow her to maintain a steady pace the whole time. And it was a task which badly needed to be done, so she wasn't wasting her time exactly, but...

She was bored out of her mind.

She was so bored, she found herself wishing that someone would shoot at her.

It wasn't a good feeling.

Nothing she could do about it now, though; she put her head down and kept running.

It happened more than once, of course. Just once would have been too easy.

There were times when she was sent to memorize plans and the hard part was getting in and out, because the plans themselves were obvious. There were times when she was sent to play bait, looking helpless and nubile until Hydra officers came outside, tempted beyond restraint by the opportunity to hurt someone who couldn't fight back. There were times when she and Peggy were sent in, only to find themselves twiddling their thumbs because the Nazi forces weren't where they had expected them to be.

It wore at her, that and how endless the damned war seemed. It had been going since she was twenty-one, and she was nearly twenty-six now. It seemed sometimes as if the war were never going to stop, and at other times it seemed as if she wasn't making any difference, and all told, she was ready to scream at the massive, stomach-turning waste of it all.

The thing was, she was sure she couldn't go to Peggy with it. She was good at what she was doing, and she was contributing in good earnest to the war effort, but she still didn't think going to her commanding officer with thoughts of discontent was a brilliant plan. And Midge and Elly were both good sports, but they were in the same boat she was; they would either feel the same way as she did about it, in which case complaining wouldn't help anything, or they wouldn't, in which case whining to them about it would be damaging morale.

So she went to the only other person she could consider a friend, the only other person who had met her before the serum, who had looked at her even then as if she were something new and fascinating. The one who made her pulse race and her eyes widen with his intensity, although she wasn't sure whether that was a good thing or a bad one:

Howard.
“Well, it’s hardly surprising, is it?” he asked, taking apart some machine which looked like a Victrola, but which could not possibly be just a Victrola. “You’re a very clever young woman, Sarah. All your testing showed it, back before Rebirth, and I doubt it’s lessened since then. Why wouldn’t you be bored, mission like that? All that running, hmph!”

“It wasn’t just that one, though!” She leaned her weight on the hands she had braced on the edge of the counter, stretching her long legs in front of her. Howard never minded when she did simple exercises like this, and it was always easier to talk and move at the same time. Slowly, she straightened her bent arms so that her legs, held stiff, came off the ground. It ached, in a trembly, satisfying way that told her she was actually using her body, and she continued the exercise, pleased. “There was also—”

“—the spy missions, yes, you said. Frankly, Sarah—”

She really wished people would stop calling her that.

“—I’m not worried about it. I’m more concerned that you’re worried about it.”

“What does that mean?” She started to lower herself down again.

“This whole conversation—” He put down the wrench and picked up a hammer, gesturing vaguely with the handle before reversing it in his hand. “—it feels... predictable. I have met you, and for more than five minutes, even. I assure you, this was always coming.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked as her feet touched the ground, frowning at him.

“You’re not a spy, sweetheart.” He managed to make it sound both fond and condescending, at the same time. “And you’re not a pawn, either. You’ll never be satisfied with just doing what you’re told, even if what you’re told to do is extraordinary. You’re special.” He smiled at her, and her heart started hammering, possibly in panic. “No, this life isn’t for you. You’re not a spy, and not particularly a soldier; what you are is an officer. You know, if you’d been born a man, you’d be at least a captain.”

She looked down and straightened her arms again, pumping out another push-up. “Not coming from Brooklyn, I wouldn’t.” Her ears felt warm.

“Well, maybe not... But I wouldn’t bet against you!” Howard turned away and started banging on the not-a-Victrola, loud whacking blows that made it impossible to talk.

By the time he’d finished smashing at it—whatever it was made of, it hadn’t shattered under his attack—she had switched positions, now balancing on one arm, hand braced against the table; her other arm was pressed to her thigh, keeping her skirt from riding up as she slowly tilted sideways. “So what do you suggest I do?” she asked, voice coming out hoarse from the way the tilt pressed her organs together.

Howard shrugged, running his hands through his hair and glaring at the machine. “Try to switch,” he suggested casually. “Find a way to become an officer.”

“The WACs—” They weren’t the Auxilliary, by that point.

“Oh, not literally. But maybe more like Peggy; she makes her own calls, doesn’t she?”

She did, actually, now that he mentioned it.

“I could... Do you think I should ask her?”
Howard gave her a dubious look, then shrugged again. “Sure,” he said, “but I would mind how you phrase it. Sweetheart, would you mind...?”

*I think maybe I like it when he calls me sweetheart,* she thought, lowering her feet to the floor again and stepping over to take the hammer from him.

She gave it three good blows, and the box of the not-a-Victrola didn’t even dent. The hammer shattered into smithereens, though.

Midge was in Portugal, Elly was back in France, and Gwen was in London when Howard gave her the shield.

“What?” she laughed, incredulous.

Peggy looked over and sighed, but it was the kind of sigh which was actually a laugh in disguise. “Howard.”

“What, I’m not allowed to make a present for our friend? For shame, Peggy.”

“Howard...”

“Thank you,” Gwen put in. “It’s very... shiny.”

It really was. Thank God the thing was light, or she’d have been worried he’d crafted it out of solid gold.

“It’s *too* shiny. Howard, what on earth *use* is it?!”

“Well...” Howard’s eyes twinkled. “...Sarah did say you seemed to be mostly using her as a distraction.” Peggy didn’t wince, but her eye twitched, which meant that no, it *hadn’t* been Gwen’s imagination. “She’ll certainly be distracting now, won’t she?”

Peggy pressed her lips together hard, and for a moment Gwen was afraid she was going to explode at being called to account over it.

But when the explosion came, it was laughter, not rage. Peggy snorted, then chuckled, and then full-on laughed. Exhaustion and overwork made her giggle-fit last longer and harder than it perhaps otherwise would have, but by the time she had stopped laughing, Gwen and Howard had caught it from her. So they stood together, Gwen clinging to the shield, Peggy clinging to the table, and Howard clinging to Peggy, and laughed, and laughed, and laughed, until even Gwen’s scientifically-enhanced sides were aching.

In fact, the shield would prove to be quite durable, and did actually fulfill both its overt and its more pointedly sarcastic purposes quite nicely: not only shiny and eye-catching, but also an apparently-impregnable shield. “What on earth is this made out of, anyway?” Gwen found herself asking, and although they were out in the field at the time, Howard would eventually hear about the question and provide an answer.

Apparently, it was a gold-painted (not plated; paint was much less expensive) titanium alloy. “It’s not perfect,” he wrote her in the letter with the explanation. “It won’t turn those blue-light guns of Hydra’s, and it will shatter under sufficient stress, but it should be able to turn most of the normal fire you encounter.”

It did, too.
Gwen was maybe a little fond of it.

A little bit.

A titch.

Anyway, she kept bringing it with her on missions, and although Peggy rolled her eyes unendingly, she didn’t actually order her to stop.

“Agent Rogers.”

Peggy spoke from the entrance to the mess tent, and something about the outline of her there, silhouetted against the misty, rainy day—Gwen would have thought Italy would be sunnier—cast a chill through Gwen.

Or maybe that was just the use of Gwen’s title, which Peggy almost never bothered with; that was also a possible explanation.

Regardless, Gwen got up from the table in a hurry, crossing to Peggy with her long legs stretched all the way out on each step. “Agent Carter?” She pulled herself up and let her chin stick out in the S.S.R. salute.

“Come with me.”

Peggy led the way through the camp, explaining the situation as she went. “One of the units operating in this sector of the conflict has been captured,” she started.

“What, the whole thing?”

“Most of it. Over two hundred men were sent out, and barely fifty have returned. Of the rest, neither hide nor hair has been seen of them since. The casualties they have found are horrific: men clearly shot in cold blood, arms still raised over their heads in surrender, that sort of thing.”

Gwen shuddered, thinking of Bucky, out here in all this mess with monsters who didn’t even follow the basic rules of war—such as they were.

“Unfortunately,” Peggy continued, “Among their number were three S.S.R. agents, sent to rendezvous with other allied forces.” She paused significantly. “The men they were supposed to meet have, by and large, also been captured.”

“Damn.”

“Rather.”

Peggy held up the flap of a tent and Gwen ducked inside, only to have a tube—the sort that usually contained a rolled-up map—and three large, full, document-cases thrust into her arms. Peggy, still standing in the mouth of the tent, jerked her head to the side, and Gwen obediently headed out after her again, the tent flap falling behind her like mine shaft with the support beams cut.

“The documents you have just been handed are the profiles of all the agents and allies we have presumably lost to this massacre. Our task is to assess the intel, determine the extent of the breach should our agents fail under questioning, and plan for that eventuality.”

“No thought of a rescue, then?”
“I only wish we could. Given the extent of the losses, it would take over a thousand men to come close to completing a rescue successfully; it has been deemed an unacceptable risk. If we could do it with only a small team, then that is exactly what I would be planning now, believe me.”

Gwen nodded, grasping the map tube more tightly. “How long do we have?”

“One week for the assessment and to enact the plan. Given that they will doubtless learn our location, this camp will be relocating in no more than thirteen days, probably only eight or nine. We’ve lost enough men to combat; we had better not lose the rest to bombardment.”

“Alright. Do you want me to interview the remaining men, see if they remember anything else?”

Men tended to try their best for Gwen, something which Gwen insisted was due to her straightforward personality. Peggy didn’t argue, precisely, but she did insist on checking the seams on Gwen’s hose whenever she went out to for an interview.

“I do, just as soon as Phillips is finished compiling the list of who’s present and accounted for, who’s wounded, who’s dead, and who—the majority—is MIA. The 107th was hit damned hard on this one.”

“The what?” Gwen felt her face drain of blood, and she stopped stock-still in the middle of the path, the map tube and document cases dropping from her arms into the mud. She stooped and tried to pick them up, only to drop them over and over again as if her fingers weren’t working. “Peggy—sorry, sorry, but—Agent Carter, who did you say they were?!”

“The 107th,” Peggy repeated, her eyebrows shooting up. “Sarah, what on earth is the matter?”

A year-long habit of trusting Peggy Carter took over, and Gwen blurted, “Bucky,” in answer. But then of course she had to explain. “He was my best friend for years, we—”

*We’re married.*

No, she couldn’t say that.

“He and I used to get into such fights back home—not with each other, I mean, we always had each other’s backs—”

She told Peggy about Reggie Wilde as she picked up the muddy map tubes and followed Peggy into her command tent, about how Reggie had always tripped Bucky in the halls until Gwen smuggled a rat down the back of his shirt right after he’d done it, and then continued on to talk about the time Emeline Mingus had cut all of Gwen’s hair off with a scissors. “Bucky spent a week in detention for hitting a girl, and he and his folks all agreed it was worth such a paltry punishment.”

Peggy looked at her thoughtfully. “I see,” she said, and unfortunately she saw rather more than Gwen was ready for her to see. “Sarah, darling... How long have you been in love with him?”

Gwen’s heart sank, and her body followed suit, folding down onto a nearby—if wet—crate of k-rations. “Since I was eleven,” she admitted, shoulders slumping. “He was—God, at that age—! He was perfect, Peggy, he really was. You know how boys are children and they’re cute, and then later they’re teenagers and they’re gangling, and in between they’re little miniature men and they’re perfect? That was Bucky: perfect body, and then just to be unfair perfect face, perfect teeth except for this one snaggle-tooth, perfect hair... Oh, and what was worse, he was perfectly brilliant and kind as well... You know, he coulda been a real jerk and folks still would’ve forgiven him a lot, but not Bucky. Bucky always cared, he cared about doing his share and treating people right and
She was interrupted when Peggy sighed. “Oh, Sarah.”

She smiled wanly. “I know. I really do know. Oh, but Peggy, Bucky’s always been my—my everything. Please, you’ve gotta find out for me if he made it—you know Phillips won’t tell me directly.” She nodded at the stack of paperwork Peggy was sorting. “Come on, I’ll do that for you while you check it. Please?”

Peggy was largely immune to even the best of Gwen’s begging eyes, but on the other hand, she did hate paperwork. She passed over the forms and left Gwen sitting down at the desk—Peggy’s; Gwen’s didn’t have a desk—to deal with them, as well as she could with her mind racing and her heart beating in her chest.

Five minutes later, Peggy was back, and it didn’t look good. Gwen felt the blood drain from face at the expression on Peggy’s, and, keening softly, folded in on herself. The paperwork tumbled, unnoticed by either of them, onto the floor, and Peggy even stepped on it when she came over.

“Here, now,” Peggy said softly. Her voice was coming directly into Gwen’s ear, and her arms were wrapped around her. “Here, Sarah. You must contain yourself, at least until we can get you somewhere more private.”

Gwen’s arms were wrapped around herself, pressing tight into her own ribs as if she could that way hold all of the emotions, all of the terror and grief and loss, inside of her. Peggy put her own hands under Gwen’s forearms and lifted, bringing her to something approximating standing.

“Come now. Ever onward, Agent. In this case, ever onward to a place you can grieve in peace. I will see your duties for the rest of the night redistributed,” she added, and there was a tiny piece of Gwen’s mind which found relief about that.

“What—you said that some were lost, and some were—were dead?” she asked, stumbling along as Peggy led her towards the section of camp where the sleeping tents were pitched.

“And you want to know which,” Peggy sighed, “Immediately. Despite the fact that I distinctly remember telling you to find privacy, first.”

“I know, and you’re right, but Peggy... I have to know.” She dug in her heels, and Peggy turned to look up at her. It was always odd when the two of them stood face to face; the rest of the time, Peggy was such a strong personality, easily dominating every conversation, every encounter. But face to face, Gwen remembered all over again how small Peggy actually was.

She seemed even smaller now. “He’s not on the list of the deceased,” Peggy told her. She pitched her voice low, moving in closer to Gwen so that they wouldn’t be overheard. After all, it wouldn’t do to be seen grieving, Gwen thought bitterly, but that wasn’t fair; the war wasn’t going to stop just for her, after all. “There are well over a hundred men captured,” Peggy continued. “He most likely resides amongst their number.”

“Or resided, anyway,” Gwen said, nodding. She thought of the expression on Bucky’s face, the night before he had deployed, when he told her he couldn’t promise that he’d come back. I can promise to do my best, Gwennie; that’s all I can give you.

Damn it—! She felt her throat closing, and fought it off.

And an earlier memory: Bucky reaching out to kiss her, even though she was crying and he was making a mistake. I’m sorry, I’m sorry; I’m so damned sorry, Gwen.
She never had apologized in return. *Damn it!* She reached up to scrub the tears away from her eyes.

And then she saw Pastor Jack, so old she wondered sometimes that he didn’t crumble into dust, but his face and voice had been strong as he read out the wedding vows. *Til death do ye part,* he had said.

She didn’t even know if it *had,* yet, and...

She went very still as the thought occurred to her.

...And she had to *change* that.

She met Peggy’s eyes, a wild, reckless fury springing up in her chest. She felt like the proverbial fox, about to eat the Spartan boy’s insides in her desperation, and she would feel bad about it, she *would,* just as soon as she knew *what the Hell had happened to Bucky!*

“Oh, no,” said Peggy, her voice full of dread.

And then her eyes dropped down, and her expression sharpened, incredulity and rage mixing on her features. She was looking at the base of Gwen’s neck, where Gwen’s fingers were, holding the chain with her dog tags on it...

...and her wedding ring.

“Agent Rogers?!” Peggy’s voice crackled as her eyes snapped up to Gwen’s face. She had obviously put it together, had figured out that Gwen had lied to her and Phillipps and the entire command structure about this.

Gwen looked away. “Erskine said you wouldn’t take me if you thought I was married,” she said softly. “So I just... wasn’t.”

She shrugged.

For about two seconds, Peggy looked like she had a migraine building, and then her expression smoothed into that calculating gleam that Gwen so esteemed. Gwen remembered the look on Peggy’s face when she said that they couldn’t mount a rescue, and knew that, when push came to shove, Peggy would have her back on this.

It was a strange feeling, but one Hell of a good one.

“Alright,” Peggy said, and Gwen could see her trying to set Gwen spinning like a top, spinning fast and hard enough so that she wouldn’t just fall down. “Very well. You tell me your plan, and I’ll keep it from being a damned foolish one.”

“No plan,” Gwen admitted. “Or, not yet. I don’t *know* anything, we don’t have clearance, and there’s no intel here... And I can’t exactly gather that intel without some way to get behind the enemy’s lines.”

Peggy pursed her lips. “Well,” she said, “I think we know someone who can get you that last one, at any rate.” She raised an eyebrow. “I recommend you *not* mention to him the part where you’re married.”

Howard Stark was still as handsome and reckless as ever, thank God. He seemed almost blase
about the idea of flying them behind enemy lines, against orders, in his own personal aircraft.

“We’re not going to be able to do a pickup,” he called back to her—she and Peggy were in the rear of the plane—over the noise of the engine. “We can’t just hang out in here in German airspace all night, and at any rate all those men would never fit in the plane. But radio in as soon as you know the situation; if it’s a massacre—”

Gwen was very glad he couldn’t see her face right at that moment. And not only because of Bucky (Bucky, isolated, all alone in there, all vulnerable, oh God what were they doing to him—she had to not think about that), but because of the scale of it. All those men... Over a hundred, Peggy had said, but when she’d actually gotten a look at the number it turned out to be one hundred forty-seven, just from their own forces; locals and irregulars were not accounted for. If all of them were dead (Bucky, Bucky, Bucky—!), the damned place would be a charnel house.

She swallowed, and thanked Heaven she had a strong stomach.

“...just call in, and we’ll find a way to get you out,” Howard was saying. “If there are survivors, radio in with that, too. Christ, Sarah—remember, you’re the only hope these men have. I don’t know how much you can do against enough forces to take that many men captive—”

But she was armed, and the captives weren’t; it had to matter. Furthermore, she was armed, and she had the element of surprise—“Oh, you’re a surprise all right,” Howard had said when he heard the plan—and lastly she was very, very hard to kill—Lord knew enough people had tried in the past year. Surely, surely, it had to make a difference.

Had to.

God, she was scared. Not of the drop so much—the plan was to get her in low, but she had a suspicion they would start taking fire as soon as the people on the ground heard the engines—but the possibility of failure.

The idea of Bucky, alone, helpless, taking a bullet in the brain—

She had been on a mission in France, once, infiltrating a Hydra-owned laboratory, when some schmuck who had apparently had a burning need to work late had popped around the corner of the stairwell, right in front of them. Gwen screamed, he screamed, Peggy screamed and then shot him, and his brains had spread out along the wall behind him like an over-ripe tomato dropped on the kitchen floor.

It wasn’t going to be Bucky.

It wasn’t.

And even if it was... didn’t the other men there deserve to live?

“Damn,” Gwen swore, leaning her head back against the door of the plane and closing her eyes.

“Are you alright?” asked Peggy.

Gwen nodded, and pulled her shield closer. They had covered it up for this—the gold paint was too gaudy, too much of a giveaway for the one time in her life Gwen was trying for stealth—but the fabric over it was thin, and she could feel the faint divots in its surface from where she had taken fire in the past, a comforting string of imperfections.

From the other side of the door she leaned against, she heard the crackling booms of explosions.
Anti-aircraft fire; that was her cue to go. “How close can you get me, Howard?”

“For you, sweetheart? At least a little bit more.” He checked the dials and the view, then swore softly under his breath. She probably wasn’t meant to hear it. “Eject in one minute,” he said grimly, and hit the throttle.

*Risky,* Gwen thought. Evading in the direction of the enemy was usually successful, but less so than evading up or down or side-to-side—*Let Howard fly the airplane,* she told herself, *you just get ready to jump.*

Shield, gun, other gun, knife, knife, helmet. Scarf, patch, pin for colors—how not to get shot as a spy—and radio.

Badge. Scarf. Pin.

Radio again, just to be sure.

Ammo, not that she needed much; it was in the pouch at her waist, but the Germans used the same size they did, and if she couldn’t scrounge some she would have bigger problems than that..

Shield. Shield cover.

Helmet.

Radio.

Time.

“Fuck, Peggy—kiss her good luck for me, would you?” Howard’s hands were tight on the controls.

“You are *ridiculous* and *pathetic,*” Peggy told him, rolling her eyes. She kissed Gwen anyway, though, closed-mouthed on the lips, so maybe she believed in luck, too.

“Thanks,” Gwen told them, then hesitated one more second, thinking of more than just a kiss for luck, thinking of all the ways they had been true friends to her, all the rules they were breaking just letting her *try* out here. She wanted to make a speech, but she didn’t have the words, and anyway she didn’t have the time. “Thanks,” she said again.

She opened the door.

She jumped.

She had never jumped out of a plane before, and it was a little embarrassing how exhilarating she found it.

The fall time gave her a good chance to memorize the layout of the facility, too.

Useful!

These men were *insane* and *wonderful.*

They seemed to find her own brand of insanity quite wonderful, too, thank God.
“Christ almighty, I’ve died and gone to Heaven,” one joked.

“Nah,” said another. “You’re still here, it’s the angel what’s come to us!”

She rolled her eyes and broke their bonds, and together they all slew their captors, which was immensely satisfying.

Halfway through releasing the captives—looking, always looking, Bucky Bucky Bucky Bucky—some jerk with a knife took the cover off her shield. She rolled her eyes and ripped off the rest of it, revealing the gaudy gold flash of it. “Here,” she said, tossing the fabric to the one who seemed to be a medic. “Make a sling, maybe?”

“You got it, Angel.”

She rolled her eyes again. “My title is Agent, actually. It’s equivalent to a captaincy.”

“Ehn.” The one with the bowler hat ridiculously perched on his head shrugged. “Agent, angel... Close enough! Here, did you say there was tanks outside?”

Bucky wasn’t fucking there. Gwen grasped the base of her french braid and pulled firmly, using the small pain to focus.

He isn’t here, he isn’t here, he isn’t here—

“Are there any other captives in this place? Any others at all?!”

“Upstairs,” offered a man on her left. “The interrogation rooms—or at least, that’s what they said they were.” He hawked and spat on the ground. “Didn’t seem like they’d been doing much interrogation, though. Just a lot of torture.”

“Thank you,” she said sincerely, focusing on the fact of additional information and not the content of the intel he’d provided. “Go—go join the rest in the courtyard, will you? I’m going to check upstairs, and then—”

What if Bucky wasn’t there? What if he was already dead, or worse? What if she never found him, never found out what happened to him?

She blinked and pulled harder on her braid, chasing those thoughts away. “I’ll check upstairs, and if no one’s there, we’ll blow it,” she said. “Hell, blow it anyway. Er... Do you know anyone who does explosives?”

The man grinned, the tired, hectic grin of someone who has finally gotten the joke that Life has been telling him for decades. “Do I know an explosives guy?! Yes, actually, I suppose I do! DERNIER!”

And off he went.

Gwen took a second—just a second—to close her eyes and breathe.

Check upstairs.

And then, if he’s not there, get out.

Because it’s going to go up in flames, now, whether you find him or not... and because all these other men still deserve to make it home.
One final tug, and she released her braid, heading up the narrow, bricked-in staircase to the next storey.

Finding Bucky on that table was one of the worst moments of her life. She had had nightmares like this, literally, where she came to find him only to discover that he had been tortured. In her nightmares, it was because they—whoever ‘they’ were—had found out he was queer, and all her protesting and insisting that he was her husband, damnit, hadn’t done one little bit of good.

In real life, it was even worse.

“No no no no...” She whipped around the room, snapping his bonds and memorizing everything she could as she pulled him into her arms, and then up to standing with his arm slung over her shoulder. “We’re getting you out of here, Bucky. We are, okay? We are.”

“Gwennie?”

“Yeah, Bucky.” She thought she might cry, except she couldn’t cry, because she had to get them out of there. “Yeah, it’s me.”

“Love you, Gwen. I’m so sorry—

“You always say that when I’m the happiest,” she said, pulling them through the doorway and into the hallway. He looked confused to be standing, and she realized he had thought she was a hallucination. She swallowed and went on, “Can’t you see I’m just glad to’ve found you?”

“Gwen, they did something. They did something to me.”

Her heart squeezed, and her throat closed.

Then Bucky seemed to realize that she had an inch and a half on him and was practically dragging him along the hallway. “They... they did something to you? Hell, Gwen, did they do to you what they did to me?!” His voice was gaining strength, anger and fear giving it weight.

“It’s not like that,” she assured him. “It’s—”

“AGENT ROGERS.”

“Now what?!?” she snapped, furious. They were so close—they were almost there—but, just as they were making their escape, they had come out onto a bridge over a giant river of explosions. Facing them across the way were Shmidt and some other guy, who looked like a toady, coward like a toady, and frankly set off all of her toady alarms at full shriek.

“How exciting!” called Shmidt, and no, no it wasn’t, because Bucky was shrinking back against her, and suddenly, Agent Sarah Gwen Rogers Barnes was absolutely, completely, 100% done.

She slipped Bucky’s arm from around her neck, crossing the bridge, her skirt swirling around her knees in the thermal winds coming off the fires raging below. She had to get Bucky out of here quickly, the smoke was probably tearing him up inside—

“So, Doctor Erskine managed it, after all,” Shmidt was saying. “And such a ravishing specimen —”

Gwen punched him in the face. She started to say something, then gave it up; Shmidt was a Nazi
and a first-class jerk, and now he had the nerve to be hitting on her, and she was not dealing with this today. She kicked him in the fork, and then in the back, knocking him far enough back that the toady was able to retract the bridge to bring him to safety.

Shmidt’s laughter took her by surprise—it wasn’t the usual reaction people had when Gwen punched them in the face. It was hoarse laughter, true, and with a very mad sort of flavor to it, but still, it was laughter, accompanied by ranting: “You have been deluded, Agent!” and, “We have left humanity behind!” and, “Join me, and we will spawn a new race!”

Bucky started growling, too low for Shmidt to hear it, but Gwen was oddly touched, anyway.

Then Shmidt ripped his own face off.

“Jesus Christ,” Gwen swore.

“You don’t have one of those, do you?”

“If I did, I promise I would keep on wearing it!”

“JOIN ME!”

Gwen clutched Bucky to her more closely. “I’ve already got one husband,” she called, “A perfectly good one, right here.”

And then the toady was pulling Shmidt away, and they were making their way across the chasm, and there wasn’t any more time to think about it.
The march back to base was God damned putrid.

There was the weather, for one thing; hot in the day and cold at night, the air dry enough to wick away the moisture from your face so that the wind would chap you right up, and then cold enough so that you shivered beside the campfire. And they had been reduced to huddling around campfires, because there were so damned many of them and so many injured with so few supplies that she had assigned every man to carrying either stretchers or the rations they had thankfully raided from the factory before it blew. But that meant that they didn’t have any tents in their supplies, or anyone left to carry the tents if they had.

The worst of the injured was a young man from Boston. She knew he was from Boston, because
he told her, which he had opportunity to do because he had apparently been in the same experiment as Bucky, only instead of doing some unknown thing that involved strapping him to a table, the monsters had just cut his damned legs off.

And yes, it would have been understandable if the men had left him to burn—because why would men trapped in a burning factory have thought to go back for him, and also because the room he had been in had actually been on fire by the time they found it. But—and she was so proud of all them for this—they hadn’t; had, in fact, rescued him out of the flames, and it turned out to be a good damned thing because he was one of the few men in the entire facility with a head for maps, and in addition to carrying him because well, somebody had to, she was also carrying him because he had good intel.

But he was never going to walk again, and they all knew it. And even worse, the whole time she carried him pressed her chest—because his arms weren’t yet strong enough for piggy-back style—she was holding him right under her nose, and, well, long story short, he smelled like a pork roast fresh from the oven, and she hadn’t eaten in almost three days—there were others who needed the rations more—so her mouth was watering terribly, even though she tried to suppress that particular instinct all the way down into China. It made her want to become Catholic, just so she could have someone to confess to.

The factory itself had been about forty miles outside the base camp; taking the terrain and enemy forces into account, that required a pace of thirteen miles per day, roughly, in order to make it to camp in the time they had left. Gwen knew how the S.S.R. camps operated, and she knew that if they took any longer than that, they ran the risk of the whole camp moving out. So that pace—which was normally acceptable to men at march, but “normally” didn’t include starvation, or injury, or any of the other terrible circumstances her people were facing—was going to have to be the very minimum she set.

She pushed them hard the first day, reasoning that if they built up a buffer, a disaster could strike and they would still make it to camp in time. The first day it worked—they actually covered nearly seventeen miles. The morning of the second day, however, she woke up at dawn to find reports that two of the men had died overnight, and time had to be set aside for burial.

She was asked to say a few words over the graves, because she was so clearly the one in charge, and because somebody had to do it. So she led them all in the Lord’s prayer, and then, hesitantly, began from her memories of her mother, back when she had been a child and her mother had still managed to attend services from time to time. “Ave Maria…” She must not have been the only one who knew it, because a dozen voices rippled back at her, “Gratia plena, Dominus tecum. Benedicta tu in mulieribus…”

That’s us, she thought, looking around the haggard crowd. In peccatoribus for real. Nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae. But hopefully not today; not for the rest of us, anyway.

When the vague rumbling, the characteristic noise of a group repeating rote words without pause for contemplation, faded away, she said, “I’ve always been told that prayer is as much for listening as it is for talking. Let us pray,” and then she bowed her head.

The silence rippled out, the humans soundless even as the woods around them teemed with noisy life.

Half a dozen bird calls and trills split the air; the mosquitoes were inescapable. But the humans were silent, and some of them, Gwen included, were listening.

Go, she thought suddenly, out of nowhere. Go now.
She licked her lips, and raised her voice. “Rest in peace,” she said to the ground, and “Move out!” to the rest of the group. “We have a long way to go, and it’s vital that we cover that ground today.”

She looked around at the forest. The birds were still as loud as ever; if anything, even louder. She caught sight of a flash of blue sky peeping through the trees, and shuddered at the sight for no reason she could put her finger on. “Move out,” she repeated.

Go now.

An hour later, they heard the noise behind them: shouts, as the enemy discovered the graves. Gwen stiffened, and leaned over to the man walking next to her—Gabe, his name was. “Silence in the train,” she said in his ear. “Pass it along.” He looked at her with sharp eyes, then nodded, and leaned over to the man beside him.

Go, go now, whispered the voice inside her again.

She thought of how close the call had been, and shivered.

She was the only one of the lot not falling-down tired by the time they made it into camp late in the afternoon of the third day, but make it they did. Half of them had literal holes in the soles of their shoes, but they made it.

They had buried three more along the way, but they made it.

They made it.

Peggy took her broken radio from her hands, and looked Bucky over up and down. Then she raised her eyebrows and turned away, all without saying a thing.

The whole lot of them were shipped back to London after that, some to be hospitalized, some to be sent home. Gwen herself was dressed down first by Peggy—with a winking acknowledgement that it was a performative reproof—and then by Colonel Phillips, who seemed to be genuinely angry at all the rules she had broken, but also seemed a little too complacent with Peggy’s part in the affair.

“Is it just me,” Gwen wondered as they wandered out of the HQ, “or could that have been a lot worse?”

“It’s not just you. Or rather, it is, but in a different way. You’re their only successful experiment, Sarah; did you really think they were ever going to retire you?”

“Well, not while the war is on,” Gwen laughed, pulling out a cigarette.

Peggy gave her a sharp look. “No,” she said.

Gwen paused in the act of lighting up. “Wait.”

“Not after the war, either.” Peggy reached over and took a cigarette from her, holding it up for a light. “You are far too valuable.”

Gwen felt something cold crawl down her spine like a roach. “You mean, they’ll want me to still be involved in public life, somehow. Still doing something for the government.”
“I mean they will order you to continue your espionage missions,” Peggy said bluntly. “You have made good progress—that map you brought us back is invaluable—but the only way to guarantee yourself a chance to retire is to become someone so well-known that your continuing activity is remarkable.” She studied Gwen’s face, then sighed. “Consider it, Sarah. And in the meantime, light me up, would you, darling?”

When they all got back to London, most of the men were sent to the hospital. It stood to reason: most of them were in fairly bad shape, after their capture by Hydra. So as soon as she was released on leave (twenty-four hours, not forty-eight, which she thought was a bit unfair, but then she could still get courtmartialed, so on second thought twenty-four hours was plenty) she headed to the main medical facility, where the majority of the 107th could be found.

Bucky wasn’t there.

She worked her way through the ward—a whole lot of them seemed to want to touch her skirt like it was the Pope’s robes, which she found alarming—and whispers spread behind her, but it was only when she ran into Miles, the legless young man from Boston who had been so badly burned, that she finally found someone who could tell her where Bucky had gone. “The pub,” he said shortly, and then laughed like a broken marionette. “And I don’t blame him none, either. I could walk, that’s right where I’d be heading, too.”

She took the address and thanked him. She allowed him to press a kiss to her cheek—something else that was proving bizarrely popular with the men she had rescued, even the ones who weren’t European—and then headed back out of the hospital, grateful, in spite of the scolding she gave herself at the pettiness of it, to be out of the wretched smells.

Bucky didn’t argue when she came up beside him where he slumped on his barstool. He didn’t startle, either, and she realized that there was a large, shiny sword hanging over the back of the bar—a remnant of some ancient war, she would guess—and that he had been watching the reflections of the room behind him in it.

“All of a sudden, she remembered how it used to be, eight years ago: Tiny Bucky and Tiny Gwen, Tiny Bucky doing his best to get wasted enough to pretend he wanted a woman—he never had—and Tiny Gwen going after him and fishing him out of the bars, dragging him home—or, if he was very badly off, to her place—to sleep it off.

It was later, now, and their problems were different. This wasn’t that.

She firmed her lips and her voice, and stepped forward again. “Come on, Buck. Let’s get you out of here.”

She pulled him off the chair, making sure they paid the tab before leading him by the arm back towards the hotel room she had secured for the night. The prophylactics Peggy had slipped her with a sympathetic and encouraging smile were heavy against her side, the tin thumping against her side with every step.

“Seems like this is always us,” Bucky said. He was slurring a little, but not badly; she must have interrupted him before he got too far, although the bar tab had been substantial, and Miles in the hospital had said Bucky had left for the pub a while ago.

“What’s always us?”
She looked both ways and pulled them across the street.

“This.” Bucky waved his free left arm, indicating the way he hung off of her. “You haulin’ me around. Bet it’s easier now, huh?”

“Well, you’re less drunk than you used to get,” she joked, smiling feebly. “Come on, it’s just over this way.”

“Your quarters? Or mine?”

She side-eyed him, then turned determinedly forward again. “Ours, for the night. It’s a hotel—I’m on leave—”

“Gwen…”

“—We don’t even have to do anything, I just—I missed you, and—”

“Gwen. How can you…” He looked ready to cry, which could have been the bad angle or could just have been all that beer he had supposedly consumed. “How can you still want—Hell, Gwennie, look at you!”

She gave him a weak smile and steered them inside and towards the staircase. “I have, believe me. Have you seen my arms? They’re awfully hairy—”

“Aw, Gwennie, come on.”

“I mean it, Bucky.” She dropped a kiss onto his cheek, not caring, for that one minute, who might see her do it. “I meant what I said to Shmidt, you know? I’ve got one husband already; a perfectly good one, right here. Mind you, you having a face helps…”

He didn’t answer as she led them up to the room, and didn’t say anything as she unlocked the door and then relocked it again with them on the other side. She kicked off her shoes and pulled the pins out of her hair, letting it flop down in a braid, much thicker than her braid was the last time Bucky would have seen it, which hung over her shoulder and jostled whenever she moved. She slipped off her jacket and pulled out her tie, then crossed to where Bucky was still sitting on the edge of the bed, motionless, not undressing or doing anything else. He just looked at her, with tired eyes.

She wondered, for just a second, where her devil-may-care, flashy-smiling husband had gone.

Then she sighed, and knelt at his feet. He was still wearing his boots, for Heaven’s sake; she might as well get those off of him.

Christ, she was kneeling at his fucking feet.

What the hell.

“Gwen,” he said, and she jumped a little. It had been a little bit of time since he last spoke, now that he thought of it. “Gwen, come on. You don’t have to do this.” Not anymore, his mind suggested, and he suppressed a shiver at the damned truth of it.

Christ, he was paying for his sins now, wasn’t he?

Because the truth was—the ugly, petty, jackass truth of it was—Bucky hadn’t just married her because he wanted to protect her. He had, of course, that was—that had been—a real part of it,
but...

There was more.

And it wasn’t that he wanted her protection, either, the protection that having a skinny little wife at home had offered the kind of man he was. He could have done a lot more with that than he had, and the reason he hadn’t was purely to play it safe. The guys doing the sucking off got it a lot worse than the guys getting sucked, and he’d gotten past his reckless phase by the time he was twenty-two. No, having a Missus was nice, but... it had never been the point. Not the whole point, not really.

There was still more.

And it wasn’t because he loved her. Which he did! God, she was incredible; why wouldn’t he love her? She’d been the best part of him since before his balls dropped, and missing her would be like... would be like missing an arm, or something; he couldn’t imagine it. He wanted so much for her, too, he wanted her to have everything, but...

...but he wasn’t able to kid himself anymore, not after this—not after Zola, God damn him. Him loving Gwen wasn’t the real reason he’d married her, either. It wasn’t the true, deep, piece of shit reason. It wasn’t the thing he’d never acknowledged out loud, never acknowledged at all, even when he was staring his own self in the face in the mirror.

But he couldn’t look away, anymore.

Gwen had always been plain. Boyish, and disdainful of feminine fripperies. Flat-chested, and stubbornly indifferent to the fact that she was flat-chested. Her features were fine enough, but she damned well had never done anything with them. Even when she’d worn cosmetics, they’d only been because her job required them.

But what, he had thought as a callow asshole of twenty-two, what if that had changed, one day? What if Gwen had met someone, someone who believed she could be beautiful, and they had changed her mind? What if Gwen had held herself differently, and acted demure for more than five minutes at a time, and captured some other lug’s attention?

What then?

He woulda lost her, was what then. And even back as a kid, as a scared little boy working out his frustrations and fears in the bars, he had known it.

So he’d locked her down and locked her in, instead, and that, even more than the many men he’d killed by now, was gonna take him down to hell when he died.

“Gwen, come on. Come up here. Christ, I’m so sorry...”

“You keep saying that.” She smiled at him like her heart was breaking, and Christ, it probably was. “I keep trying to tell you, you’ve got nothing to be sorry for.” She set his boots off to the side of the bed.

He laughed.

She winced, and then pasted on a smile again. “I knew who you were when I married you, Bucky Barnes. You’re not getting out of this that easy.”
She reached out to take his jacket, which he squirmed out of, as well as his shirt and, after a second of hesitation, his pants. She hung them all over the back of the chair with her own clothes, disregarding the fact that his clothing was, by and large, filthy, although he had gotten to wash off in the hospital before his release. A second later, he noticed two packs in the corner of the room; she must have prepared by bringing spares.

What else had she brought to prepare...?

He didn’t ask as she stripped down to her chemise, then turned around and requested he help her with her brassier; she didn’t say anything else as she dug out a men’s nightshirt and passed it over. He held the nightshirt in his hand, studying it a moment. It was blue, sky blue, and a thin sort of fabric; nothing too hot in the muggy London summer. Tentatively, he slipped it on, only taking off his shorts underneath once it was covering him.

She pulled off her own underthings—a simple pattern, almost no lace; still his same old Gwen in that respect, then—and pushed him, very gently, back onto the bed. He went, passive under her hands, feeling scared for no reason he could put his finger on, but also strangely excited for no reason that made sense. It wasn’t like...

God almighty, she was taller now, he supposed, but she wasn’t any more masculine or anything. So why...?

But then she climbed in on her side—still the right, still the same side it’d always been—and curled up against him, and it felt so good just to be touching another person that he almost cried. He did sniffle a bit, rolling onto his side and clinging to her tightly, his arms pressed one around her back, the other around her neck. Her arms found the same holds on him, so they were locked together like puzzle-pieces, and he let his legs creep forward, too, his knees hooking around her hips, squeezing tightly as he clung, and shook, and made muffled sounds that he wasn’t gonna acknowledge into her neck.

They stayed like that for a while, a long time, and if Gwen was shaking, too, it was more of a relief than anything else. “I thought you had died,” she whispered in his ear. “I thought I was going to be alone forever.”

“You wouldn’t,” he whispered back, wriggling a little at the feeling of her fingers carding through his hair. “You wouldn’t, you won’t. Promise me you won’t be alone, Gwen, promise me if something happens you’ll move on.”

She made a muffled noise against his neck, almost a yelp like a puppy would make when you took it away from the teat. “I’m not sure I’d want to,” she said. Neither one of them was letting the other see their face.

“Eventually,” he insisted. “Sooner or later, you’ll come out from under it. Promise you won’t—won’t do something stupid, like stay alone forever ‘cause you think it’s what I want.”

She didn’t say anything for a moment, but she shivered, even though it was warm in the room and neither one of them had cold feet. “I think you would kind of want it,” she said after a minute, and it stung, stung badly, more than he wanted to admit.

He shuddered all over one more time, then took a deep breath. He’d spent his whole life being scared, up to this point, but Gwen had always made him feel brave. He could be brave one more time, for her.
“I would have, once,” he admitted, pulling back. “I wanted—no. I was afraid.” He blew out a harsh breath. A stray tendril of hair which had escaped her braid moved gently in the breeze of it. “I’ve always been afraid, really. You were always the one...” He pulled the hand around her neck back, cupping her chin. “You were always the strong one,” he said huskily. “But.”

She pressed her face into his hand, her eyes closing not quite enough to hide the worried expression she wore, and he took a deep breath. “But I love you,” he said, moving his hand gently so that it cupped her chin. “And I want you to be happy.”

He kissed her, then. She kissed him back, too, so that was that, thank God. It was sweet, and a little hungry, but not very; then she bit gently at his lips, and that was very nice. He let her nibble on him for a little bit, and then pulled back. “Promise me,” he demanded. “Promise me that you’ll be open to it, to someone loving you, okay? Can you do that?”

She blinked, and her face shaded, a little bit; a secret, held back. “I don’t know,” she said. She pulled her arms back from where they were wrapped around him, smoothing one down his side, the other down his chest, a firm press that sent tiny little wiggles all along his nerves. She bit her lip, watching him, and her eyelids drooped. “I don’t know if I can,” she repeated. Her voice was honest, but opaque. “I love—I love you an awful lot, Bucky.” And that was just honest.

“I love you, too,” he said. His voice came out lower and huskier than he’d meant it to. “I just—please be happy. As much as you can. God, I hate—I fucking hate you being in this war, Gwen, but you know I’ve always supported you—”

— because I want you to be happy, he meant to finish, but she interrupted him.

“Nobody calls me that any more,” she said, and he blinked at the sudden change of topic, and at the sudden change of tone: her voice was passionate, expressing a frustration that must have been eating at her for a while.

“Uh. They don’t?”

“They don’t. Everybody calls me Sarah, now.”

Bucky blinked. “But that’s your...” He found his voice trailing off, and realized that he could not in all honesty finish the sentence, especially in the face of her wide-eyed and indignant expression. “...Okay, no, no it’s not,” he admitted. “Your name is Gwen, they should call you Gwen, so what the hell?” He shifted absently, pressing more firmly against her, leaning into the hands still rubbing down his side and chest. “Why don’t you just ask them to call you Gwen?”

“Military,” she said gloomily. “I asked the first day. I’m not making the same mistake again.”

He imagined his own DI’s hearing a request like that, and winced. “Point,” he conceded. She rubbed a little harder at the sensitive spot beside his ribs in appreciation. “But Gwen... this goes back to the same damned thing, doesn’t it?”

“Make some friends who know your damned name,” he begged her. “Please. For me?”

She ducked her head, but he could see her smiling, and knew she was taking her turn to concede. “Alright,” she said. “Fine. But you’re my first friend on that list.”

“Fine,” he said immediately. “First friend; sounds kinda like First Lady. Good.” He scrubbed his hand across her shoulders, scratching absentely at the tense muscles there, and she rolled her head
on her neck, pressing into his hand.

“Mmmm,” she said. “You know what being my friend gets you?” Her eyes opened just a slit, and a lazy curl grew at the corners of her mouth.

“What’s that?” he asked, moving his hand around to scratch the other side.

“Mmmm...” she looked, if anything, even more smug. “Tickles.”

Tickles?

“Shit!” he hissed, pressing away from her hands as they dug into his sensitive spots. “No! *Fuck! GWEN!!!*

She giggled madly, moving closer even as he tried to shove her away, and then it was *on*, a wrestling match like none other they had ever had before, either in scale or in difficulty.

Mostly because for *none of their other matches* had she had *thirty pounds and two inches* on him!

*Fuck!*

He cussed and squirmed, but she had him securely pinned in under a minute, and took merciless penance from his poor ribs before wrestling one of his legs up and going at the back of his knee, instead.

Which was when it started.

She was strong, so tall and all muscle, but she was also still his Gwen, and the confusion alone would have been enough to send him loopy. But she was also pinning him down and hauling him around, and the joyful glint in her eye was something else, and he—

“Gwen.”

He shifted his hips, just a little, just enough for her to understand what was happening. The look on her face was awful, but also happy, a sort of Gift of the Magi happiness; it was sick-faced, but also real, and also deep.

“Really?!” She bit her lip, excited and scared all at once. And then—she was only wearing a *chemise*, he could actually *see* her shoulder muscles tense as she said it—she added, “Is it... Is it because I’m... bigger... now?”

He bit his own lip, echoing her expression, but he had *no fucking clue* what the honest answer would be. “Maybe? Who the fuck knows, and I don’t—fuck, Gwen, we could analyse it, or we could use it—”

That was all he got out before she leaned forward and pinned him again.

Okay, then.

Apparently she agreed.

He’d gone through all kinds of things in that POW factory, and no one had ever said for sure what exactly they had been doing to him, but he had known they’d been trying to change him. Somehow. And then Gwen had broken in, and been *so different*, and suddenly he’d had a clearer idea of what kind of change Zola had been looking for. But he hadn’t known for sure whether it had worked or not, and then they had been stumbling towards freedom, and all that had mattered
was getting back to camp, getting the dead buried and the wounded the care they needed, and, most importantly, having Gwen’s back no matter what.

In all of that, he had lost track of the fact that he was supposed to be walking wounded.

Supposed to be.

Because he wasn’t, not at all. Not a single mark on him, in fact, including the ones he should have had from the battle before he was captured. Which meant that whatever they’d been trying to do to him, it had, at least a little bit, worked.

And, Christ, that was terrifying, wasn’t it?

But the one good thing about it was, in all the worry over that, he had forgotten about what he had gone through in the factory. Had forgotten that they had tied him down, had forgotten that they had hurt him. Had forgotten that he had gone forty-nine hours and thirty-three minutes with sleep, and that somewhere in the middle of that they had started injecting him with things. Had forgotten the big mack with the scalpel who was in no way a doctor, the one who had leaned over him on the last day and just started randomly slicing. Had forgotten the beatings and the starvation and the—

Yeah. All that. It had all been just way less important than supporting Gwen.

And, fuck, maybe he wasn’t supposed to push all that shit down—maybe it was the kind of thing that Freud guy woulda had a field day with—but in the meantime, it was working for him, it was serving his purposes, and fuck if he wasn’t gonna keep it going.

So when Gwen pinned his hands, he didn’t think about being back on that damned table; he just remembered he liked it when guys pinned his hands and rode him, and that’s what he suggested she should do.

“What,” she asked, eyes wide, glancing down at his lap before looking up at his face, “Just... climb on?”

“Yeah,” he said, “Come on, do it, quick. Use me how—however you want, come on.”

She bit her lip and leaned further over, pushing his wrists deep into the pillow beside his head. He flexed a little, keeping them there, and she leaned back so that she brushed against him, even as he was pinned. “Stay there,” she ordered, and he gave a full-body shudder, but obeyed.

She slipped off the bed, rummaging around in the coat she had abandoned over the chair. “Come on, come on,” she muttered, then bit back a cry of triumph and straightened, a tin held in her hand. She made her way back over to him, then opened it up, and Bucky was astonished—but at the same time, not really astonished—to see her hands were trembling. “What is it?” he asked.

“Skin,” she said. “We can’t risk...”

“Right,” he said, but his mind was whirling. He had never used one of those before; would it hurt? Would it be alright? Fuck, what if he couldn’t do it with one, after all?

She caught his expression, or something, because she sat down on the edge of the bed beside him and touched him with gentle hands. “It’s alright,” she said. “If you don’t want one... I mean, we don’t have to. Do this, I mean; we don’t have to do this.”

He picked his head up—he’d been pressing it back into the pillow—and checked her face. She smiled faintly. “I’ve been getting by without it for six years,” she pointed out. “I’m not going to
start exploding with need now.”

He flushed.

“But,” she continued, running one long-fingered hand up his thigh and making him yelp, “As you were the one to point out... We’ve got an opportunity here.”

“Anything,” he said. God, he loved her, he would do—“Anything.”

She met his eyes again, her gaze heavy with significance. “Anything is a big word,” she observed. “You sure you’re game?”

No, he fucking wasn’t, there were a lot of things he couldn’t do, and Gwen seemed to find most of them. “Yes,” he said anyway, and she smiled.

“Oh,” she said. “Okay.” She reached out and gripped him; he hissed, thrusting involuntarily when she touched him.

“Gwennie.”

“Bad?” she asked, worried.

“God, no.”

He closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation, but then opened them again. It felt kind of rude to her to have his eyes closed while she was doing something like that. She caught him watching, and blushed. “Do you mind if I...?” She gestured with her free hand towards where she had him, but he wasn’t exactly sure what that meant.

“If you...?”

“Um. Explore?”

His heart thumped urgently, either from arousal at the idea or shock at the idea of it being Gwennie. Christ, they’d been married for five years, you would think he’d be over this by now! “Go for it,” he said, his mouth dry.

She did.

Her hand curled gently around him, twisting softly, just enough to pull at the foreskin. She tugged, just as gentle, and the foreskin rucked down, revealing him standing—well, slanting—most of the way proud, darker-hued than the rest of him. His skin was glistening in the shady lamplight, and she laughed delightedly. “Oh my god,” she said. “Can I...?”

He still didn’t know what that meant. “Yes,” he said anyway. Fuck it, if it was something bad, he’d just—

She licked him.

“Christ!”

She pulled back half an inch at his outburst, hesitating, but when he didn’t say anything else or shove her off, she went back to it, pressing kisses—some dry, some open-mouthed—along the shaft, the base, and even, ticklishly, the balls, until he was shifting restlessly beneath her. It was good, but so weird, and he couldn’t—he couldn’t quite manage to—
“Jesus, Gwennie!” he cried, and she pulled back, eyes wide and thoughtful.

She had bit him, hard, at the top of the hip.

“Jesus, what do you—fuck, do it again!”

“Wait, really? Um.” She leaned back in, suddenly tentative, and nipped; he whined and twisted under her, so that her mouth was above the soft skin of his belly, instead. She took it as a hint, setting into him with everything from kisses to full-on chomps, leaving mark after mark on the skin of his stomach, his sides, his hips, then up to his chest, and again, and again, and again, lingering gently on his nipples because they were very sensitive, and she figured out way too quickly that if she blew on them after she’d bitten them, he’d beg. But since his “Please, stop”s had been interspersed just as much with “Please, more”s, she just kept going and going, until he was jackknifing up, too stimulated, too overwhelmed, to take it any more.

She caught him as soon as he was upright, folding him into her arms. “Shh, shh, it’s okay,” she said. “You’re okay, I’ve got you,” and that should have been embarrassing, but it wasn’t; he was just glad to know he was safe...

She pulled the rubber from its tin, then, frowning in concentration at it. “Is it okay if I...?” she asked, and this time the meaning was unmistakable.

He was, he discovered, completely erect. And throbbing, actually.

“Yeah,” he said, barely breathing, stunned by what he was seeing. “Yeah, go ahead.” Holy shit. Holy shit, Christ almighty, he hadn’t even known he’d be able to...!

The rubber was tight, when she put it on him, but cold, and he closed his eyes trying to cope with the two contrary sensations coming at the same time. She squeezed him through it, and he shuddered, looking into her eyes like they were some kind of a hand-hold in this mess. “Do you want me to...?”

“Yes,” she breathed, eyes dark. But then she shook herself, seeming to snap out of a trance, and changed her mind. “No, wait—Like you were?” She guided him into place with hands on his shoulders.

His heart pounded in his chest, and he felt cold, all of a sudden, but he lay back pliantly.

She straddled him, not quite in a position to ride—too high, her knees were on either side of his stomach, not his hips, and she was leaning forward, pressing her chest against his. She picked up his hand and put it on her hip, then the other one and brought it to her breast. “Here,” she said, eyes semi-shutting. “Just... touch me, will you?”

She didn’t ask for much, after all. “Sure,” he said.

Breasts were strange; nice, but bizarre, heavy in his hand although she still wasn’t huge, or anything. They were soft, so soft to the touch, and he got a little lost in it for a minute, brushing them with the fronts and backs of his fingers, watching the way Gwen shivered under the caress. He rubbed a thumb over her nipple the same way he himself was used to, and the shiver became a shudder, complete with throaty cry.

He wasn’t even aware of doing it, but he smiled.

She looked up, and saw it, and her eyes changed, turning greedy and dark. She surged upwards—not far to go anymore, Jesus she was big—and she pressed kiss after kiss after kiss to his mouth, each one demanding something from him before tearing away. She pulled back and then came back in, lower this time, along his neck, and she bit hard, digging in with her teeth as well as—he
could just barely feel them—with the tips of her fingers, hot, hard points of aching stability against his upper arms.

“Fuck,” he gasped. “Gwen.”

“Bucky.” She kissed him again, then pushed back from him so that he sank into the pillow and mattress. She leaned backwards, rising up over him while reaching behind herself, and his breath caught in his throat.

This was real; they were really doing this.

Then she sank down against him, and for one moment, he couldn’t think at all. “Gwen. Ah, Christ Jesus. Gwennie!”

She scratched at his chest, her short, blunt nails leaving broad white tracks against his skin. She gasped above him, getting used to the feel—small spots of wetness gathered at the corners of her eyes—

And then she was moving, the strong muscles of her legs tensing so that she rose above him. She didn’t go far, maybe two inches, but Bucky’s eyes still rolled back in his head. “Christ, Gwennie, it feels like you’re pulling all the way off of me!”

“Yeah,” she agreed breathlessly, but she also eased backwards, letting herself take him in again. She dug her nails in again—they both whined—and rose up again, then down, gasping on the downstroke so that he knew he had hit something right within her. Or rather, she had hit something right within herself; he was pretty much just the tool she was using, in this position.

She shook her braid back over her shoulder, and then did it again, and now she had a rhythm going, a steady bounce, and her breasts were bouncing with her, up and down, so he put his hands on them, each nipple covered by one of his thumbs. She moaned, and her head fell back, and God damn it, there she was, being some kind of beautiful all over again.

She had tears at the corner of her eyes, and, blinking, Bucky realized that he did, too.

They both lost track of time there, for a while. Gwen rode him, and God but she was luminous, boneless with pleasure except for her working thighs and her grasping hands. Her pace never changed, never slowed, but it didn’t accelerate, either, just stayed the same, up and down and up and down and—

Bucky drifted, lost in a world where he could put that look on her face, happy to the point of contentment.

Which was why, he would later reflect bitterly, it had been doomed not to last.

He almost didn’t even notice the change, at first. He was so busy floating away on a cloud of look at her, look at the look on her face! that he wasn’t even aware of what his own body was doing. By the time he did notice, it was too late: he was already wilting, softening under the press and release of her body until she couldn’t get him in her anymore.

He saw the moment she realized it, that something was wrong. Then he closed his eyes tightly and turned his head into the pillow, unwilling to watch her face as she put the pieces together.

He wasn’t sure what he expected—a slap, probably, at the very least—but what he got was something else. After a minute spent listening to both of their lungs rasping into the hotel room, he felt her hand gently—so gently—touch his hair.
“Bucky?”

He felt his mouth twitch, the self-revulsion crawling over his skin. Jesus fucking Christ, the one thing she wanted him to do for her—the one thing any man would be fucking thrilled to do for her—and he couldn’t fucking do it. What kind of a damned selfish bastard was he, anyway?! “Jesus Christ,” he swore, not opening his eyes.

“Bucky.” She brushed his hair away from his forehead—he was sweating a lot in the clammy hotel room, and strands of it were sticking to his face—and ran her fingers through his hair.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He clenched his eyes tighter and swallowed, swallowed.

“I’ve asked you to stop saying that,” she pointed out with a tight sort of lightness that he didn’t buy for a minute. “Don’t be sorry. It is what it is.”

“Ha.”

Her fingers in his hair twitched like she had flinched, but she didn’t draw back completely, didn’t even move off of him. He swallowed one more time, then rolled his head back to center, opening his eyes to look at her even though he knew she would see the self-hatred in them as soon as he did it. His entire body felt bleak.

“You ever think about marrying a real man?” he asked.

She froze, her jaw dropping slightly, then pulled her hand back to prop angrily on her hip. “I did think about it, actually,” she said, face tightening bullishly—stubbornly. Oh, god, he’d woken the Gwenbeast. “When I was nineteen. And then I did it. Are you going to work with me on this, or not?”

Now his jaw dropped. “What?”

“With this.” She waved her hand at the place where she rested on him. “You remember—”

He could see the exact moment that she fell short of saying it, but it didn’t matter because by that point he knew what she meant and he was there to catch her. “Yeah,” he said, half-sitting up and blinking probably more than he really needed to. “Yeah, sure, okay; yeah, I’d love to. C’mere.”

She flushed pink and leaned forward, bracing on her forearms before rolling off of him. And, Christ, he could watch her back muscles work forever when she did that; he had the fleeting thought that maybe that was what they’d been doing wrong, except that, no, he knew what was wrong, and it was that he’d had too much time to think about her being a girl, God damn it.

They shifted around in the bed like a couple of landed fish or dizzy piglets or something, ending up her lying on her side with her head towards his stomach, and him lying on his side with his mouth towards her.

“Come on,” she said, raising her leg up, and okay, a night like tonight, she probably had earned the right to that impatience; he put his head down and his arm into it, and set to work.

“Hold my hair?” he asked, hesitantly, and luckily, she didn’t even pause; just wound her fingers through his hair and tugged his head up, her free hand coming behind his neck to support him. It was all nibbling and sucking, licking and nuzzling and using his hands, trying to make her feel as good as some other men had made him feel in the past, trying to make her feel loved and supported, like she could ask anything from him and he would give it to her. And it was nice; he had a task in front of him, now, something he could do well or not, and he was able to turn off all
the other pieces of his mind and just focus on doing this one thing well.

She popped one off quicker than anything, just a minute or at most two and then she was making little yips and rocking against his face. Practically pulling his hair out by the roots, but he’d never minded that. He pulled back an inch and asked, “D’y’wanna go again?” and he was guessing by the enthusiasm with which she pushed him back down that the answer was yes.

Number two was a different matter, a long slow build that seemed to take forever. It was some delicious kind of penance to be there with her thighs blocking the light and her moans blocking any sound and the smell of her blocking out anything else. She had cleaned up well before coming to find him that day, but that had been a couple hours ago, now, and the scent was all around him like some kind of musky perfume. It smells good, he thought, and then immediately wondered about that thought, but before he could get caught up in it she was urging him to move faster and he let it go.

It was strange, but good, sinking beneath those waves. He remembered the drifting feeling he had experienced the night before deployment, and tried for it again. He could sense it, right there, right there, but he didn’t quite manage to reach it before she was crying out and he, instinctively, pulled back against the hand she had bracing his head.

His felt the beginning twinges of an ache in his jaw by the time she came off again. He thought as he pulled back that it must actually have been as long as it seemed, because he’d definitely given her more than two of those before he deployed, and his jaw had ached in a more normal way, back then. But her legs were tightening around his head, and her cries were getting loud, and there was liquid all over his face, so all things considered, he really wasn’t stopping to think about it just then.

When it was done, he squirmed around in bed—completely flaccid again, by then—so that they were face to face once more. “Alright?” he asked, stroking her face.

Gwen opened her eyes. She had obviously been crying, but she smiled.

“I’m good,” she said. “I’m wonderful, actually.” She caught the hand at her cheek, folding her fingers with his and pressing both of their hands together between her breasts. “I’ll be fine,” she promised.

“You sure?” He leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

“Yeah...” She pulled them closer together, resting her head against his chest. She had to drop her head and hunch over significantly to do it, he noted with amusement, and it seemed a shame to waste all that effort, so he wrapped his arms around her.

They drifted for a while, after that, him holding her pressed against him, her stroking his chest and down his arms, possessive and thoughtful and more than a little tuckered out.

After a while, he shifted, cracking an eye and studying the way she was pressing her hands over his body, the way she ran them over his nightshirt-covered chest and down his long legs, the possessive claim of the motion and the satisfied curve of her smile.

“Like what you see?” he asked softly, and when she looked up, her eyes were hazy and pleased.

“Love what I see,” she promised him. “It’s mine, isn’t it?”

He laughed out loud. “Sure,” he said, only mildly sarcastic. “Property of S. Barnes, and also the American Army.”
Her smile took on a rueful edge. “As good as any of us is going to get, these days,” she agreed, and then flopped down beside him on the bed.

On the right side, he noticed; her side. They had sides of the bed once again, and that, more than anything, made him wonder for the first time whether he might actually make it through the war.

Gwen couldn’t be here, but she was; she couldn’t be strong, and tall, and able to carry him one-handed, but she was. She couldn’t have rescued him from the darkest place on earth, but she had. She couldn’t love him when he was worthless, but she did. And no one could survive the decimation, the massacre, which was the modern form of war, but... maybe they would.

Maybe.

There was a hell of a long road between here and there, but he began to think, just one daring, hopeful thought and then it was gone... maybe they would meet on the other side.

Someday.

As it turned out, Gwen didn’t have to worry about getting herself out of espionage, because the men she had rescued did it all for her. Early the next morning, she was called in to Command, escorted into a room full of moustachioed colonels—and higher—all of whom were shouting.

“—supposedly covert agent—”

“Over two hundred men—!”

“Nevertheless—”

“— giant goddamn clusterfuck—”

“—exponential spread—”

“—beat the Nazi’s at the their own game—”

As the din continued, she was able to put it together: essentially, the men she had rescued had talked. Well, that was understandable; if Gwen though she were going to die, and then hadn’t, she would talk about how relieved she was to be rescued. Right? Wouldn’t anyone?

But what the men had actually opened their mouths about wasn’t their own feelings about safety, but rather about the “Avenging Angel” who had come for them.

Yes, they were using that exact phrase.

Yes, it was horrifyingly embarrassing.

“Sirs,” she said, drawing herself up as tall as possible and not feeling the benefit of her inches in the slightest, “I did not authorize anyone to release my identity! I don’t know why they—?”

“Lass,” said a middle-aged general who was definitely not Scottish to be allowed to call her that, “we know you didn’t. But the fact remains, the word is out, be it authorized or un-.”

Gwen bit her lip.

“So all we can do now,” Phillips said, his eyes sharp on her, “is use it.”
Which... didn’t make sense. “What? Sir.”

Someone snickered.

“Congratulations,” Phillips told her. “You’re now a celebrity.” He sucked on his cigar. Marty Richardson had been right, way back at the beginning of this; those were foul.

Then Colonel Phillips led her away from the generals (and assorted other officers; she thought one of them might have been a Commodore, which wasn’t even an army rank) and down the hall to his office, which was small and cramped but did have enough chairs for her to sit, if invited. He did not invite her, and she figured that—as much as he was obviously enjoying some schadenfreude from watching her squirm—she was still in his bad graces after defying orders. Not too much in his bad graces, though, because if he were really hot under the collar, he could have had her courtmartialed in about thirty seconds, and he hadn’t. So clearly some part of him was alright with the way things had worked out...

The way he laid it out for her was this: she was, as he had said earlier, a celebrity. She was no longer under Peggy Carter’s command; instead, she was commanded by him directly, although Peggy would continue as her point of contact.

She would get a call sign—“The men seem to have settled on ‘Avenging Angel,’ so I hope you like it, because that’s what it’s going to be.”—and she would get the A team.

“I might have some ideas about that,” she said, more confidently than she felt.

Phillips blew cigar smoke at her, the frown-lines on his forehead deepening. “How many of the regs do these ideas of yours break, exactly?”

“Oh... pretty much all of them,” she admitted, starting to smile.

Phillips started looking for his aspirin. She got a couple points back when she found it on the desk and passed it over for him.

The worst part of the new situation was the spotlight.

No, more specifically: the worst part of the spotlight was the comic books.

Good Lord, they were awful! They turned her into a real-life Wonder Woman, and they showed her getting tied up just about as much.

In real life, her uniform was non-standard for a service member, but in the interests of functionality: she had trousers under her skirt, and the skirt itself was cut full, so that she could tie it up around her hips in a hurry, and full-length, to hide the trousers. Her jacket—a blend of blue and deep red, just close enough to the colors of the flag and patterned in stripes and a star so that no one could claim she was a spy—was a high-grade material, similar to leather but tougher, and while it wouldn’t stop bullets, Howard thought it might slow them down enough to be useful. Her shoes were boots, her hair was usually in one braid or two, and she never, ever bothered with makeup in the field.

The comics put a secretary in a flag-colored suit and gave her Gwen’s face. Gwen hated it.

They were really badly drawn, too.

Not that she would say that.
There were other forms of publicity, too, of course: newspaper interviews, film reels from the front... Radio interviews were particularly popular, because they didn’t take any extra effort, just put her on a radio and go. There was also—she pretended not to be aware—a swiftly-growing black market in pictures of her in incomplete uniform. Not *undressed*, although she was sure those would have been popular; no, the object seemed to be to get just enough deshabille in the photo to suggest that at some point she *would become* undressed. Jacket off, skirt pulled back, and hair just slightly falling down seemed to be the favorite; she’d seen at least fourteen of those unobtrusively compared to her. Some genius even came up with a line of “Avenging Angel” trading cards, like some bizarre cross between a baseball card and a pin-up calendar.

She wanted to be mad about it, but honestly the whole idea made her flush and stammer so badly that she couldn’t really get up a good head of steam on the issue. Added to that, Howard had suggested that the photos might help the men let out some stress. So instead, she just pretended they didn’t exist, and laughed awkwardly to herself whenever she slipped up and remembered.

Still, all things considered—yes, even the pinups—when she thought of her new situation, she couldn’t complain; she was the one who had broken essentially *all* of the regs, it was only fair that she bear the brunt of the consequences.

Chapter End Notes

Violence etc: If you’ve seen CA:TFA, you know how Azzano goes; for those who haven’t, it’s a lot of punchy-shooty-things-go-boom. However, there is a scene (in the movie) in which Bucky Barnes is found strapped to a lab table, and it is made clear that he has been tortured. That scene is replicated in the fic, and then later in this chapter the torture is referenced specifically. Additional mention of amputations, which obviously is also canon-typical.

Burns: Character with severe burns. Mention made of the smell.

Religion: Funeral service, with prayers in both English and Latin. I specifically attempted to replicate a faith experience that I have personally had; however, if you prefer to interpret the scene as having non-spiritual explanations, then (as is *also* the case with my personal experience) that is perfectly possible.

Sexual situations some may find disturbing: Gwen and Bucky are reunited, and Gwen takes him to a hotel room where, after quite a bit of negotiation both verbal and physical, they attempt to have sex. The attempt fails, at which point Bucky experiences a lot of self-hate based on his orientation, and the ways it constrains his relationship with Gwen. After further discussion, Bucky proceeds to perform oral sex on her, followed by cuddling. THIS IS A HARD SCENE. It is, in my personal opinion, one of the three hardest scenes in the fic, and one of the reasons I wrote this fic in the first place-- many of the elements here are lifted directly from my own failed marriage. USE CAUTION.

Dom/sub undertones: Bucky’s subby-ness plays a role in his ability to respond sexually to Gwen. It is referred to in-text, but at no point is it addressed by name.
They found Howard Stark in his workshop, consulting with half a dozen other people while still banging away on a shield. At her entrance, though, he smiled, dropping everything and stepping away from the group, taking her arm and escorting her through the lab. “I’m glad it went well,” he said. “We were worried.”

“Sorry,” she apologized reflexively. “My radio—”

“I heard.” He smiled into her eyes, moustache twitching. “I suppose some things can’t be helped,” he offered.

“Still.” She smiled back at him, hunching her shoulders up in a shrug. “I’m sorry to have worried you.”

The room was quiet, except for the murmuring voices of Stark’s minions, and no one was looking at them, and suddenly Bucky could barely hear over the sound of his pulse pounding in his ears because Stark was looking at Gwen smolderingly, and Gwen wasn’t looking away.

And then she had, cutting her eyes away and clearing her throat. “Peggy—!”

Bucky winced, poking at a gun in several pieces on a workbench. Gwen’s voice had come out very shrill.

She coughed, and started again. “Peggy sent me down for a replacement radio...?”

“Well,” Stark said, puffing his chest and looking pleased, “I will feel more secure about your safety if you’re outfitted with my equipment. Come on over here...” He moved around the bench and started fiddling with different pieces of gear, and she followed, trailing after him like a child after its mother’s apron strings.

Bucky watched them, the whole time they were putting together her replacement gear. He watched as Stark pressed a new radio into her hands, and then fished out a new shield—this one, thankfully, not painted with gold leaf—and presented it to her like it was the championship cup of the Kentucky Derby. Her face lit up when she saw the round, gunmetal-colored shield, and Bucky’s heart squeezed in his chest.

This was what he’d said they would do, wasn’t it? This thing where she could find someone to love her? He’d practically twisted her arm to get her to agree, but oh, it squeezed his heart to see her actually do it.

Or... maybe she wasn’t actually doing it...
He tipped his head to the side, watching them with his brows drawn together. She took the shield and the radio from Stark with a smile, but her shoulders were hunching around her ears and she turned immediately towards the stairs, tilting her head to invite Bucky to follow her. And they were just reaching the bottom of the steps when a lady agent with some frankly dangerous curves appeared on the stairs, and Gwen’s face lit up just as much, and in the same way, as it had when she first saw Stark.

Bucky nodded to himself, then followed the agents out into the main camp, drifting along after them and keeping his eyes and ears open. The situation, apparently, was complicated.

There was this to say about Gwen: when she decided to do a thing, she did it.

Having been promoted into the spotlight—metaphorically and, given that the powers that be had decided to send a fucking film crew with them, literally—she was now embracing it, and the team she had put together were making one hell of a name for themselves. The Howling Commandos, folks called them, and it sounded very exciting until you realized that they were howling mostly because someone had let Dum Dum cook dinner again.

In spite of the little quirks like that, though, the men really were good. Bucky remembered Dum
Dum from his unit—hence Bucky having the privilege of calling him Dum Dum, which none of the other guys were permitted to do on pain of never again getting their hands on the seemingly endless supplies of tobacco Dugan had somehow secured—and the rest of the men, he knew from the factory.

Gwen brought in a couple more folks, too: a gal she called “Other Sarah,” who remained “Other Sarah” despite the fact that the Howlies, overhearing Bucky, called Gwen “Gwen” after the first week; and a lad named Jimmy, who was probably all of thirteen but was cannier than most thirty year olds and exceptionally good at looking helpless and innocent. Gwen had apparently met Jimmy in London—when he tried to scam her for coin—and instantly decided that he was going to be on her team, much to the dismay, chagrin, and fury of her command chain. Bucky could have told them not to bother getting upset; he’d seen Gwen before when she got that look on her face, and he was completely unsurprised when Command folded like a paper umbrella in a storm and cleared Jimmy for missions in less than two weeks. And Jimmy spent those two weeks getting three squares a day courtesy of the Army, too, so privately Bucky thought Gwen was kind of winning either way.

Gwen brought Stark in on their missions, too, far more often than Bucky thought Command would have liked. It was half her doing, and half Stark’s; the man was like a tornado when he had something he wanted, a force no one could stop or even slow down—and, honestly, Gwen wasn’t much better. Stark was fascinated by the Hydra tech they had brought back from the factory at Azzano, and Gwen liked having him around.

For a bunch of reasons, Bucky thought sourly, then immediately chided himself for being sour.

It was just that he couldn’t really bring himself to like Stark. Maybe—if Stark hadn’t been a jackass—he would have been okay with the way the man panted after Gwen. Maybe, if Stark weren’t so obviously bad news...

...but that wasn’t fair. He wasn’t obviously bad news, not if you were one of the people he was paying attention to. He wasn’t obviously anything; he was subtle.

Bucky knew already that Stark didn’t know he and Gwen were married; no one did, and they were keeping it that way. They didn’t even share a tent in the field, because that was always Gwen and Other Sarah, together for propriety.

(Bucky wound up in with Jim Morita, who had seemed really solid and no-nonsense and continued to be completely indifferent to ninety percent of their antics. Sometimes, Bucky would catch him watching the team, and he would just know that Jim had a whole passel of younger siblings. At least four; probably six.)

But there was another reason that Bucky knew that Stark didn’t know about their marriage: if he had, Stark would have noticed Bucky. If he had, even for a moment, suspected, he would have introduced himself to Bucky at the first opportunity. He would have made sure that Gwen saw how generous he was, how gracious. He would have been faultlessly polite, and warm-seeming to boot.

As it was, he completely ignored Bucky, and Bucky couldn’t help but see right through the act.

The map that Gwen had spotted in the factory—and when had she had time?!—proved to be essential. Not only were the Hydra factories clearly marked, but the placement of them, when filtered through the rest of the intelligence that the S.S.R. had access to, turned out to be suggestive.
“It’s a chain,” Carter had said lightly one night, when they were all smoking on a balcony during the blackout because she and Gwen were both reckless, and Bucky wasn’t going to let them do it alone. “If the factory is in Italy and not in Poland, then what does that mean about Poland? If the factory is in Poland but not France, what then? But if we know that the factory is in Poland, and what the Polish Resistance have been doing, then we can interpret that the Hydra forces are over-committed in that direction, and when we make our move in France, we can be ready.”

And Gwen—or Sarah, as all these numbnuts insisted on calling her; the ones that weren’t calling her the Avenging Angel, anyway—was proving superbly equal to the challenge. One by one, she—and the Howlies—wiped out factory, base, resupply, outpost, factory again, depot... One by one, they were closing in on the central facility; the same central facility that none of their intel, no matter how good, had been able to locate.

The facility they were going to have to capture a high-ranking Hydra official to locate.

Carter suggested Zola; Gwen, bless her heart, wanted to go straight for Shmidt.

“You don’t have a bit of moderation,” Bucky told her tiredly.

She tipped her chair back, balancing it expertly on one leg by shifting her body weight. “I’m a super-enhanced spy leading a team of ex-POW’s on a hunt through Nazi-occupied Europe, searching for a group of mad scientists led by a man with no face who was last seen trying to convince me to shack up with him.” She shot him a sardonic look. “I’m not really seeing why I should be moderate.”

He had to admit: she had a point.

Bucky knew the mission was going to go sideways almost before they had set out from their camp—in this case, less of a “Camp” and more of a “bombed-out hotel whose bottom floor they had completely co-opted.” There had been chandeliers, a surprisingly-intact bar, a kitchen, plenty of linens and working water in the bathroom... and that had been the last piece of good luck any of them was going to see for a while.

They almost got caught by patrols while getting to the outskirts of the cities.

The cars they stole both broke down, one in a way which was fixable, the other in a way which was spectacularly not. Gwen had to go back to town and steal another car, which Gwen—not having done it alone before, but rather always in Jones or Derniers’ company—did not know how to do. Which meant that somebody had to teach her, and then she had to run back to town (ten miles) and steal a third car, correctly, before driving it back to meet them.

They were almost two hours behind, and they hadn’t even gotten close to the second-to-last factory.

And that was when the fuckin’ Hydra patrol found them.

If it had been anybody but the Avenging Angel, they all would have been corpses. Or at least, they would’ve been that weird, non-existent thing that happened, where people shot with Hydra guns just disappeared.

They would have been dead, was the point.

With Gwen in the lead, though, they took out the whole patrol.
There were about twenty of them, all in the ugly dark-green-and-goggles uniform of Hydra, which made it real easy to tell they were bad news. If they had managed to sneak up on the Commandos, the team would have been decimated; as it was, first Bucky and then Gwen had thrown their heads up at the last minute, hearing the way the birds had gone silent but the twigs were still cracking around them.

Gwen’s eyes widened, and she started issuing orders, thankfully things they already had prearranged signals for: grenade—there; move—here; everybody duck!

Then she threw the shield.

The thing was, the shield itself was impressive. It tended to fly and move in ways shouldn’t, ways that didn’t obey the laws of physics, and it seemed to only go faster the more things it hit. So exactly none of them were surprised that she managed to take out the first three guys with it. They weren’t expecting her to time it quite like she did, though: just as it reached the rear of the Hydra squad, the grenade went off, and the boost of force from the explosion sent it ricocheting through again.

Suddenly, they weren’t facing twenty men armed and ready with those evil blue weapons; they were facing thirteen men, discombobulated and unprepared. After that, the fight was brief, brutal, and bloody, ending with Gwen hitting a Hydra soldier with another Hydra soldier, her shoulders heaving and her lip lifted in a snarl as she worked out her frustrations in the most violent way humanly possible.

“Holy Hell,” breathed Falsworth, and they all took a moment to appreciate it.

“Lads,” said Dum Dum meditatively, “There are times when I think we do not properly appreciate our fortune in this war.”

Dernier swore in French.

“I’ll say,” agreed Other Sarah before spitting in her hand and rubbing at a slow-oozing cut on her arm.

They pressed on towards the Factory.

_________________________________________

Howard Stark was talking a mile a minute, and Bucky kind of wanted to punch him in the kisser. He had his hand on Gwen’s back, for one thing, which, no matter what else it was, it didn’t look professional for the troops. Gwen had noticed, too: she kept glancing down at it, like it was alarming her but she didn’t quite want to be rude enough to throw it off, and her shoulders were doing these little twitches before she’d go still again. He was steering her through the shell of the factory, showing her all the little blue disasters they had discovered, and her steps were dragging like she didn’t want to go.

And, well, hell; Bucky had helped her get out of enough parties she didn’t enjoy, over the years; what was one more?

So he slipped down from his perch—on top of a barrel of who-knows-what, but they apparently had five hundred gallons of whatever it was—and approached from behind so that Stark wouldn’t know he was lying, then came up behind them just in time to hear Stark say, “And I do think, Sarah, that—”

Something sullen and righteous lit in his stomach, and he didn’t take the time to find out what Stark thought before he said, “Hey, Angel; I really think you need to see this thing.”
No way in hell was he giving Stark the name *Gwen* if Stark didn’t already have it.

“I’m sure whatever it is can wait,” Stark dismissed him. “Now, look over here, for one, Sarah—”

But then he stopped talking, because Gwen was frowning at him.

“Sarah?”

“We’re still in an enemy stronghold,” Gwen said, sounding less like she cared about the danger and more like she was getting pissed off. “I think I’d better go see what Bucky wants.”

And say this for Stark: he looked taken aback, but he accepted it with perfect grace, saying “of course!” and “you’re right” and generally looking like he respected what Gwen thought.

Which he didn’t, Bucky was sure of it. But, hell, it wasn’t his call, was it?

As it happened, there was something Bucky thought Gwen should see—the range and conspicuous absences of vehicles in the courtyard was highly suggestive—and it made a good excuse to get her out of there.

“They’ve got too many jeeps and transports,” he said, pointing to the lot, “and not nearly enough tanks and cargo haulers. They managed to get something away from here, right? Can we follow the tracks at all, at least get an idea?”

“Not likely; our people will have covered them up.” Gwen leaned her hip against the low wall of the observation tower and turned her attention to him. “Is there a reason you couldn’t just tell me this?”

Bucky stiffened. “Thought you might want to get away.” He flicked his eyes sideways at her. “Kind of looked like you wanted to get away... Sarah.”

Gwen flinched. It wasn’t much of a flinch, but he knew her. “Is that what the whole *calling me Angel* thing was about?” she demanded. “Because we both know that was *some* kind of nonsense.” Her eyes narrowed. “You don’t seem to like Howard much. Do you, Buck?”

Her tone was pointed with the beginnings of anger; she definitely had some kind of theory about why that was, and there was one obvious one which was guaranteed to piss her off.

Bucky scrubbed a hand over his face and eyes, looking out over the cracked pavement of the lot—damaged by the Hydra guns, mostly, although some of their own explosions had worked on it, too—and trying to think how to answer. The thing was, he was jealous—as petty and dog-in-the-manger-ish as that was—and he couldn’t pretend that wasn’t part of this. But the bigger part really was that he couldn’t stand Howard Stark, and to be honest he was a little confused that someone as smart as Gwen was hadn’t seen that by now.

Also, Gwen was still taller than he was, and every other fight they’d ever had, he’d towered over her; it was throwing him off his game.

Finally, he opened his mouth to answer. He paused for a second before taking the plunge, his mouth agape, taking in the sulfur-scented smoke breeze, and then jumped in and said it: “No, I *don’t* like him, much...”

Gwen’s lips pressed together, and her eyes lit with a holy fire.
“...but it ain’t what you’re thinking,” he continued, running over whatever she had been about to say. “I know how it looks, okay? It looks... It looks bad. I say, ‘oh yeah, find you a man who can,’ and then when you do I mysteriously don’t like him? It’s not rocket science, okay?”

“Hell, if it were, that would be more his bailiwick,” Gwen said nastily.

Bucky gritted his teeth and ignored it. “Look, I can’t think how to explain this in a way you’re gonna—no, wait. Yes, I can.” He turned his head back to her, his gaze flat and angry because he knew what she was thinking, goddamnit, and it wasn’t fair, and he didn’t deserve the kind of scorn she was giving him. “Here’s what you do: table this conversation. Go back in there, and let him put his hand on your ass in front of all the men—”

“It wasn’t on my—”

“—but when you do,” Bucky said, and he was getting loud, now, but they did this, they’d always fought like this, no holds barred because they weren’t the kind of people that pulled punches, not with each other, “When you do, you ask him. Ask him what my name is.”

She was sufficiently surprised that it derailed the head of steam she had been building. “...what?”

“You hang out with him all the time; I’m your husband, and your best friend. Plus I’m on your team. You’ve gotta have talked about me, so see if he knows my name.”

She stared, her mouth dropping slowly open. “See if he...”

Then she hesitated.

Bucky smirked.

“He...” She bit her lip. “Do you mean ask him if he can name my... best friend... or if he can name you when I point you out.”

“You tell me, Gwennie; seems to me, he should be able to do both.”

She hesitated again, and he pushed.

“Can he do either?” he asked quietly. “Does he know the name of anyone on your team?”

“He knows Falsworth,” she said immediately, but that wasn’t the right answer and they both knew it. She sagged, going into a squat and then sitting down, her back to the wall and her legs stretched out in front of her. Bucky dropped down beside her without being asked, pulling her head down into his chest. Her arms went around him, and he started gently scratching at her scalp.

“Hey,” he said, “it’s okay. He’s a charming sonovagun, okay? I get it.”

“He loves Peggy,” she said, her voice coming out muffled against his chest. “They’re like brother and sister, constantly squabbling but so clearly fond of each other. And Peggy’s a really good judge of character, Buck. I thought—I don’t understand...” She trailed off unhappily.

“Yeah, well...” Bucky thought about his own sister. “Look, I love Becca, right?”

Gwen snorted, nuzzling in closer and obviously recognizing where this was going.

“And I’d do anything for her. But Becca and me, we don’t get along so well.”

“Because Becca’s an idiot.”
Bucky laughed. “No, she’s just always nasty around you,” he corrected, patting Gwen’s head in amusement.

The last time they had all been together, it had been Easter of 1942, and Becca had barely said a word to Gwen all night. Instead, she had kept up a rollicking conversation about cosmetics, clothes, fashion, and dance with her mother and younger sister, deliberately excluding Gwen by keeping the topic on subjects where Gwen was ignorant, and ignoring Gwen on the few occasions she had been able to contribute.

Gwen, being Gwen, hadn’t tolerated this at all, and instead had joined Bucky’s conversation with his father about the war, both in the Pacific and in Europe. Beulah was a curious sort of girl, and soon jumped ship over to them, leaving Becca and Mama Barnes in the minority—a situation Becca had not tolerated at all, claiming a suspiciously-sudden sick-headache and retiring to her room. “Like the sore loser she is,” Gwen had scoffed later that night, and Bucky, safe in the privileged throne of male uninvolvement, had said nothing, although he had, privately, agreed.

“And anyway,” Bucky said, changing the subject now, “Stark isn’t actually a bad guy. He’s just... kind of self-interested. That’s okay; lots of people are.”

Gwen looked like she was going to protest.

“You are, sometimes,” Bucky added before she could say anything. “When you get into fights when getting along would just be easier for everyone, or when you insist on doing it your way even though everyone else would rather do it another. You’re not perfect; and neither am I, not by a long shot. So it’s okay if you still... You know, if you’ve picked your target and you’re still going after him.” Bucky raised his eyebrows and grimaced comically, and Gwen caught enough of the gesture to laugh. “And I mean... He’s rich, he’s smart, he’s good looking, and he wants to eat you like a Christmas pudding, so... it’s not like he’s a bad choice. And I know that, I do, I just...” His voice trailed away, because there was no way to tell her how the little voice in his head screamed when he saw her with Stark.

Not that one! it insisted. Anyone but him! No, not him, not that guy!

But that was just him being jealous, right? Surely?

Instead, he just looked down the walkway they were on, frowning. “Just... be careful, is all. I wanted to be sure you knew who he is and what you’re getting into, before you did it.” And then, realizing the possible implications of the permission he was giving her, he added hastily, “And use some sort of a condom, Christ.”

Gwen spluttered, laughing, and pulled back. “I’m not really... Bucky, come on. I wouldn’t really...” She trailed off, looking up at the edifice of the Hydra factory rising above them, lost in thought. Then she turned an incredulous look on him. “Could I?!”

“Christ Jesus.” Bucky let his head thunk back against the half-wall of the walk. “I’ve told you this, ain’t I? I told you I wanted you to be happy, I said that before we even started this—”

“Before you started this,” she muttered, and that was a low blow, that was, mentioning how she must’ve been in love with him for so long when she knew he was never gonna be able to give it back.

He glared, then shifted, staring hotly at nearby rock, instead. He cleared his throat. “Look...” He stopped, and cleared his throat again. “Look, if you do... y’know, do it... Just don’t tell me
about it, alright?”

She slanted a look at him. “What, you don’t want... details?”

Gwen had never in her life shared the details of her sexual activities, and they both knew it, but he still shuddered in mock-horror, anyway, and only a little bit of relief that she could joke about it.

Then another thought occurred to him. “Oh, hey—if you do decide to go ahead with it... Maybe it’s not even him, I dunno, maybe you decide you like Jim or something...”

Her eyes widened, and Bucky realized suddenly that he wasn’t as off-base as he had thought with that line of reasoning. He continued on hurriedly.

“...then please, for the love of God, make sure they know you’re married first? Because that’s really the sort of thing a guy likes to know, Gwennie, I swear it is.”

She nodded, chewing her lip. When she let it go, it had gotten red and puffy from the pressure of her teeth, and that, combined with her hair and skin and eyes when she looked up, made the whole damned scene look like something Van Gogh woulda painted. “I promise,” she said. “I’ll tell.”

Then she shrugged. “I was going to tell him about you, anyway,” she added. “You deserve to be treated better than you were today.” It wasn’t an apology, but it was close enough.

“Thanks,” he said, and took her hand when she stood and offered to drag him to his feet.

Bucky knew immediately the day Gwen told Stark she was married, because Stark came storming into the chow hall, obviously looking for Bucky, only to stare at him confoundedly when he found him before turning on his heel and storming off again.

Bucky only sighed and kept eating; no point in wasting perfectly good definitely-not-beef, after all.

He went down to Stark’s lab after, even though he knew that was ceding the high ground. He was the guy married to Gwen; that was probably enough high ground, honestly.

Stark was puttering, but he only stalled for a minute when he saw that Bucky had entered his demesne. “Barnes,” he said, then stopped, looking confused. Then he rallied with an actual, physical shake of his head and shoulders, and continued, “Would you like to come for a walk? I have an excellent bottle back in my rooms. I’m sure it would do us both wonders.”

Bucky hadn’t been able to get properly drunk since Zola had strapped him to a fucking table, but sure, he’d drink Stark’s overpriced bootleg liquor. “Lead on.”

Stark’s quarters proved to be a hell of a lot nicer than his own, which wasn’t exactly a surprise; they even had actual walls, which at this point Bucky, considering how much time he spent in tents, found vaguely claustrophobic. The liquor was smooth and peaty, and the air not nearly so smoky as it was back in the barracks. “Thanks,” Bucky said, sitting down when Stark gestured at the only chair in the place—a little wooden one, in front of an enormous pigeon-hole desk.

“My pleasure, I assure you.”

Stark was still looking squirrely, but seemed to be rallying at a good pace.

“It has come to my attention,” he began, and then stopped, frowning. “That is to say... I understand that you and Miss Rogers, er...?”
“We’ve been married since 1939,” Bucky said, taking pity on the guy.

“Hell,” Stark said feelingly, and sat down on the bed looking shaken.

Bucky laughed—with gusto, but mostly at the situation; only a little bit at Stark himself. “She’s a hell of a woman, isn’t she?” he asked him, tipping his glass towards the other man. He let his lashes fall forward over his eyes and let the skin crinkle at the corners of them, and sure enough, Stark unbent just like that, warming and relaxing at the same time as they both of thought about Gwen.

Or about Sarah, as the case might be...

“She is,” Stark agreed.

They drank some whiskey in silence together.

After a bit, Stark leaned back blew air out of his mouth as if he’d been smoking. “Peggy was the one who told me,” he said. His expression said that he was bearing bad news, and for a moment Bucky couldn’t figure out why; what was so bad about Carter sharing news? Carter knew everything about everyone in this place, it was what she did!

Then after a second, Bucky put it together, and he burst out laughing. “What,” he asked, snorting all over again at just how stupid it all was, “you think I didn’t know?! You think—you think I didn’t realize, what with the touching, and the looking deep into her eyes, and the hanging on her every word...?”

Stark’s face turned mask-like, like a snake waking up from a nap. Bucky took a swig of Stark’s whiskey, swallowing the burn, and tapped his fingers on the side of his cup impatiently. “Gwen and I... We’ve talked about it.”

“Good lord.” Stark sounded mostly appalled.

Bucky shrugged, and leaned back in the chair. He crossed one leg over the other and rested his whiskey on the upturned knee. “We haven’t been...” He closed his eyes. “...much. I mean, I don’t. I used to...” He laughed. “I used to have a lot of...” He waved his free hand evocatively.

“Mistresses,” Stark filled in, and to his credit he sounded incredulous, as if the idea that anyone could cheat on Gwen, even before the Serum, was remarkable. Bucky gave him credit for that, at least.

“Sure,” Bucky agreed. No point in making a big deal of the genders involved, right? “And Gwen, she never... never had nobody else. But she deserves to. You know, if she wants to; she doesn’t have to, obviously, but...”

“How very egalitarian.”

Bucky wasn’t sure whether Stark’s tone was more impressed or scornful, and all things considered he didn’t much care. He fixed Stark with a harsh glower. “She deserves everything she ever wants, alright? And God knows why that’s you, you sack of shit, but it seems to be, so...”

He tipped his head to the side and took another large gulp of the whiskey. “If it weren’t for Gwen... I’d be dead,” he added, voice hollow.

Stark tipped his head in acknowledgement and took a drink. “She saved a lot of men along side you, too,” he agreed.

Stark’s mouth opened in astonishment again, but Bucky didn’t wait around to find out what it was this time. He tossed back the last of the whiskey—a shabby treatment for a pretty good drink—and stood, folding his fists into his pockets. “I’ll tell you this, Stark—she seems to like you. God knows why—I think you’re an asshole—but it’s true. So I’ll respect that, and I’ll try to stay out of your way—seems the least I can do, to be honest.

“But if that changes. If there ever comes a day when I find out that you have hurt her, or broken her heart, or—hell, if I even find out that you have disappointed her, or let harm come to her when she’s out there, or something...” He made eye contact, holding it until Stark crumbled and looked away. “I will kill you, if that happens. She deserves every happiness, Gwen does; and if I find out you’re standing in the way of that, then hell yeah I will come for you. You will be done. I will eliminate you.”

He walked to the door of the room, then paused, turning back to look at the swanky son of a bitch who, for all his faults, was going to wind up loving Gwen better than Bucky ever could. He tried to think of a last thing to say, some last set of words to make everything settle into place, but he couldn’t find them, and after a moment, he realized why: they weren’t his words to say, were they? They were Gwen’s.

So he just said, “Good talk,” and left.

Between whatever Gwen said to him and Bucky had said to him, Stark turned a lot more respectful in the days that followed. All of a sudden, they weren’t the dust beneath his feet so much as the rocks he could build his churches on. It wasn’t a surprise that Stark changed his behavior—Gwen had been pretty furious when she stalked back into the factory, that day—but what was a surprise was the effect it had on morale. All of a sudden, they didn’t seem to feel like they were drudging along anymore; instead, it seemed like they were making good progress, cutting into the Hydra operations, and bit by bit the cuts were starting to ooze. It was like the twentieth mile of a marathon: they had come through the worst of it, and they were closing in on the finish, finally, at last.

They still didn’t have the location of the last facility, though, and the higher-ups (Gwen, Carter, and Phillips) were getting nervous about the lack. In particular, Gwen could be found pacing the outskirts of their camps smoking borrowed cigarettes—she didn’t smoke all that often, and she always gave away her ration, but folks were always willing to spot her one here and there, and these days, it was more here than not—and muttering about how they couldn’t get Shmidt if they didn’t get Zola and they couldn’t get Zola if they blew up everything they already had.

Carter was invaluable, during all of this. She calmed Gwen down in a way that Bucky, for all he’d known her longer, had never quite been able to manage. When he mentioned it to her, she only smiled crookedly and rubbed inconspicuously at the small of her back. “Well, to begin with,” she said in her crisp English accent, “I never invalidate her rage. She has quite a lot of that, you know.”

Bucky had grimaced. “Yeah,” he said fervently, “I know.”

Carter just laughed.

But Stark, for all he was a colossal ass, was also pretty helpful. Gwen clearly hadn’t made her
mind up about how far the thing between the two of them was going to go; you only had to take one
look at them to see it. She was still honked off at him for how he had been treating the
Commandos, for one thing; and also, Bucky kind of suspected, she was dithering, because she
never had been popular with the boys, and didn’t know how to handle it now that she was.

And it was just as obvious that it was driving Stark insane. He constantly doted on her, dancing
attendance and turning up whenever she was within the bounds of the camp. Come to think of it,
that might have been part of why she spent so much time on the outskirts, now; dodging his
presence like she was dodging the decision because she was the only one who could make it.

To his credit, though, Stark didn’t push; he kept the invitation open and stuck by her side, but
Bucky never once caught him harassing her or pressuring her, which was good because Bucky was
almost always armed, these days, and it would have ended pretty badly.

And, in the meantime, Stark made his liquor and rooms available to them, the four of them—Stark,
Carter, Gwen and Bucky—crammed in like sardines, Carter and Gwen laughing together on the
bed like a couple of genius floozies, the kind that would cut your throat and steal your wallet
sooner than sleep with you—because when they relaxed like this, it was obvious they were
dangerous women. Stark usually gave Bucky the chair, because manners was manners even when
you was a jerk, and he himself usually cleared a spot to sit on the desk.

Then, one day, he was waving Bucky towards the chair while moving projects around to get some
real estate to park his ass on and, simultaneously, breaking out a bottle and glasses, when Gwen
told him, “Don’t bother with that, Howard. Come on, Bucky, there’s plenty of room; just join us
over here, would you?”

Bucky froze, one hand already on the back of Stark’s chair, eyes widening. He was either going to
have to go over there or say something, and he wasn’t too comfortable with either option.

He tended to hold his counsel in these strange, after-hours pow-wows. Let the people with the
heads for planning speak; that was Gwen, and Carter, and Stark—and Phillips, but they spent all
day talking to Phillips, and there was a lot of booze paired with no formality at these parties, both
of which Phillips would have been obligated to report. So Phillips turned a blind eye, and the four
of them cozied up, half planning, half gossiping, taking the opportunity to let off steam as much as
work out strategy. Mostly, Bucky just listened, sitting back in Howard Stark’s not-terribly-
comfortable chair, making sympathetic faces, or occasionally humorous ones. Every once in
awhile, he would have some story about the team, or some insight into the thing Gwen was
bitching about, and he would share back, but mostly he was lazy snake hanging back in the grass,
and he sort of thought they all liked it that way.

But he couldn’t just shake his head and refuse Gwen, but he wasn’t strictly comfortable crawling
onto a bed with two women, either, even—or maybe especially—if one of them was his wife.

Carter rolled her eyes, though, and that was what decided him.

He let go of the chair and moved forward, kicking off his shoes before sitting down on the edge of
the not-quite-just-a-cot, pushing himself backwards until his back hit the wall behind the bed. His
legs weren’t quite long enough that he could sit like that and have them hang naturally over the
top, so he folded them Indian-style and then opened his arms, unthinkingly, the way he used to
with Gwen, and she and Carter both burrowed in against him, one on each side.

Stark smiled. He looked faintly annoyed, but more amused. “Some people have all the luck,” he
said, and started pouring the whiskey.
Bucky looked down at the double-lapful of woman he had, and tried not to panic, but even having just Gwen would have been a lot more woman than he was used to having in his lap; she was a lot bigger than she used to be!

He didn’t say much as the drinks and cigarettes were passed around (Gwen bummed one from him, then lit hers and Carter’s; Bucky didn’t realize quite what it looked like until he realized that Stark was staring at the women fixedly, as if burning the image into his mind for later). He didn’t need to, really; Gwen liked having him there, and sometimes he was able to offer some insight, so he came, but for the most part, the other three did the talking—and that worked out well, because every one of them could talk their way out of a German ambush if they wanted to. Yappers, all.

The conversation drifted, covering the shield, and the radios, the battles in general and Gwen’s driving during the battles in particular—

“You threw a motorcycle at an aeroplane!” Carter cried, exasperated.

“Well it worked, didn’t it?” countered Gwen, her eyes wide, her elbow digging painfully into Bucky’s thigh where she was holding herself up with it.

—but always, eventually, circling back around to the troubling question of how to pick up Zola (or Shmidt) when they couldn’t locate them.

In the end, it was Bucky’s own idea that got them there, and although they all acted astonished, Bucky himself didn’t really think it was all that big of a deal.

Gwen was seething, quietly, the way she had been for two weeks, because they were down to only two possible locations for Zola. “As soon as we make a move, though,” she said miserably, “He’s sure to be sitting securely in the other one, whichever one that turns out to be. Law of Bad Luck.”

She took another drink, the tumbler balancing not-quite-steady on Bucky’s knee, threatening at any second to dump icy liquid on his lap if he moved wrong. Bucky held very still; they were all
pretty far into it, although Gwen and he seemed to be feeling it less than the rest of them, and it wouldn’t take much to topple the glass. But if he spilled it, then he couldn’t grump at whoever did it.

“Don’t see why you need to hit the facility,” he commented instead, sucking on a cigarette in his left hand while brushing his hand through Peggy’s hair with the right. It wasn’t a lascivious or tender gesture at all; mostly it was a restless movement, very much like petting a large cat that had chosen to take up residence in one’s lap. Peggy shifted minutely, pressing into the touch, but otherwise didn’t comment on, or even seem to notice, what he was doing.

“Need to hit the facility to get Zola.” That was Stark, all right, Bucky thought, mentally rolling his eyes; always willing to state the obvious as if you were too fucking dumb to see it for yourself.

No, be fair; maybe Stark didn’t understand what he was saying. Bucky sucked impatiently on the cigarette and blew the smoke up, over the girls’ heads, then said, “It’s not the law of bad luck.”

Gwen grumbled against his leg.

“No, it’s not,” Bucky insisted. “It’s that he has the ability to get out fast when he knows we’re coming, and he’s figured out by now what ‘us coming’ looks like.”

Gwen grumbled something significantly filthier against his leg, and Carter giggled.

Bucky put his hand on top of her head and pushed down gently so that she was gagged by the fabric. “Hush, you.” He waited for her to stop giggling and cleared the fond expression off his face before he looked back up at Stark. “If Zola thinks we’re hitting the facility, he’s going to run right to the other one, isn’t he?”

Stark shrugged. “Sure, but what good does that do us? Then we get the last one, and we don’t know where he’s going to run. Same problem.”

Bucky rolled his eyes physically instead of mentally this time and killed his cig, flicking it to land between Stark’s feet; Stark obligingly stomped on it. “Yeah, but there’s only one pass between the factories,” he said. “We can just take him there, no matter which direction he’s passing it.”

Gwen’s eyes opened, and she popped up in excitement, bracing herself on one hand and nimbly catching the tumbler before it toppled with the other. “And we look like we’re losing at the first facility, so even if he’s in the second, he comes rushing over!”

“Yeah, exactly.” Bucky grinned down at her hair, running his fingers through the long thickness of it. “It’s the same strategy you used in fifth grade against Mickey Traverse, only you weren’t pretending to lose.”

She laughed, not stung at all by the jibe. “You jerk!” She leaned forward and kissed him, a nice big one but with no tongue, and then pulled back and laughed again. “Oh my god. Bucky! We’re going to win this!”

He grinned at her. “We always were, doll; you were in charge.”

Carter broke in, cooing, “Oooh, I want one!” She sat up, too, putting one hand on each side of Bucky’s face and kissing him squarely on the mouth, catching him right in the middle of asking, “What—?”

He sputtered and laughed, and she pulled back looking smug, then waggled her eyebrows at Gwen. Gwen returned the look with one of exasperated confusion, which was reassuring; at least the kiss
had been some sort of teasing towards Gwen, and not about Bucky, at all.

But Peggy Carter wasn’t one to stop when she could make chaos, and she smirked lightly at Gwen before calling, “Howard, come on! We’re all kissing Bucky, because he’s just solved Hydra for us!”

Bucky laughed nervously, flushing.

He couldn’t stand him—he really couldn’t—but Howard Stark was a good-looking man, and the truth was, if he had been someone Bucky had met before the war—and in a context where it was safe—Bucky would, absolutely, have made a pass. He was precisely Bucky’s type, or at least he would have been back then; true, Bucky didn’t like his personality much, but back then he wouldn’t have known him long enough to get into all that. So it wasn’t exactly a hardship to go kissing him, it was just—

What if he figures it out?

What if he knows I’m an invert, just from this?

Stark—Howard—didn’t look too thrilled about it, either. Like a cat when you blow in its face; if he’d had mobile ears, they would have been back, and his expression was lightly affronted, although at least not furious or anything like that.

Bucky swallowed, and glanced at Gwen.

Gwen looked like Christmas had come ten months early.

Bucky felt his stomach sink. He turned back to Howard, and gestured with his eyes towards Gwen; Howard’s face lit in comprehension, and he gave a pretty impressive fake of a lighthearted laugh before getting up and moving the three feet to where Bucky’s lapful of woman kept him pinned. Bucky opened his arms, just like he had earlier that night, and Howard leaned in, trapping his face in his hands just like Peggy had, his moustache tickling on Bucky’s lip in a way that made Bucky’s stomach clench, a feeling he hadn’t really had in... God, it must be years, now. How long since Basic? At least that long. He smelled good, too, cigarettes and expensive cologne, and the warm, electric underscent of Bristol cream. Bucky felt the moan climbing his throat, and pushed it down.

Howard’s mouth was warm and firm, pressing against Bucky hard enough that Bucky could feel the teeth under his lips before he pulled back that crucial fraction of an inch and let him feel the softness of them, instead. They were wide and full, his hands large and strong, and Bucky felt his own fingers start to tremble. Howard’s mouth moved slightly on his, as if he were opening his mouth to ask a question, and then it was over. He pulled back, and away, and finally his hands fell away from Bucky’s cheeks, and it was done.

Bucky watched him, cautiously, as he stepped away, but there was no sign of the rage, the disgust, that Bucky had been half-expecting. He gave a little shake of his shoulders, as if throwing something off, and then looked over at Gwen.

Bucky looked, too.

Gwen was biting her lip, and smiling, both at the same time. Her eyes were alight with glee.

Bucky felt his stomach clench and sink again.

Fuck!
Howard coughed. “Well, this calls for a celebration!” he said. “Barnes, Sarah—get out of here, would you? Peggy and I can plan out the details of this, and you doubtless have a little celebrating to do. Barnes, you’ve more than earned it, just now.”

*I ain’t that good a kisser,* Bucky thought nastily, but Gwen was already on her feet and pulling him to his, even tumbling Peggy away where she had still been half-leaning on Bucky. Gwen towed him out of the room by his arm, calling “Goodnight!” absently over her shoulder, and Bucky waved, feeling stunned, following in her wake.

Stark’s voice came to them, muffled, as soon as the door was closed, asking “What were you *thinking?*” in a strangely shaken tone. Maybe it was whatever they’d done to him in the factory, or maybe Stark was just too tipsy to hold back; either way, Bucky was pretty sure he wasn’t supposed to have heard that.

Regardless, he couldn’t quite make the muffles of Peggy’s answer into words.

Their quarters—they were assigned separate ones, Phillips not being one of the two people who knew they were married—were both some distance away, but Bucky’s distance was a lot more than Gwen’s; she was in the same building, albeit on the other side of it, and like Stark, she had honest-to-God walls. Bucky normally avoided Gwen’s room for that very reason, but tonight she seemed hell-bent on getting them there, and he wasn’t inclined to argue.

As soon as they got inside, she closed the door and locked it, then slammed him up against it and kissed him again.

“Gwnph?”

His hands came up in surprise, settling at her waist, still mostly the same size it always was although the rest of her had flared out above and below it. She was taller than he was, pressing him into the door, and her shoulders were broad and strong for woman. He wasn’t going anywhere, anytime soon, and something in the back of his mind curled up and *purred* at the knowledge.

He relaxed into the kiss—smokey and boozy, warm and familiar, and then she brought the tongue into it, sweeping into his mouth and taking over, moving in like she planned to stay there for the summer. He tipped his head back against the door like he was drunk and just let her, shivering in the dark closeness of the room. His hands flexed and closed on her waist like kitten’s paws, pressing her closer, and the world seemed to go sunshine-edged and hazy when she made a pleased noise and moved into the touch.

She had moved him against the door by his shirt, and she was still grasping it; she let go, now, smoothing the wrinkles and running her hands over his shoulders proprietarily, all without breaking the kiss. She ran her hands down his shoulders, down over his arms, then caught his wrists and gently brought them up by his head. *Now* she pulled her mouth away, but only enough to kiss down his throat. She mouthed over the pulse point, and he shuddered, his chest juddering forward because the door kept his head from falling back any more and he *needed* her to have access.

She bit, lightly, over his windpipe, then moved him, interlacing his fingers together and tucking the pad of hands behind his head, arranging him so that his hands cushioned his skull against the door while simultaneously being pinned by his own head. “Yeah?” she asked, and he was sex-stupid enough that it took him a minute to figure out she was asking permission.

He had to swallow before he could manage a strangled, “Yeah,” in return.
She started working on the buttons of his jacket.

“Gwen,” he said. It came out weak, a half-gasp, half-moan, and he felt surprising tears spring up in his eyes. “Fuck. Gwen, what are you doing?”

She paused, leaning in, and rested her head against his shoulder so that she could avoid his eyes.

She said, “I wanted.” And then she didn’t say anything else. Her hands had gone still, poised in the middle of opening the last flat, blue botton of his jacket.

It wasn’t hard to put together. He remembered the look on her face when she was watching Howard Stark kiss him, remembered the speed with which she had lit out immediately afterwards. No, it wasn’t hard to connect the dots; it was just hard to believe the total he came up with.

He felt his face do something strange as he asked, “…Really?!?”

Her shoulders hunched up, and her fingers tightened on the button. “Really,” she said. Her voice came out very small.

Bucky thought about it, then shrugged. “Okay,” he said.

He wasn’t entirely sure what he was saying okay to—he would really rather not get involved with Stark, because attractive as the man was, he was still an utter jackass—and when did those priorities change for me?—but Gwen seemed to understand more than he did. She popped the last button off, opening the jacket and letting it hang on either side of his chest, exposing his thin cotton undershirt, and then started working on the belt.

“Did you like it?” she asked. Her breath was warm against his throat, and he shivered before he understood the question.

His teeth gritted together. “I like kissing men,” he said shortly, closing his eyes at the humiliation of it. Honestly pricked him, and he added, “Especially men who look like that.”

He felt her smile wryly against his cheek, and then she started popping the buttons on his flies. “He is very…” She trailed off, searching for the word.

“Yeah.” He felt a whine building in his throat as she opened his trousers and worked her hands inside, and for once he let it spill out. “Hnnn—! God. He’s damned manly, Gwennie. But with a soft mouth. It’s a—fuck!”

She had tightened her fingers around him, sliding him within the sheath of his foreskin, just as he mentioned Howard’s mouth, and it was impossible not to mentally connect the two, impossible not to imagine those plump lips wrapped around dick. He threw his head back, cracking it against his hands, thudding against the door. “Gwen!”

“Yeah,” she agreed, and started kissing his neck again. Her lips travelled up, and under his ear…

“Does he kiss well?” she asked in a murmur.

He shivered again at the puff of warm air. His arms flexed, but so did his neck, and his hands stayed in place behind his head. His toes curled, and he was panting as he said, “It was fine. Short. Over before I really had a chance to—you know.”

“I know,” she said. She licked around the edge of his ear.

“I liked his moustache,” Bucky confessed, and her fingers tightened around him.
And then she pulled off of him, backing away, leaving him hanging, exposed, in the air. “Stay like that,” she said, arms still stretched towards him, hands up as if ready to prop him back up should he face-plant forward. “Just like that. Don’t move.” She took another step backwards.

Then she reached the bed, and dug down, pulling something from under the mattress as he blinked at her, stupid with sex-thoughts, aroused as much by the directive as by what she had been doing. What was this, now? What was she...?

She opened a sketchbook.

“Oh,” he said, feeling stupid.

She looked up, making eye-contact, and then smiled, rueful and semi-apologetic when she realized that he hadn’t been on the same page she had. “I wanted,” she said just as she had earlier, except that this time, it was an explanation.

Bucky thought about how he looked, posed like a male version of a pinup against the door, his hands trapped, shirt open, cock out and—by this time—hard against his hip.

He still had his boots on.

“Oh,” he agreed, just as he had before, and her smile was bright and devilish as she picked up her pencil.

Gwen was right: the Law of Bad Luck—or whatever it was—meant they didn’t find Zola at the factory they chose to attack.

Bucky was right, too, though: they caught him on the train.

The first thing Gwen did, once they had Zola secured in their camp and the Commandos had been dismissed, was turn to the nearest trash can and vomit. It was awful, her stomach churning and jumping, over and over again, like convulsions, her throat burning, the taste and smell everywhere. She couldn’t seem to stop, though; just when she thought the heaves were settling down, she would remember that Bucky was dead, and her stomach would turn all over again.

By the time she finally stopped for good, she was crying, and apparently someone had tried to summon Peggy to deal with her. Peggy, though, was back in London, conferring with MI-6, and so it was Other Sarah, bristling and looking ready to punch someone, who showed back up and took Gwen into her arms. She bit off a snarl when she saw the scene, and quietly led Gwen away to their tent.

She brewed up a cup of coffee from her stash of spare packets—Other Sarah didn’t drink the stuff, and always had plenty of spare for barter and bribes—and once Gwen had stopped crying enough to hold it, she passed it over, commenting, “I didn’t realize how close you and Barnes were,” in a cautious sort of voice which was pretty much asking if they were sleeping together.

Gwen smiled bitterly, and drank her fucking coffee. “We were close,” she said. Her voice came out hoarse and burned, which about matched how she felt. “Ever since we were kids—”

Other Sarah nodded, listening but also still curious.

“I don’t know what I’ll do without Bucky,” Gwen said. Her fingers were tight around the mug, white at the knuckles, and she forced herself to relax before she shattered it. “He was always there
for me. Always there to point the way.”

Other Sarah relaxed, and patted Gwen’s knee, about as bad at offering comfort as Gwen was at taking it. “It’s hard,” she offered, “losing a friend like that.”

Gwen looked over, startled, and then took another gulp of the scorching hot coffee. “Yeah,” she said, her voice bitter and poisonous with grief. “It’s hard.”

While Brass took the time to convince Zola it was worth his while to turn over on Shmidt, Gwen and the Howlies were given three days of leave in London. Bucky had been a valued member of the team, and they all toasted him, but they hadn’t known him like Gwen had, and afterwards, Gwen found herself wandering the street, unsafe during the bombardment but uncaring of the danger. Eventually she worked her way in the burned-out shell of the pub where she had first officially recruited the Howling Commandos, drinking and drinking and drinking like one of those mechanical marvels, hoping to feel the effects, at least a little bit, and never really doing so.

Peggy found her there, and sat with her a while. They talked.

It helped, a little.

Zola came through, after all, and it wasn’t long before they were gearing up for the final assault. It couldn’t be long; Shmidt planned to start bombing things in less than a day.

“We don’t think that’s suspicious?” Other Sarah sat with her leg propped up on a locker at the stern of the boat; Gwen and Howard had just come down to join her.

The first step of their plan was to take a boat up the river into position behind Hydra’s troops; it was an hour-long boat ride, and they were all twitching by twenty minutes into it. At the head of the boat—a mode of transport chosen primarily because it was quiet, secondarily for speed—the rest of the Howlies had gathered, mostly pestering Gabe, who was working the controls.

“We do,” Gwen said grimly.

Howard nodded, watching the water trail out behind them, hands braced on the back rail. “He knew damned good and well what he was doing: stalling, and then appearing to cooperate. And the worst part is, it’s going to work. I’ve heard the US government is already offering him a research lab.”

Gwen growled. She didn’t mean to, and it wasn’t very loud.

“I agree,” Other Sarah told her dryly. Then she hefted her rifle. “But it’s not my call,” she added in the macabre cheer of the professional soldier. “You two need a minute alone?”

“N—”

“Yes, please.”

Gwen looked over at Howard, then back Other Sarah, who raised her eyebrows in a show of being unimpressed. “Apparently, we do,” Gwen said. She touched Other Sarah’s arm. “I’ll be up in a minute, alright?”

Other Sarah nodded, with only a shade of reluctance, and left.
Howard nodded, too, still staring into the inky currents of the river. Gwen shifted awkwardly; so close to their goal, there was a distinct possibility that Howard wanted a word so that he could say goodbye.

It turned out to be something else, though.

“I just wanted to say…” He didn’t look up at her, and was apparently talking to the water. “...I was... distressed to hear of Barnes’ death. You have my deepest sympathies.” Now he looked up at her, into her eyes, and Gwen felt something break loose inside her at the look on his face.

It was off. Just a little bit off, mind you, not enough that it was easy to see, but... it was.

She watched the banks on each side of their stream, and tried to think what to say. Something was bubbling up inside of her, probably grief but possibly something else, something more like... rage. She was keenly aware that it wasn’t Howard’s fault she had lost Bucky and that it wasn’t fair to blame him, but damn if she didn’t want to do so, anyhow.

“I know that this time must be... difficult for you—”

She interrupted, looking away from the banks and directly into Howard’s dark eyes. “You know he never really wanted me, right?”

Howard blinked, rather a lot. “I beg your pardon?”

Was she betraying Bucky’s memory by telling him this? She didn’t think so. It was hard to judge anything, right now, hard to feel her emotions correctly when there was a tangled knot of fury and grief hovering behind her sternum all the time. But she thought it would be okay, to tell people, now that it couldn’t hurt him any longer. It was the largest part of him, anyway—or at least, that was how it had sometimes seemed to her. And they could hardly put him in a box for it now.

She laughed, bitterly. “Bucky was—Bucky was queer, Howard. He liked men— needed them, even—far more than I ever have.” When Howard just blinked, wide-eyed at her—even his moustache looked surprised—she continued, “He couldn’t even stand you, and he still would have been happier to have you in his bed than me. He told me so himself.”

Howard’s mouth dropped open, and he turned away from her to stare into the darkness of the water. He was still in a neatly-pressed suit—he always was: yet another thing Bucky had both liked and hated about him—and suddenly the contrast seemed so ridiculous to Gwen. They were in the middle of a forest on the border between France and Switzerland, and here was Howard fucking Stark, wearing a point-perfect suit.

Of course he was. Of course he was.

Howard shook his head slowly. “Is that why he...?”

“Yes. Yeah, that’s why he and I—” She watched the banks and checked her marks one more time, pin-scarf-gun-gun-knife-badge-radio-shield, the same as she always did before a mission. “He wasn’t jealous.”

“Ah,” Howard coughed. “Well. I guess not.” Howard blinked into the distance as they approached the drop-off point. “And you say that... he wanted me?”

Gwen let her gaze drop the way she imagined Bucky would have in his clubs, casually stroking over Howard’s face, shoulders, hips and thighs, before bringing it back up to make eye contact. “Not for your personality,” she said.
Howard laughed, sharp and loud and a tiny smidge unhinged. Twelve feet away, the rest of the Commandos looked up, some of them glancing back at the two of them before directing their attentions back to their own pre-mission rituals.

Howard leaned in a little closer, wiping at his mouth. “And... do you want me?” he asked. Apparently, learning that Bucky had preferred men was the last thing he needed to free him from his compunctions.

That, or Bucky being dead.

Hopefully the first one.

Gwen licked her lips, and met Howard’s eyes once more, finally willing, now that she had gotten the worst of it out, to be honest with herself about what was really going on. “Not for your personality,” she admitted.

He looked affronted, but nodded his acceptance anyway. “Alright,” he said. “Maybe when the mission is done? I’ll take you out to dinner, first.”

Good Heavens, was he really willing to put up with that from her? But then, she supposed she was willing to put up with rather a lot from him.

And, anyway, it was better than sitting around grieving all the time.

*Bucky would be proud of me,* she thought suddenly, as the bank approached on their right—starboard, she remembered, on a boat it was called starboard. *Bucky would be relieved.* *He’d far rather see me do this than see me grieve away and die of a broken heart.*

Even if it felt like that was the only thing she *could* do, most of the time.

*God, I miss him.*

He had been gone for less than a week, and already it felt like it had been years since she had seen him. At the same time, though, the grief was as raw and fresh as a newly-made gut wound.

*Keep going. Complete the mission; have dinner with Howard. Wipe Hydra off the map, and then keep on living your life.*

*Do the things Bucky would want you to do.*

“Dinner it is,” she said.

She couldn’t tell if accepting Howard’s offer felt like failure or success, and there wasn’t time to figure it out. She led the Commandos off the boat, waving as Howard called behind her, “Don’t be late!”

It was the wrong decision. She knew it was the wrong decision, knew almost as soon as she made it. There wasn’t time—between leading the Hydra forces into capturing her, being dragged in front of Shmidt, thrown to her knees—for her to regret it; no time for anything except leaping for the *Valkyrie*, trying like Hell to defeat the Hydra goons defending the plane, and then trying even harder to stop Shmidt.

Once that was done, though, she had plenty of time to think things through. She called in on the radio to tell them what was—what was happening.
“We’ll figure out a way,” Howard said impatiently. “We’ll turn the plane!”

But the plane didn’t have controls, it had a set of coordinates blinking on the dash and no way to change them, and abruptly, Gwen didn’t want to talk to Howard any more. “There isn’t time,” she said, “I’ve got to put her in the water.” And then she added, before he could draw breath, “Is Peggy there?”

Peggy was there. “Sarah—”

“Sorry, Peg. You said to get out, but... I think we both know this isn’t what you had in mind.”

Peggy’s breath caught, bizarrely clear over the radio line. “You are a constant source of surprise,” she said, her voice sounding heavy with grief, but also pride. “Are you certain there’s no other way? Could you release the bombs early, or...?”

Gwen thought of the way the bombs had, themselves, been planes, also with coordinates entered. “Not an option,” she said. “Peg—Peggy, I’m sorry.”

The line was silent for a second, and then: “I am, too,” Peggy whispered to her. “Good-bye, Sarah.”

Gwen turned the radio off without answering.

The water was coming up, a plain sea of ice spreading out infinitely in front of her, and she sat in the pilot’s chair and pushed steadily, inexorably, on the stick, the stick which wouldn’t bank the plane from side to side, but which would take her up—or take her down.

She couldn’t let the bombs go off; even in the middle of nowhere, there was still a chance of a village she couldn’t see from the air, or that they were bigger and more dangerous than she knew. It had to be done.

Bucky would be furious, she thought, smiling to herself. It didn’t hurt quite as much—Bucky being dead, that was—now that she was going to be dead, too. In sickness and in health, she thought, ’til death do us part. And maybe after death had put them back together again, too. He’d be livid about what I’m doing now, though. But she knew how this went: furious, and frustrated, and hurting, and he still would have helped her do it. Bucky Barnes had always had her back, from the time they were nine years old, and it wouldn’t have changed now, even when the thing he was mad about was her passing.

Howard was going to be annoyed with her, too—missing their date, their assignation—but she rather thought she would have cancelled that, anyway. She found herself a lot less interested in him now that she knew she was going to die soon, and she thought that might be a good sign that she shouldn’t be going to bed with him.

I would have been lonely... but maybe it’s better to be alone than to settle.

Howard was a good friend, as far as she could expect it to go. But pushing it to be more than that was foolishness. At least, going to her death now, she wasn’t going to be messing that up!

So she blinked away the wetness from her eyes, and pointed the nose of the plane down, down, down.

At the last second, she brought the nose of the plane up so that the impact didn’t set off the bombs. It was the only way to guarantee they didn’t go off: a long, slow landing in the water, and then, as
the edge of the ice rushed up towards her and she had to make a choice, she nudged the nose down once again, under it, under the waves, the water blue and endless around her.

The last thing she saw, as the plane’s nose eased beneath the waves, was the endless, dreamy blue of the sun-lit, ice-covered ocean, with the gray-white of ice arching endlessly overhead...

And then she and the Valkyrie were going down, down, into the inky blackness. But the plane wasn’t built for the water, and within seconds, the pressure broke the windows of the plane. Cold, icy water rushed inside the cockpit, ripping her off her feet, and her head smashed against the side of the plane, and before she could even draw a breath to drown, everything was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Canon-typical violence etc: More punchy-shooty-things-go-boom.

Unhealthy interpersonal relationship: The height of the Howard Stark arc; the flaws of his personality which lead to the most negative depictions we get of him in the MCU movies— I haven't read the tie in comics— are explored here. Gwen continues to have a friendship-slash-flirtation with him anyway, however, despite becoming gradually more and more aware of how shitty he can be.

Sexual situations: D/s undertones are much the same as before: informing the action, but not explicitly named. Sexual situation involves Bucky kissing a man while Gwen watches; Gwen becomes aroused, makes out with Bucky, and then proceeds to arouse Bucky for the purpose of what is essentially voyeurism. No penetrative sex occurs.

Character death: If you've seen CA:TFA, you know how this goes: Bucky falls off a train (on a cliff), Gwen!Steve pilots a plain into the ice. Everybody else gets very old and/or dead because time happens to us all.
“Agent Rogers? You’re awake. It’s okay; relax. You’re among friends.”

_Suuuuuur_e, she was.

The pretty girl in the pathetically bad nurses’ costume smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. Gwen smiled back, anyway, though; it couldn’t hurt.

“Who are you?” she asked. “Where am I?”

“You’re in the infirmary.” The woman’s voice betrayed no hint of a lie. “We found you frozen, so chilled that it was like your heart had stopped.” She stopped and blinked slowly at Gwen. “You’re lucky to be alive, Angel.”

Gwen felt her smile start to crisp on the edges like a casserole left in the oven too long. “The infirmary of where?” she asked, her voice hard. “The light in the window is designed to look like sunlight, but whatever’s emitting it has a faint hum; your clothes are all wrong; and no nurse worth her salt would show up with her hair so loose and messy. So I’ll ask you _one more time_: Where. Am. I?”

The nurse’s innocent expression faltered.

Gwen did quite a lot of damage to the facility on her way out. Later, when Fury had calmed her down and explained to her where she was, she would feel a little guilty about that.

Not much, though.

“The Avenging Angel! My God! Wow, you are _significantly_ larger in real life, aren’t you? You know, I used to have a figurine of you when I was a kid! ...not that I expected you to be figurine sized, I just meant... You’re much more _muscular_ than the comics! I mean... I guess I expected you to be—”

“Thank you,” Gwen said decisively.

Agent Coulson looked pathetically grateful to be cut off.

Natasha Romanov was a mystery, and Gwen liked her from the moment she stared up into the sky and said, “It’ll be fun.”

Romanov had clever eyes and a dry humor, both of which Gwen would have appreciated anyway, but she also gave Gwen space, and was one of the few people in this new millennium who seemed willing to judge Gwen as an individual, and not a symbol. Her voice was compassionate when she
offered to show Gwen around the future, but she also seemed unsurprised when Gwen declined.

Bruce Banner was an unassuming man of middle-age, and Gwen found herself immediately, instinctively, liking him. He had kind eyes, for one thing, eyes that reminded her quite a lot of Erskine. Secondly, he called her Gwen, as she requested everybody do, and not Sarah, as so many persisted in doing anyway.

And for a third thing, he seemed content to keep his pre-established expectations of her, whatever they might be, to himself.

Howard’s son, on the other hand, was a twat.

(Although admittedly, a good looking twat. He did at least take after his father that much.)

The thing that confused her was that he had been hailed in her reports as “charming” and “superficially gracious.” But in real life, he was aggressive and snide, the very opposite of charming. It was almost as if she had stepped on his toes, somehow, or done him some injury, but that couldn’t be possible. She had only just met him, for Heaven’s sake!

Sometime after the shwarma, but before they returned Loki to Asgard, there was a round of general toasting. It culminated in Natasha and Gwen wrestling on the floor in the broken glass, and when Gwen won, Thor hoisted her onto his shoulders and carried her around the restaurant while Howard’s son patched up Nat’s wounds.

Clint watched, saying nothing, but the empty darkness in his eyes eased a little at their antics. Which was something, anyway, although the Lord knew the man had a long way to go.
Gwen prepared her hands carefully, the meditative process of moving the tape almost like walking a labyrinth. The effect was enhanced by the cool temperature of the room—although it would grow overwarm quickly, once she started moving—and by the dim lighting, mostly composed of fluorescent bulbs located too far overhead. The bulbs made a low-level humming noise, and it droned in Gwen's ears like the buzzing of insects at twilight. She was waiting here for the Widow, who she had learned was many things, but almost never punctual.

She was freezing in the chilled air, but she couldn't particularly bring herself to resent the time spent in stillness. She should resent it, and she could see the vague, dim outlines of the resentment forming in the mists, but frankly, it just seemed like too damned much work. So instead, she wrapped her hands, and then her feet—she was barefoot on the mats in the center of gym—and waited, listening to the far-away lights like summer cicadas. She couldn't help but contrast that drone with another: the drone of a congregation, parroting back the words of the service.

On reflection, listening to the lights seemed like a poor damned substitute for listening for the voice of God. But then, that was just one more part of what had her so annoyed, these days.

By the time Nat arrived, Gwen was moving as if she were angry—or at least, moving in the way a normal person would when angry; Nat herself tended to slink more as she felt stronger emotions. "I almost cancelled on you," she said with a too-bright smile. "I had a busy schedule, today, but to be honest... I needed the stress relief."

Gwen was never going to fail to be grateful to Nat for their spars. For one thing, there were damned few who could match Gwen in the rink, and Nat was one of them, especially if she had had time to properly prepare (which she hadn't, today). But more than that, Natasha had something that Gwen had never even heard of in her own time, a comprehensive education in a brand new art: how to fight like a woman, and win.

Natasha taught Gwen how to use her hips rather than her shoulders, how to slink instead of strut, how to use her flexibility against her opponent, her speed, her different center of balance... Even the expectation of femininity would give her an edge, as her opponent underestimated her and paid the price for it. Some of it didn't apply—Gwen had most of a foot in height on Nat, even when Nat was in heels—but for that, Gwen had had other teachers. Even Peggy Carter hadn't had the scope and variety of training that Natasha did, and week by week as they met in this dim and dingy gym, every Sunday night—long after the regular hours in the Triskellion—Gwen felt herself improving.

Plus, it was one hell of a work out, which, after the day Gwen had had, she desperately needed.

Nat let her get three good punches in before asking. A kindness, all things considered. "What's wrong?"

Gwen just grunted, and tried for a kick.
“It’s Sunday. They only call you in at the Triskellion on a Sunday if there’s a mission, and we both know there wasn’t.”

This kick missed, too. Maybe Nat had been spotting her a couple of punches to start with.

“Therefore, it’s something in your personal life.”

Gwen’s blow went wild, and Nat tripped her, rolled her, and got her in a choke hold. Gwen tapped out, and they rose to begin again.

“You’re sloppy tonight,” Nat said—not challenging, just observing. The tilt of her head made her short red hair swing against the side of her neck, where it clung to the beginning stickiness of sweat. “You’re almost never sloppy. What’s up?”

“I’m sloppy sometimes,” Gwen protested, but that only furthered Nat’s point, because every time Gwen had been sloppy before, it was because she had been upset about something or other.

Nat didn’t even grace it with a response.

Gwen sighed, and re-focused on the fight. They went back and forth for a while, a good round; Nat winded her once and staggered her another time, and then Gwen had Nat pinned on the mat and it was Nat who was tapping out.

Gwen sighed again, deeper this time, and accepted the inevitable. “I’ve been trying to find a church,” she admitted as she rolled away.

Nat gave one blink of total confusion—she, like most of the Avengers, was not religious—then covered, cocking both her head and her arms. “Not going well?”

“So sort of.” Nat blocked a roundhouse from Gwen, but it cost her some real estate: Gwen had used enough force in the punch to push her backwards, since she’d known Nat would be able to block it. “Nothing’s the same,” Gwen complained, dodging Nat’s leg.

“How so?”

A fast flurry of blows passed between them while Gwen was thinking about the answer, but it wasn’t enough that she was unprepared by the time they both had gone still again. “The last three times I entered a house of worship,” she said, “someone got out their phone. Recording.”

Nat winced, and then winced again as Gwen sank a knee into her guts. Gwen danced backwards. “You alright?” she asked.

Nat held up a hand, gasping and huddled over, so Gwen waited.

Nat wretched, and then spat—just saliva—onto the mat before straightening. She put her hands at the small of her back and stretched backwards before coming forward into a ready position. She nodded at Gwen, and they began again.

“You were raised Episcopalian?” Nat blocked a series of fast punches, then trapped Gwen’s arm and flipped her over her hip.

Gwen rolled, coming to her feet again. “Which my ma called Anglican, yeah. Ma figured it was the most familiar of the Protestants.”

Nat frowned. “Your mother was Catholic?”
“Yep.” Gwen dodged once, twice, three times, then put Nat over her hip the same way Nat had to her, earlier. She spun just in time to see Nat’s approving nod. “Ma figured, we’d have enough to deal with without bein’ Catholic on top of it.”

Nat blinked at the sudden code-switch on Gwen’s part—the Irish creep was an inevitable result of quoting her mother about anything—then started an exchange of punches so quick that neither of them was able to talk. She ended it with her legs wrapped around Gwen’s throat, which was gonna be a problem very shortly... Gwen backflipped, smacking Nat’s back against the ground until her grip loosened.

They both crawled away from it, wobbling back to standing. This time, Gwen was the one who held up a hand for a breather.

“Have you tried the Catholic churches?” Nat asked, taking the opportunity to pull her hair back into two neat pigtails low on her skull.

“Yeah.” Gwen made a face. “But, I mean... This Ratzinger Benedict guy...”

Nat smiled with one crooked corner of her mouth, nodding. Gwen shook out her shoulders, and they began again.

The next time they paused, Natasha was looking thoughtful. “Being lost makes you sad,” she observed. “It isn’t what made you angry.”

“Oh—that. No,” Gwen agreed, but she wasn’t going to get distracted this time. She focused in, blocked Nat’s blow—that one would have tagged her with a Widow’s Bite, if this had been real—and managed to get Nat up against an imaginary wall in the air with her arm behind her back.

“Well done,” Nat said. “Let’s move it to the real wall, though. You’ll like this.”

Up against the real wall, Nat was able to walk her feet up the wall, kicking over to unkink her arm and break the hold. She was right; Gwen loved it, and they practiced the move three times before calling it quits.

“So what pissed you off?” Nat asked, tossing Gwen a towel.

Gwen ran it over her shoulders and neck, letting her sweaty hair out of it’s french braid. “Did you know,” she asked, “that the Episcopal Church came out with a provisional rite of blessing for same-sex unions?”

Natasha went very still.

“Weddings, actually,” Gwen clarified. She started unraveling her hands, looking very carefully at what she was doing. “Not just just unions.”

“I did know that,” Natasha said. Her voice came from farther away than expected—about twelve feet—but it did sound as if she were looking at Gwen. “This makes you angry?”

Gwen tore the tape coming off her, after all. “If a thing is sacred,” she said, “then shouldn’t it always have been sacred?” She balled the tape into a little pebble shape.

“I suppose,” Nat answered. Her voice was very indifferent, which Gwen thought might mean she did actually care about this, somewhat. “So you don’t oppose change because of what the change is, you oppose it because it’s change at all?”
“No,” Gwen said. She put her foot on the bench and ripped through the tape going around her foot with one tear. “I am angry—"

And she was. Truly, deeply angry, angry at the stupid damned waste of it all, angry at the perversion and loss and loss of opportunity she had experienced in her own life because of it.

“—I am angry because, if this is the right thing to do, then why the Hell weren’t they doing it eighty damned years ago?”

The second round of tape parted under her hands with a loud noise almost like a moan.

Natasha’s eyes were wide.

Then a small, gleeful smile started to twitch in the corners of Natasha’s mouth. She tossed another towel over to Gwen, easy and underhanded. “To be clear,” she asked as Gwen finished wiping herself and the bench down, “you are not mad that they’re permitting gay marriage now. You are mad that they weren’t doing it then?” She led the way out of the gym, but Gwen paused in the doorway, hands over her head, casually braced against the top bar of the doorframe.

She swallowed, and looked Natasha in the eye. “My husband was gay. Did you know that?”

Natasha’s eyebrow twitched, a short, sharp jerk that designated some strong emotion. Probably irritation at being caught out, to judge by her tone as she said, “I didn’t know you were married.”

Gwen smiled, as sharp as Nat’s eyebrows. “Seven years,” she said. She couldn’t quite tell by the feel what her face was doing, but whatever it was, it wasn’t very nice. “July 2nd, 1938.”

“Until the end?!”

“Until he died.” Gwen blinked slowly at Natasha, who was very good at her job and got it immediately.

“Barnes,” she said, clearly reviewing everything she knew about the Avenging Angel. “It’s not in any of the records.”

“It isn’t,” Gwen acknowledged, then relented and explained. “Rebirth would take a married man or a single woman, but they weren’t going to take a married woman, especially not one with my history. But Erskine knew; he recruited me after he was called to treat my miscarriage.”

Nat’s eyes widened, and she made a small, jerky movement of her arm, almost as if she had started to reach out, and then stopped. Her mouth twitched.

“So.” Gwen cleared her throat. “I think—well, I know—that if they had had gay marriage back then... None of this would have happened. Bucky could’ve...” She closed her eyes tightly, fighting off the sudden sting of tears she could feel rising. She cleared her throat and shook her head, then tried again. “He could’ve been happy. And that—God, I wish—”

Nat was standing in the middle of the gray-lit SHIELD hallway at that point, but now she stepped forward again, coming in close to stand under Gwen’s chin. She reached up, putting her hand on Gwen’s cheek. “I’m sorry,” she said.

Her eyes were green, and very deep.

Gwen reached up and put her hand over Natasha’s, holding it in place against her cheek. She leaned into it, pressing into it for comfort. “Thank you,” she said, looking at the wrist with its
hundreds of microscopically-fine white knife scars, too tiny to see from even two feet away, the
hard evidence that there was only one way to get as good as Nat was. “I, uh...” She flicked her
eyes to meet Nat’s, again, feeling huge, but also very breakable, beside the smaller woman. “I
appreciate your sympathy.”

Nat looked down, and chuckled, just a little. Her hand tightened on Gwen’s cheek, and then pulled
away. “Greatest generation,” she said musingly, before graciously changing the subject. “Did you
bring a kit down?”

“What?” It took Gwen a minute to realize that Nat had changed the subject to something less
painful. “Oh! Yes, I did, hang on.” She ducked back inside the gym, then returned to the door a
moment later, gesturing with her duffel bag to indicate she was ready to go. Nat turned and led
the way down the hallway, a moderate pace and silence both working to put Gwen back at ease.

Natasha was really very good at what she did.

“So,” Gwen said, taking a deep breath, “What is there to do for fun in this town?”

Natasha gave her an incredulous look, and Gwen returned her own look of pure desperation: please
let’s stop talking about it. Please help me do anything, think about anything, else.

Nat gave in. “Well...” she said, her voice so mild that Gwen knew immediately she was going to
say something perfect, “...what do you know about the sport called ‘trolling’? Because there’s this
guy at Phoenix News I would love to put you in contact with...”

Gwen had an apartment in Washington, D.C., now. The woman (the realtor—no, SHIELD agent.
SHIELD realtor?) who set her up in it was apologetic, explaining that the powers that be had
deemed it more important that Gwen be near SHIELD command and the Triskellion than it was
that she have a large place. Gwen didn’t have the heart to tell her that her entire apartment before
the war could have fit in that big new living room, nor that it had been more than enough space for
two of her.

She met her neighbor the first night there, a pretty blond named Kate who worked irregular hours
as a nurse. Kate was friendly, but distant, in the manner that women usually were towards Gwen.
Gwen smiled, and remained friendly, but it was difficult not to grow frustrated with the
undefinable something wrong which she was apparently always doing.

“That’s not like you,” Natasha said when Gwen complained about it, before impressively knocking
back two goons with one roundhouse kick.

“Having trouble relating to women? I assure you, it is.” Gwen threw the shield, and neither of
Nat’s mooks got back up.

Nat strode confidently towards the keypad. “You get along with me alright,” she said mildly.
“And anyway, I meant the giving up.”

Gwen sighed, but as loathe as she was to admit it... Natasha did have a point. So two days later, she
baked up the only recipe she’d ever really enjoyed cooking: her mother’s oatmeal cookies. It
made a small batch—they had never needed much, and it was more affordable—and Gwen found
herself scarfing down the first attempt herself, standing at her large entryway window and trying
not to sob at the memories. The next batch, though, she managed to save for Kate, and she slipped
them onto a plate with a note: It’s good to have neighbors, but it’s better to have friends.

Feeling vindictive, she signed it, Gwen Barnes.
There were a lot of things to love about the future.

Gwen almost cried when she realized that she would never be required to wear a skirt again; she immediately acquired a full wardrobe of trousers for every occasion, even formal-wear—Dr. Banner took her shopping for her tux, and couldn’t stop smiling the whole time—and burned the skirts SHIELD had provided her with out of some sort of misplaced effort at providing familiarity in a sort of effigy to the past.

The thing no one seemed to understand was that the past was full of stumbling blocks and hurdles that no one had time for any more, and Gwen was furiously delighted to be rid of it.

She loved driving, too. It wasn’t something they had taught women, for the most part, but she had learned during the war, that and riding a motorbike. She had always assumed that she would have to give these things up when she went home, but happily—as she thought with deep, bitter sarcasm—she had avoided that problem.

Between her backpay—not quite as much as it would have been had she been in the Army proper, but still significant—and something called “licensing of her image”, she was never going to have to worry about money again.

And also? The internet.

Holy cow.

But there were plenty of downsides, too. Gwen had never been an expert at styling hair, but even if she had been, that knowledge would now be hopelessly unfashionable.

And nobody smoked, anymore! Gwen, used to years of having it as a tactic and a thing to do with her hands, found herself jittery and irritable without it. A pack of cigarettes was appallingly expensive now—good grief!—and it just wasn’t worth the shocked and disgusted looks people gave her when they saw her in particular doing it. But the restless energy was greater now than it ever had been, and she was constantly fidgeting, looking for something to do with her hands, until Barton, of all people, sent her a breadbox-sized package entirely filled with clicky pens.

And also... The internet.

That one definitely belonged in both the plus and the minus columns.

Possibly her least favorite thing about the future, though, was the way everyone seemed to think that they knew her. That they owned her, in some way. Apparently, her legend had taken off after her death—had ballooned, becoming a legend in truth. Little girls wanted to be her, little boys wanted to make her proud... It should have been a good thing.

Should have.

But the version that everybody knew was that nincompoop from the comics. Little boys were taught that patriotism, not honor, was the key, and the little girls were taught mostly about her glorious, serum-enhanced hair. Everybody called her “Sarah Rogers”, which wasn’t her name, and seemed confused when she introduced herself as Gwen.

And nobody, nobody knew about Bucky.

The knock came around 8:30 in the evening, as Gwen was spending her usual half-hour staring at a
When she had gotten the apartment, someone—she had no idea who—had put together the fact that she used to be an artist, and had anonymously sent her over a thousand dollars in painting supplies, including canvas, easel, drop clothes, and the paint itself. At first, Gwen had been thrilled—she set it up in the bedroom, since she didn’t need nearly that much room for sleeping, good grief—but as time went on, and she continuously found herself unable to actually paint anything, it turned from a delight to an exercise in frustration. Now, she dutifully set a timer and sketched ideas—she used plain paper for the sketches, not the canvasses, she wasn’t wasteful—and when half an hour was over, she threw the papers in the trash and gratefully turned her back.

It was good to have a routine, she supposed. Anyway, the knock interrupted the Half Hour of Hell, and Gwen was grateful enough to turn off the timer and go answer the door. Her neighbor Kate stood on the opposite side, empty plate clutched in one hand, note in the other, and an embarrassed expression on her face.

*Good,* Gwen thought, and opened the door.

Kate turned out to be a kind sort of woman with a soft smile, although her eyes were smarter than her demeanor would indicate—Gwen suspected that the doctors at her work tended to underestimate Kate, but she didn’t say it because it didn’t seem her place. Kate praised the oatmeal cookies, and smiled indulgently as Gwen explained mistily about them being her mother’s recipe; she looked interested when Gwen mentioned they made a small batch.

But the real reason she had come over, it was revealed, had been the note. “I couldn’t help but notice,” Kate had started, sitting down with the cup of coffee Gwen had made. (Bruce Banner had sent Gwen a machine called a Keurig as a sort of housewarming present, and it made just about everything. There were times when the future really was swell.) “…but that note you left me. You signed it Gwen Barnes?”

Kate’s eyebrows were arched in confusion, despite the fact that Kate was far too smart to actually be puzzled by that.

Gwen smiled crookedly. “Back during the war, of course, we couldn’t tell anyone,” she said, deliberately addressing the secrecy of the thing and not the thing itself. “The S.S.R. had only accepted me on the premise that I was unmarried; if it had got out, that was falsifying my enlistment forms. Couldn’t have that.” She sipped her coffee.

Actually, she probably could have gotten away with it—the S.S.R. had been some strange hybrid of military and intelligence organizations, and hadn’t purely followed the rules of either one—but it would have cost her political capital, capital that she could—and had—spent instead on things like, oh... getting permission to take a side-trip to sabotage a rail line that had led directly to one of the camps.

In other words, it would have cost more than she wanted to spend, especially since she and Bucky weren’t exactly the most affectionate couple in the world.

“Nowadays, though, there isn’t any particularly good reason to hide it. Bucky was—”

How to describe it, all the things Bucky was to her? The way he smiled like he knew all the things she could do, the way he leaned into her even before the serum? The way his whole family relied on him for everything, and he wanted to give them everything even as, at the same time, he wanted desperately to be away from that pressure? The way he had hated, hated like *poison,* the idea of
her joining the war, but did everything he could to make sure she made it, anyway?

The way he could turn the lights on for a whole room of people, but preferred to hang at the back, with her.

The way that, when Bucky was around, she had always had something to paint.

She couldn’t describe it, was the answer. She just couldn’t.

She swallowed. “He was my husband,” she said instead, “and I loved him. And there’s really no reason not to use my real name, now.”

Kate smiled, gentle and warm, and Gwen was reminded inescapably of Elly Mays, from the S.S.R. Except that Elly had been capable of smiling gently like that right up until she stabbed a man and took away his gun, and it seemed unlikely that Kate could do that, too.

After that, Kate stopped by regularly—about once every week or two. She usually brought a project, which Gwen would gamely pitch in on with greater or lesser degrees of success. They had a fabulous time working on a baseball predictor together; Gwen was very familiar with the game, while Kate had a good head for algorithms, so they made a good team. And when Kate brought up knitting—a skill neither of them possessed, but both were interested in acquiring—it ended with Gwen telling stories about the codes the women of the S.S.R. and the Resistance had once encrypted into their scarves. They stabbed themselves countless times trying to learn it, and Gwen wasn’t sure the garments they produced were actually wearable—the amount of margaritas consumed during the process didn’t seem to help Kate’s dexterity, either—but they had a fabulous time mucking about with it.

It wasn’t quite the same as the friends Gwen had made in her youth, because Kate had her own job and her own life and revealed precious little about either during their chats, and also because Kate was younger than Gwen, whereas even Ethel Proctor had been about four years older.

Still, it was a friendship, of sorts, and Gwen treasured it.

Nick Fury had a lot of flaws, and Gwen had been angry about a lot of things, both before and after the Battle of Manhattan, but she would say this for him: he had only had to be told once to call her “Gwen.”

They hadn’t changed her legal name, though. Her driver’s licence still said “Rogers” instead of “Barnes.”

It was an odd thing for everybody to have missed. During the war, she could understand it: she was obviously loyal, and as the last remnant of the supersoldier program she was too valuable to dismiss, so why would they have bothered with investigating her?

But after the war, too?!

There were four major biographies of her—besides the comic books, that was—and apparently every single one of them had managed to miss that she had been married. But she had been, and in the church she’d spent most of her life attending, too, so how had that particular fact escape the entire world?

It took three months for her to make the pilgrimage to Brooklyn to find out.
She found the church where she had left it—not true for all of them; the orphanage she would have been sent to if her mother had died a year earlier was gone, erased as if it never had been—but she lucked out in this case. It took quite some persuading to convince the pastor that she was who she claimed to be; even more to persuade him to let her look at the records. “Look, I even know the date!” she snapped. “July 2nd, 1939! Believe me, it was the day my entire life was changed!”

He sniffed, and looked down his nose at her, but eventually folded in the face of her ire. He didn’t let her into the church office directly, but instead sent her round to a branch of the library where apparently all the old records were stored and preserved in trust. Probably for the best, Gwen was forced to admit, as the librarian issued her special gloves and instructed her on the careful way she must handle the materials.

There was something wonderful about it, and also eerie. There was the same sort of hush to the library archive that Gwen would have expected to find at the church, the sense of something greater present, of time, of power. She found her voice coming out in a whisper, in much the same way one did in cathedrals.

The librarian, a solidly-built woman with pink hair and smooth, golden skin that probably hid her real age, found the right volume and passed it over. Gwen was struck by the age of it—the cover was some sort of velvet, and it was peeling away, the edges ragged; the paper was thin and the ink, like the other volumes the librarian had examined first, was faded—but when she opened it with her gloved hands, she saw the date on the first entry, and her stomach twisted into knots. *March 15th, 1937.* This book—this old book, ancient book, that Gwen had to handle *so carefully*—was almost twenty years younger than she was.

Her stomach rose and flipped over in disorientation, and her hands were shaking as she slowly, delicately, turned the pages.

In the end, she did, indeed, find her marriage in the church register, and when she did, she laughed and laughed and laughed, until she was crying and almost ready to puke.

The marriage certificate and the marriage registry were two different things. The first one, Gwen had taken back with her to their apartment, storing it with their other important documents and her mother’s leftover jewelry. That was lost to time—it would have gone to Becca, she supposed, who would have done who-knew-what with all of it after Gwen’s supposed death. The other, though, the marriage registry, was a church document—a book which was kept in the church offices and updated with not only the marriages, but also births, deaths, baptisms and so forth of all the members of the congregation.

Normally, the pastor would record the marriage in the registry directly from certificate, which he also filled out and filed with the state before passing it back to the couple. But Pastor Mitchell—as Gwen remembered well—had been a bit absent-minded, and certainly distractible. He must have gotten pulled away, and only come back to add her to the registry later. She knew he must have, because she came in after Louisa Cook’s baby born on the 3rd.

And he must have written the entry from memory, because he had recorded her name, incorrectly, as *Gwen Rogers Barnes.*

Gwen laughed and laughed, until the librarian left her alone out of sheer discomfort.

No wonder no one knew about her marriage; she had never been Sarah Barnes, after all.

“They want me to *what*?”
Gwen had been assigned an “event coordinator” by SHIELD, a woman who monitored her official correspondence and vetted invitations like this one. Almost nothing made it through to Gwen, and the things that did were mostly awards, which involved brief appearances and almost no effort on Gwen’s part. Over the months—it had been just over a year, actually—since her recovery from the ice, Gwen had decided that that was a very good thing. She hadn’t adjusted, yet, to the modern parlance, much less the modern appearance. Most of the time, she wasn’t even sure she wanted to adjust.

“I wouldn’t have asked,” the event coordinator—Marcia Dubuque—told her. There was an apology in her voice and eyes, but there were nerves in the way she bit her lip. “But it is local, and it’s a pretty good cause... I just thought—”

“No, I’m sure it is, I just—most of the speaking events that come in, you don’t even tell me about.” Gwen paused. “What is the cause here, exactly?”

Marcia took a deep breath. “It’s the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington,” she said. “They have these educational conferences every year—plus some other great stuff—and this one is on leadership in a diverse group. They particularly wanted you, because you broke so many barriers when you did it all those years ago, and they were thinking they could do a then-and-now sort of contrast, and...”

“Marcia...” Gwen leaned her elbows on Marcia’s desk and put her chin in her hands, drawing out the name and raising her eyebrows mildly. “Who do you know on the board?”

Marcia looked abashed. “My cousin Whitney,” she admitted.

Gwen nodded. “Well, then tell your cousin Whitney,” she said, “that if she wants me to show up, she has to promise to feed me.” She raised an eyebrow in mock-scolding. “And tell her I can eat a lot.”

Marcia blinked, double-taking, and then broke out in smiles.

Gwen was going to have to send Marcia a thank-you card, because the ladies at the InterFaith Conference were exactly what she had been looking for. No one there acted star-struck around Gwen. One or two expressed admiration, and Caroline Shapiro—an O-5 in the Coast Guard—told her point-blank that stories about Gwen had inspired her all her life. But no one was gushing, or anything like that.

And it wasn’t all ladies, either; there were plenty of gentlemen there, definitely. But church was the one place Gwen had always had an easier time relating to women than men, and she found herself fulfilling that expectation in this case, as well, even though the men who came to talk to her were certainly friendly and polite.

By the time the conference had ended, Gwen had arranged to have lunch with two Baptist ministers who were particularly involved in social causes. She had to depart early—an hour before the last event of the conference started, she was extracted to SHIELD for a mission—but she left with her heart singing and her face relaxed.

There had been no service, no sacrament or sermon, but for the first time this millennium, she was walking out of a building feeling like religion once more had a place in her life.

Well, okay... Climbed aboard a helicopter from the roof of a building, but... same difference, really.
One month later, Gwen arrived home from a dinner with two ministers, three faith leaders, and representatives from half a dozen social justice programs. She got off her bike, pelted upstairs, threw her bag in her apartment, and then immediately pounded on Kate’s door.

Kate, looking both bleary-eyed and baleful, opened it, sticking her head around the edge and peering over the chain. “What’s going on?” she asked. Her eyes became wary and hard when she saw Gwen’s desperate expression. “What do I need to bring?” Her arm, holding something beyond the scope of the opening, tensed.

“You yourself and your knowledge of how the heck to talk to people,” Gwen pleaded. “Kate, please, it’s an emergency!”

Kate stared at her incredulously, her shoulders relaxing, and shook her head. “Go start me a cup of that Hot Cider stuff,” she said. “I’ll be right over.”

Gwen paced back and forth in her kitchen as she brewed the cider in the little Keurig machine, biting her lip as she splashed Sailor Jerry into the mug, diverting the stream of hot liquid briefly with the flow of booze. She looked up when the door—she had left it unlocked—opened, and Kate slid inside, a wrapper clasped around herself and fuzzy slippers on her feet combating the fall chill. She passed over the mug, and gestured Kate down to the table, all the while worrying her lower lip between her teeth.

“Okay,” Kate said, gripping her hot cider like it was a lifeline. “Tell me what happened.”

“Darlene,” Gwen blurted. “I’ve talked about her before to you. She has a lecture series on the role of the Bible in our daily lives? Works with the IFC a lot?”

Kate swigged from the cider. “Right,” she said, blinking twice when she realized how much rum Gwen had given her. “Darlene. Is she the one who always brags about her son?”

“Yes! Yes, as a matter of fact, she is.” Gwen nodded a bit maniacally, rapping her knuckles on the counter. “Darlene was at the dinner tonight, and as soon as we arrived, she greeted some of the other people there like they were her family.”

“Well, she’s been in that scene for awhile,” Kate said reasonably.

“Yes she has. But in this case, it was because they really are her family.” Gwen turned the Keurig off after she was done making herself her own cup of spiked cider. The alcohol might not affect her cells, but she damned sure needed it for her spirits, right about now. “Charlotte, from the Black Lives Matter group—”

“You’ve talked to them before.”

“—Yeah, it’s important stuff,” Gwen said, dismissing the interjection. “Anyway, Charlotte has been telling me for ages about her nephew—who is actually her great-nephew—who does such good work for the Disabled American Veterans.”

“You’ve mentioned that once, too. Wasn’t that on your Giant List of Charities?”

Gwen had been going back and forth with Marcia Dubuque for months about who got to stay on the Giant List of Charities, and Kate asked about it with increasing degrees of amusement every week. “Yes, it was,” she said. “And I’ve been writing them checks, but the actual volunteer work I’ve been doing has been with other groups—mostly the Inter Faith Council, in fact.”
“Okay...” Kate sat back in her chair, frowning over the information Gwen was giving her and trying to get from there to the ‘emergency’ Gwen had mentioned.

Gwen took a deep breath. “There was also a group called Soulforce there,” she said. “Have you heard of them? Non-violent LGBT focus, including Right To Serve for LGBT members of the military.”

Kate’s eyebrows shot up. “Your kind of thing, right?”

“Right.” Gwen sat down opposite Kate, gripping her own mug tightly. “And one of the reps from Soulforce turned out to be Darlene’s daughter’s sister-in-law.”

“Good heavens.”

“Which I didn’t find out,” Gwen continued inexorably, “until after Linda had taken a good shot at setting me up with her ‘brother’.”

Kate blinked, and her mouth started to twitch. “Wait. Her ‘brother’, who was also Darlene’s son? The same son Darlene has been bragging about?!”

“And Charlotte’s great-nephew.” She scooted her mug to the side and leaned forward, banging her head against the table. “And who I now have a blind date with, because there were three of them, Kate, and I was completely out-numbered.” She looked up, peeking through her bangs. “I never stood a chance,” she added mournfully.

Kate was less than sympathetic, and laughed at her for three minutes straight.

Gwen had flat refused to wear a skirt since August of 2012, and was not about to change that rule. Not even for a date. Not even for a date with Darlene’s son. Instead, she showed up to the restaurant in flare-legged slacks, paired with a trim blouse cut in clean lines with a moderate neckline, something called a “statement necklace”, and a simple but elegant French twist. Her shield was in a carry-case at her feet, and, as she always did, she was wearing flats.

She sat at the bar and drank a cocktail—pink and over-priced, and served in a delicate-stemmed glass she was afraid she was going to shatter—and then another.

She waited forty-five minutes before the text came in from Darlene:

_I was asked to tell you there was a work-related emergency; reschedule plz?

Gwen looked down at her phone, and sighed.

At least now she knew what she could wear to the next date.

Except that she didn’t, because the next date they had set up, Gwen had to cancel. There was some kind of threat in Montana, and—

“I’m sorry,” she interrupted the agent briefing her and Nat, “did you just say exploding gophers?”

Anyway, she had to text Darlene to pass along her regrets.

“It’s alright,” Darlene burbled to her the next time they spoke on the phone, “I told him you work in emergency services, and he completely understands, and anyway it’s only fair after he had to cancel last time for one of his vets. I really appreciate you being so calm about that, Gwen, that
was real nice of you—"

“Wait, hold on,” Gwen said, laughing. She was standing in a Starkbucks, getting drinks for the team mostly because debriefs were awful and she would have volunteered to do just about anything in order to stretch her legs. “You said you told him I work in emergency services?”

“Well, you do,” Darlene said, her voice blase. “Or... what would you call it?”

“I’d call it being an Avenger!” Gwen pulled the phone away from her ear to stare at it incredulously, then put it back and made her way to the pickup counter. “You didn’t tell him it was me?”

“Well, no,” Darlene said. Her voice took on a chiding tone, and Gwen smiled a silent thanks as she accepted the two drink-carriers from the barista, the phone cradled against her shoulder. “I think you being the Angel is a little less important than you being my friend, Gwen.”

“I...” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Thank you, Darlene. I think so, too.”

She couldn’t stop smiling as she walked back to the Triskellion.

“No, I just think—Darlene! Darlene, listen to me— I can’t go this weekend. Why not? Because I’m going to a funeral.” Jenny Proctor, Ethel’s oldest, had just passed from bowel cancer.

Darlene exploded into apologies and sympathetic good wishes, and they rescheduled yet again.

Kate was slicing cabbage and tossing it into a bowl, for some reason. “So you still haven’t had that date?”

“I’m beginning to wonder if I ever will,” Gwen said mournfully. “It wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world, I suppose, if it never happened.”

“Oh?”

It was a very large bowl. It was a lot of cabbage. Kate got through half the head before either of them spoke again.

“You know...” Gwen bit her lip and sipped her cola, then tried again. “You know I haven’t been on a date since... since Bucky died?”

“I didn’t know, but... I’m not exactly surprised to hear it.” Kate turned the head and started shredding the last quarter. “You’re not really extroverted, and I know that you...” She glanced up over the large, curved knife she was wielding, the intelligence she usually veiled for once plain on her face. “...you mourned,” she finished simply. Then she shrugged. “It’s normal, really.”

Gwen bit her lip and nodded, watching the knife make short work of the remaining head, not meeting Kate’s eye until the last of the shreds were dumped into the bowl and Kate was washing off the cutting board.

“The thing is... I wasn’t exactly going on dates when Bucky was alive, either.”

Kate paused, measuring out salt. “You never went out with anybody before him?”

“No,” Gwen laughed, smiling at the memory of her own awkward frame, of her omnipresent, burning anger at the world. “No, I wasn’t exactly anybody’s first choice for a date. Too brainy,
and too scrappy, and anyway, half the people who knew us were convinced Bucky was going to make an honest woman of me sooner or later, anyway, so why bother?” She shrugged. “And they were right, in the end.”

“And Bucky never took you out, to the... soda parlors, or... lover’s lane...?”

“What’s a lover’s lane? No, don’t answer that—” She stopped, watching Kate toss the bowl. “What on earth are you making?”

“Uh.” Kate’s hands stilled, and she looked down at the mountain of shredded brassica dubiously. “It’s supposed to be sauerkraut?”

“Uh- huh...” It was literally just cabbage and salt; Gwen was pretty sure Kate was missing something there. “...And have you ever made it before?”

“...No?”

They studied it together, and then Gwen shrugged. “Well, if it’s terrible, at least cabbage is cheap. Carry on.”

“Would you believe the jar to age it in was actually more expensive?” Kate took back up tossing it with efficient, deadly-looking movements. Sometimes Gwen watched Kate and really just wanted to teach her to fight.

“Why didn’t you just use a leftover butter tub? I have a small mountain of them.”

“They said the smell would get into it. Hey, do you mind...? I’m supposed to toss this for ten minutes, and already my arm is sore.” She did look sore, too, rubbing at her shoulder and grimacing, so Gwen accepted the bowl and started tossing.

It was kind of fun, actually. Satisfying, in a way, to watch the little mounds of vegetable shiver and tumble at the movement of her spoon.

“So Barnes never took you out?” Kate asked, watching Gwen work. Her voice was casual and light, the sound of a friend trying to get the story straight, and Gwen was deeply grateful for the natural remove of it.

“Not often. Once in awhile.” Gwen shrugged. “I didn’t miss it, mostly; I was insular, not one for parties or dancing.”

“But now you feel, what? Cheated by life?”

Gwen’s smiled turned bitter and she poked the cabbage more fiercely. “I always feel cheated by life,” she said, voice sour. “No, my complaint is more... I wouldn’t have known what I was doing in this situation, even if I were in my own time. And I’m not.” She froze, then shook her head. “I didn’t mean that how it sounded. This is the time I’m in, therefore it’s my own time, I know I can’t go back. But...” She started stirring the proto-kraut again. “...I guess I just don’t know the rules all the time. Still. Even though I’ve been here two years, now.” She grimaced. “It doesn’t measure against the twenty-five I spent there.”

“I guess. You’re going on a date, though; that’s a good sign, right?”

“Maybe. But it’s a date under duress—kind of—and I suppose it is good for me, but short of punching the guy in the nose, I’ve got no idea what to do if it goes badly.” She frowned, stabbing harder at the cabbage until a couple of shreds went flying up into her hair.
Kate snorted, unimpressed by her nerves, and dumped some black pepper in the bowl. “I tell you what...” Her sarcasm was mild and soft, but still distinctly present, accompanied by a gentle sort of smile. “...if this guy does something that makes The Avenging Angel punch him in the nose, we’ll just agree to assume he deserved it.”

“Excuse me.” The voice was young, of indeterminate gender, and had a tension underlying it which told Gwen that although they was putting a good face on it, the speaker was frightened.

Gwen turned.

It was a girl, judging by the dress—a rather pretty, frothy concoction in pearlescent pink—of about seven years of age. Her gaze was intelligent and clear, but scared, and she was looking at Gwen like Gwen was a beacon in a foggy night.

“Miss, are you the Avenging Angel?”

Gwen was not in uniform—this was a IFCW charity auction, and she was wearing a champagne-colored pantsuit—but her face was well-known, and honestly there just weren’t that many women out there who were more than six feet tall. “Yes...”

“I lost my mother,” said the girl clearly. “And they say that if you lose your parent, you should find an adult you trust to help you look for them.” She folded her arms and tilted her pointy little chin up. “You’re the Avenging Angel; I know I can trust you.”

Gwen blinked, and then blinked again, then nodded. “Let’s go,” she said, holding out her hand.

She did not actually have any clue who the girl’s mother was, nor did she recognize the name when the girl supplied it. But she knew who would know, so she escorted the young lady across the room to where Darlene was holding court, surrounded by a number of people who were trying to look down their noses at her. (Given Darlene’s personality, it wasn’t much of a surprise that those folks weren’t having much luck.)

The crowd around Darlene was about five people deep. Three were older white men, all of whom Gwen had been introduced to, none of whom were particularly interesting; Gwen remembered all of their names, but she rather wished she didn’t have to. One was a younger—mid-thirties—white woman, with obnoxiously gaudy jewelry, to whom Gwen had not been introduced, although she had seen her in tabloids from time to time; she seemed to be the only one of the crowd actually angry. The three older men were all offended, but not heated—perhaps the discussion was some subject less personal to them, or perhaps they were simply more self-assured. The lone black man, fifth in the group, seemed to be calm and also stifling laughter, if she could judge by his shoulders—his back was turned to her, so she couldn’t see his face.

“I hate to interrupt,” Gwen began—

—but she didn’t have a chance to finish because Darlene looked over and all but started licking cream from her whiskers. “Gwen! Oh, it’s so good to see you—how long has it been, a month?”

Darlene was the sort of woman who knew to the hour just how long it had been, so Gwen was instantly suspicious.

“Somewhere around that long—” she started.

“—Oh, and you’re just in time!” Darlene’s hand shot out like a claw, one of the few parts of Darlene’s body to show her age, snagging the arm of the youngest of the men before he could turn
or excuse himself. “I’ve been wanting to introduce you two for ages. Hard to believe it’s taken this long!”

Darlene was not fooling anyone.

“Gwen, this is my son Sam Wilson—you remember, I’ve told you about him? Sam, this is my friend Gwen I’ve told you about—isn’t she a darling?”

“Oh, that’s not really... why... I...”

She stopped.

Darlene was a dear, tricky minx of a good friend who had completely neglected to mention that her son was absolutely gorgeous. Warm brown eyes, sharp cheekbones, sharper chin, and a wide mouth prone to smiles. He was smiling now, in fact, a half-smile, half-smirk, one eyebrow raised in mutual admission that Darlene was a weapon of mass destruction and oh my God—he had a little gap between his front teeth. Gwen’s stomach, completely involuntarily, clenched.

The blond actress asked, “I thought her name was Sarah?” in a tone of confusion, and Gwen could barely hear it at all over the pounding of her heart, over the feel of her teeth denting hard into her own bottom lip, over the sudden awareness of a subtle, masculine cologne.

God, Sam’s eyes were warm.

“And who is this, then?” cooed Darlene.

Who was who?

With a start, Gwen remembered the little girl, who she had just been ignoring like a great, cow-eyed oaf for the last minute. Deliberately, she blinked, pulling herself back into reality. “Dee!” she yelped. “Delicia Harris, this is the Reverend Darlene Wilson; she’s good people, and we can trust her completely. Dee can’t find her parents,” Gwen explained to Darlene, “And I know there’s a system for that, but I don’t know what it is. Some kind of intercom...?”

Darlene smiled quite genuinely. “I’ll take care of her,” she assured Gwen. “Dee, I know exactly who your mother is. Goodness, you look just like her! Come along, we’ll go talk to security, pass the word to them that you’ve been found.”

Dee looked back at Gwen, who nodded in encouragement and reassurance, then took Darlene’s hand. “I’m adopted,” she said dubiously, but Darlene brushed her off.

“Well, you look just like her, anyway. Come on, it’s this way...”

Without Darlene to center them—to rally against?—the group broke up, splitting off into pairs and wandering away so that, suddenly, without quite knowing how it happened, Gwen found herself alone with Sam Wilson, who was still gorgeous and kind-looking and amused.

That gap between his teeth was giving her palpitations.

“You know,” said Sam Wilson, nodding after his mother in fond exasperation, “If a nuclear strike ever wipes out the Pentagon, I’m pretty sure we can just put her at the head of the army, and stand back.”

Gwen threw her head back and laughed, unexpected surprised by the mental picture. It was true, Darlene at the head of an army was a rather terrifying thought. Something about the bayonet,
Gwen decided...

And before she knew it, for the first time in years...

Her laughter slowed and stopped, too coarse for the delicacy of the moment, the shred of grace and hope welling up.

...for the first time in years, she had an idea for a painting again.

She glanced away, looking around the room—Darlene and Dee had vanished—and then back at Sam. Sam’s eyes were still so very, very warm. In fact, was it warm in here? She felt the flush building up her neck, and cut her eyes away, moving her left foot nervously. She was wearing peep-toe, nude-colored flats, which made a plastic-sounding tap-tap-tap against the floor.

Sam watched her for a moment—oh God, he was sharp-eyed as well as good-humored, what was she going to do?—and then coughed, prompting her gently. “I know she can be irresistible,” he said, “once she gets an idea in her head. That’s how this happened.” He gestured around the room, indicating the charity auction to build up his mother’s most favored charity. “So if you really weren’t that into the idea of a date...”

“I am!” she blurted, eyes widening in horror. “Oh God. I am, I just—”

She bit her lip again, savagely, as his eyebrow—his right—arched slowly upward. She swallowed, wavering back and forth on her, and gathered her thoughts.

“I haven’t... dated... much,” she said carefully. “Or... ever, really. I wasn’t exactly...” More familiar—more comfortable—with the idea of her own unattractiveness than with his exceptionally-attractiveness, she offered a wry smile, and watched his shoulders relax.

“Well, then, Mrs. Barnes... It was Barnes, right?” For the first time, he showed a hint of uncertainty, obviously trying to reconcile the knowledge he had from his mother with the knowledge he had from the rest of the world.

She didn’t care. She felt the smile spreading over her face, thawing her out like the first strong sunlight of spring. He’d had the two to choose from, and he’d trusted his mother. No one ever got that right, but Sam had—had without her saying a word, without her having to re-introduce herself, without needing to explain that her name wasn’t Rogers, and it also wasn’t Sarah. She supposed intellectually that it was more about Darlene than her, but it still felt... comfortable. Like being known, being recognized, for the first time in the two years she had been awake.

Or for the first time in seventy years, depending on how you looked at it.

“Yeah,” she said, then coughed to clear the hoarseness from her throat and tried again. “Yeah, it was Barnes. Gwen Barnes.” She held out her hand.

He took it, shook it firmly, without hesitation—but he didn’t let go, holding it gently, shifting the grip to twine their fingers together. “Then, Mrs. Barnes... it would be my pleasure to take you out to dinner on Monday night.”

She looked down at their clasped hands—he had big hands, but so did she, and they fit together so well—and then back up at him, beaming into his face from a distance that seemed shorter than it had a second ago. “What’s wrong with tomorrow?” she asked, feeling reckless, giddy—like jumping out of an aeroplane, like throwing the first punch.

Sam leaned in, laughing gently. “Well, actually...” He was whispering in her ear, now, and she
felt a sort of effervescence rising up her spine. He was the same height she was, just about, but he felt taller. “...I only have the one suit,” he said, mock-confessing.

She giggled, a burbling sort of sound that came up without her even thinking about it, and agreed. They made the arrangements and parted ways, but for the rest of the night, the memory of warm, dry palms and good-humored eyes had her flitting around the gala like a ballerina, practically bouncing wherever she stepped in her pretty, impractical shoes.

Their reservations were at seven, and she found herself at the bar at six-thirty, drinking ridiculously-colored cocktails again and beating a syncopated tattoo with her foot. Sam showed up ten minutes later—still plenty of time before their table was ready—and joined her, ordering a vodka martini. “Dirty,” he said, voice smooth, glancing up at her out of the corner of his eye.

Completely involuntarily, her mouth watered.

Sam turned on his stool to watch her. “Thanks for agreeing to this,” he said. His voice was smooth and confident, but there was an undertone of uncertainty she found oddly reassuring. “To meeting up again, I mean... I know we cancelled a few times.”

She swallowed her pink nonsense, then gave up and ordered what she had honestly wanted in the first place: Bushmills on the rocks. (The bartender blinked, and poured her a water as well.) She looked back at Sam. “I think we both cancelled,” she pointed out. “Busy lives. Not easy to accommodate.”

It wasn’t a warning, exactly, but it wasn’t not a warning, either. They did lead busy lives; it would be hard to accommodate. And that didn’t even take into account the paparazzi, who had thankfully started leaving her alone after she broke a few cameras and was sufficiently boring, but who were never guaranteed to stay away.

She was astonished that no one had picked up on this connection, yet. SHIELD had to have someone watching her, but either they hadn’t noticed Sam, or—for some reason—they had chosen not to submit reports about him. Natasha, she knew, monitored her file, and this wasn’t exactly the sort of thing Nat would stay quiet about—more merciless teasing, really—so the fact that Nat hadn’t said anything to her meant that Sam, for whatever reason, wasn’t in there.

“Busy, yeah... But I think we’ll manage.” Sam twisted the stem of his glass, then sipped, the olives rocking at a jaunty angle against the rim. “Made it tonight, didn’t we?”

It sounded like an optimistic sentiment, but, Gwen realized, it wasn’t. Instead, it was a very minor reproof. He had noticed her about-face on the subject of meeting him, and while he wasn’t angry, he did want to know what had changed.

Gwen flushed, and looked down. It was an odd feeling, to understand him this way. The last person she had understood so instinctively... It wasn’t Bucky.

It was Peggy, actually.

She took a swig of her whiskey. “It feels like a big step,” she said. It wasn’t an apology any more than Sam’s comment had been censure, but at the same time, it also was, in a roundabout way. “I don’t exactly have a long and exciting dating history.”

Sam smiled, crookedly. “It’s only one date,” he pointed out. “No need to go borrowing trouble.”

Gwen watched his long, strong fingers twisting the martini glass—back, and forth; back, and forth.
The olives rocked gently against the rim again, and she felt a strange surge of sympathy for them: *yeah, that’s exactly how I’m feeling right now, too, little buddies.* She was scared—and not in the way she used to being scared, the violence-scared where the solution was to fight back harder. Instead, it was a more formless fear, less direct, less rational: *what if I fail? What if it doesn’t work? What if he doesn’t want me?*

*(What if he feels the same way everyone else always has?)*

But at the same time...

She wanted him. It probably wouldn’t have hit quite so strongly if she hadn’t known he was wonderful before getting a look at him, but she had, and by the time she finally laid eyes on him she had known she would like him. And then he had looked like *that.* Like an angel, only more tangible; like a prince, only more sensual.

Gwen *wanted.*

The olives rocked, back and forth. Back, and forth.

She swallowed dry, then met Sam’s eyes. “What if I like... trouble?”

Sam lost his smile, eyes going intent and sharp—to cover surprise, she thought.

She felt her breath rushing faster over lips that felt scorched. “I’ve always been kind of a trouble *magnet,* actually,” she continued, feeling a familiar, tiny line form between her too-bushy eyebrows. The strategy line; the *daring* line. “I’ve got a real bad habit of getting in over my head.”

Now it was Sam’s turn to watch her glass. Her hands felt huge—well, they sort of were, but they felt even bigger than that, enormous and paw-like as she lifted her tumbler to her lips. Her lips, at least, were attractive, she thought, swallowing the rest of drink in three quick mouthfuls: plump, well-formed, and she was actually wearing lipcolor tonight. She set the empty glass down on the green marble counter, watching as her hand moved away and lay, flat, fingers spread, on the empty surface between them.

Sam’s eyes snapped up to her face. “Trouble,” he repeated. His hand moved towards hers on the counter, fingers spread as if to settle over top of it, but he jerked it back towards himself instead, the movement aborted. He picked up his martini and knocked it back quickly, setting it down on the counter firmly and resting his fingers flat over the base.

Gwen *really* needed to stop watching his damned hands. For one thing, they were doing terrible things to her respiration... It was rushing out of her almost faster than it went it, barely lingering long enough in her chest for her blood to steal the oxygen from it.

Sam gave a small, acknowledging nod to himself, then looked up with the sweetest smile she had seen on him yet. “I don’t exactly have an aversion to trouble, myself,” he said.

No, he didn’t just say it... That was a *dare* he had just thrown at her. Gwen felt her pulse take off like a rocket, burning and smoking for a second before accelerating, accelerating...

She took a deep breath. “Yes,” she said evenly, giving up on the pretext and just answering the real question directly.

Sam froze for half a second like he hadn’t expected her to say that, then nodded at her and got up, waving for the host and cancelling their reservations.
Sam took his car. Gwen followed on her motorcycle.

It was a short drive to his place, but it was still *too damned long.*

---

They were kissing as soon as the door closed behind them, and thank God for Sam, because Gwen would have lost her nerve if it had just been up to her.

They had walked through the door, and Gwen had hesitated, and then Sam just turned around, put his hands around her cheeks, and leaned in. Thank goodness he had, too, because it was an *amazing* kiss, warm and full of possibilities and *so damned warm,* hands and lips and she could hear his heart beating only inches away, but still, she found she needed to feel it, to feel the thud-thud-thud of it pressed up against her. Every shred of hair on her arms and legs stood up at attention, the back of her neck lighting up with prickles, and she found herself clutching at his shirt. It felt good, it felt *so* good, like she was defrosting all over again, except she was already awake, this time, and it was *glorious.*

“Sam,” she gasped. “Sam, Sam, *please.*”

“Yeah,” he said. His voice was shaking, and his eyes were wide. He was looking up the half-inch into her eyes, panting, and one of his hands had moved to around her waist. Sam had big hands, she thought, strong hands, and his thumb was digging in, through the thin fuzzy wool of her cashmere shell, pressing against her stomach. He was looking up at her like she was a miracle, as if—she squirmed—as if she were beautiful and desireable, and he wanted to watch her go crazy, wanted to *make* her go crazy... She only barely hesitated before stepping into the embrace.

But Sam was watching her back, watching her closely, and when she hesitated, his face had changed, the want and the wonder becoming temporarily banked. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

She opened her mouth, started to say *nothing,* but then the truth poured out of her, too raw to stop. “I don’t know what I’m doing,” she gasped, and it hung there, in the air between them for a second. She cringed back against the door, not looking at him.

“Hey.” The hand at her waist moved back up, cupping her face once again, and she felt Sam shift closer, resting his forehead against hers. That big, strong thumb stroked across her cheek delicately, like a bird’s wing brushing by. “Hey; it’s okay. We don’t have to move this fast. We can do something else if you—”

Her eyes flashed open again, looking at him in indignation, and he stopped, pulling back to give her a few inches of space.

“...Or, I... could be reading this wrong?”

Gwen swallowed and looked at the floor, then back up to meet his gaze. He was going to know eventually, anyway, she told herself, and it wasn’t fair to string him along, after all. She hooked one hand around the brass buckle of his belt and tugged, lightly, not enough to actually move him. “I’m not going to know any *better* by waiting,” she said, then added the hardest part: “And I... want. I want *you,* I want you like I haven’t wanted—”

—since *Bucky,* she finished silently. She remembered the tentative flickers of desire she had felt around Howard, and, in the face of this burning conflagration, felt incredibly foolish.

“Flattering,” Sam noted, tipping his head to the side. “Okay. There’s a couch right over there; you wanna sit down on it?”
She felt her shoulders square of their own accord. “I bet there’s a bed somewhere around here, too,” she countered.

Sam’s eyebrows rocketed upwards. “There is,” he allowed. “You gonna be comfortable there, though?”

“Yes,” she said, eager and desperate and only a little nervous. “Please, Sam?”

Something changed behind his eyes, and he pulled her forwards, brushing a kiss over her cheekbone, against her forehead, onto the tip of her nose. “Yeah,” he agreed, sliding his hands back around the rear of her neck and tugging gently. “Yeah, okay. Let’s go.”

Sam’s bed was giant—Gwen compared it to the barely-more-than-a-cot she had shared with Bucky, and smiled—and his coverlet was elaborate, red and purple and gold. The headboard was pure swank: huge and made out of oak, with shelves and cabinets and recessed lighting that activated at a touch. It also had posts at each corner, massive ones, each at least four inches in diameter. There were no curtains. It was the most self-indulgently male thing she had ever seen in her life, so of course she kicked off her shoes and took a running leap right into the center of it.

His mattress was hard and comfortable.

Sam smiled indulgently and got his own shoes off, then sat back against the pillows piled at the head, reclining like a sultan as he tapped on the lights, then tossed one of a small collection of beanbags from a bowl on the shelf towards the lightswitch for the room.

Now the only illumination came from the tiny lights under the uppermost edge of the headboard. Gwen crossed her legs, sitting Indian-style on top of Sam’s ridiculous, pillowy coverlet.

“Alright,” Sam said, “now comes the fun part.”

Gwen flushed, but didn’t move, because Sam’s tone had been sarcastic and she wasn’t sure what exactly he had meant.

He caught her look, and laughed a little. “I mean the part with the talking,” he clarified.

She winced.

“No, c’mon, it is not that bad. Look, you stopped for a minute there; that’s fine, I respect that. But I wanna know why you stopped, so I can spot it if you want to stop again.”

Gwen let out a puff of breath, and buried her face in her palms, her elbows propped on her knees. There were a couple of reasons for her to be reacting this way, she supposed, but at their heart, they all came down to... “Bucky,” she said, her voice emerging muffled from behind her hands.

She took them away from her face again, sitting up very straight to work the tension out of her back. “It all comes back to Bucky, I guess. You know we were married.”

She shot Sam a questioning look, and he nodded. “Mama said you were married and widowed. A widow named Gwen Barnes, in Emergency services, volunteered with the IFC a lot—that was all she gave me. Oh, and: tall, good-looking, old-fashioned. Which...” Sam gave an embarrassed half-shrug. “...is kind of my type. She wasn’t wrong about that.” He gave her a slow, warm smile, like a fox sunning itself on a rock. “She maybe neglected to mention how very much my type you actually were...”

Gwen chuckled weakly, embarrassed.
“...but you were talking about Bucky,” Sam finished, prompting.

Gwen took a breath, then let it out and took another. This didn’t get easier, even having done it before, with Natasha and Kate. “He was gay,” she said bluntly.

Sam paused. “That makes marrying you an odd choice,” he observed. His eyes never left her face, and she felt simultaneously comforted and disquieted by that.

“Not really,” she said bluntly. “He had to marry someone, right? Why not his best friend? And I was in love with him, so that worked out.”

Her toes were curling so hard they were digging into the coverlet.

She could see Sam thinking about this, digesting it. He would chew one little bit, then swallow it, and move on to chewing the next part. Eventually, he seemed to find the part he had to cut up, the bite that was too big to swallow, because he asked, “If he was gay, did you two ever...?”

No pretending he meant anything else.

“We tried... a few times,” she said dipping her head to the side to indicate the variety of levels of success. “Only really... you know, managed... once. Other than that, it was all...” She fluttered her right hand in a back-and-forth gesture like she was holding a violin, which she simultaneously did and did not want him to understand.

He did, as it happened. He snorted.

“Yeah, okay,” he said. “So when you said you didn’t know what you were doing... That was less an existential question, and more skill-specific?”

“Yes,” she agreed gratefully.

“Hokay, then.” His eyebrows were up again, but he was smiling, sharp and delighted. “I’ve got some good news for you, then: this is a thing you can learn.” Gwen bit her lip, and Sam gestured with his chin towards the expanse of pillows beside him. “Come here,” he told her.

She felt the blush start in her ears, spreading, warm, all down her neck and over her chest and shoulders. She swallowed, and leaned forward, coming to her hands and knees and crawling towards Sam, who raised his hands to pull her close. “Hey there,” he said, voice low and bright. He was holding her upright, almost as if to shake her, by the arms “You know of anything you don’t want to do?”

“I don’t want to fail,” she blurted.

He barked out a laugh, and looked down, resting his head against her blue-cashmere-covered shoulder for a moment. Then he raised his eyes again and leaned in, whispering in her ear. “Not gonna fail,” he said, and she shivered at the brush of warm air across the sensitive surface of her ear. “No failure here; as long as we’re both having fun, there is no failing involved.” His right hand let go of her arm, moving up to rub on her shoulder, and he pulled back to meet her gaze, checking in. “Okay?”

She nodded, then dropped her eyes, shy. Then she raised them again, because she was a nearly-thirty-year-old woman and she had been married for seven years, and it was absolutely ridiculous for her to be shy.

Even though she was.
“Okay...” she said. She licked her lips. “Would you—”

But she couldn’t make herself spill out the last words of it.

“What?” Sam was still talking directly into her ear, his warm breath brushing past her temple. “Would I what?”

She couldn’t make herself say it, so she just did it, instead, pulling back just enough to get her mouth on his, kissing him greedily, until he crushed her to him and took over, deepening the kiss, then pulling back and nibbling instead, just enough to tease. A moan rose up in her chest, catching her by surprise, and she got to feel him smile against her mouth when he heard it.

“Good?” he murmured.

“So good,” she assured him, whispering with happiness. Her hand was twisted into the fine cotton of his undershirt, but she could still tell her fingers were shaking. “Sam, I...”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “Gwen, this is crazy, but...”

“Yeah,” she agreed back, smiling against his mouth.

He growled and trailed his mouth over her cheek, firmly enough that she could feel the edges of his teeth. “You know...” he started, and she cut him off by taking his hands and, deliberately, placing them at her waist. She didn’t, quite, dare to put them directly on her breasts, but she thought maybe the waist would be a good clue.

It was.

One hand slid around, cupping her rear, pressing her in all along his length, their thighs and arms and chests pressing tightly against each other; the other hand slid up under her sweater, cupping gently, one thumb brushing over the nipple still safely locked inside its Victoria’s Secret armor. “Yeah?” he asked again, and she smiled back, just the same as before.

“Please,” she said, kissing him, and after that, he didn’t stop to check in. He just licked into her mouth, plunging his tongue in deep, then started planting a trail of kisses down her neck, his intent obvious. His thumb brushed over her nipple and she shivered—the feeling wasn’t so intense, not through her sweater and her bra, but the fact of it was, the sheer experience of someone playing with her breast, and it took her a moment to realize why.

Bucky had always avoided her breasts, of course.

This was new.

“Please,” she repeated, her voice much lower this time, and he looked up at the new note of it.

Either she was being obvious or Sam was very, very observant—she thought the latter—because he grinned sharply. “Oh, hell yeah,” he muttered, and then twisted, dumping her down on her back against the mountain of pillows. She started to shift lower, but stopped as Sam lifting her sweater straight off over her head, rolling it up and around her arms, pinning them very gently in place.

Before she could say anything, he had leaned in, pressing nipping kisses to her neck that made her gurgle and whine, even as she felt his clever, clever hands reaching in and lifting her breasts out of their cups, one hand sliding around back to pop the clasp on the bra. She had a moment to be self-conscious—her breasts, while larger than they had been, were still distinctly on the smaller side of normal, especially given the rest of her frame—before the sensation, the feeling of someone else
taking off her undergarment, sent a shock of... of *something* through her.

_It feels forbidden,_ she thought, and that only made sense: this was something no one had ever done for her before. She squirmed at the idea of her breasts being on display, just sitting there, out in the open for anyone to see... except it wasn’t just anyone, it was Sam. Sam, who she had instantly known was trustworthy; Sam, who looked at her and didn’t ignore what he _actually saw_ in favor of his expectations. Sam, who smiled like he knew a secret, and who touched her like he wanted to keep her.

“Sam,” she gasped. She slipped her hands out of the sweater and tugged at his shirt. “Sam.”

“Yeah,” he said. His voice was easy, unhurried as he stripped his shirt off, and with a rich undercurrent of something running beneath it, something syrupy-thick: _satisfaction_. Gwen felt her toes curl so sharply that there was a faint cracking sound from the joints. “Yeah, I’m just gonna hang out here with these for a while; you don’t mind, right?”

She really would have answered him, except that Sam chose that exact moment to suck her nipple into his mouth, and so she was crying out, instead.

It wasn’t even words that tumbled out of her, one right after another, it was just _sounds_. Sam’s mouth was wicked, moving gently— _too_ gently, and she found herself shifting restlessly, wanting more. Sam smirked a little then, oh-so-lightly scraping his nails down the slope of the other breast. She rose into the touch, pressing closer, _seeking more more more_ , but he lifted away, teasing. She groaned at him; he laughed at her, then dropped his mouth to her nipple yet again, using teeth this time so that she moaned and moaned beneath him, her hands curling and clenching in the coverlet. It went on and on and _on_, long delirious minutes of him playing her like a Steinway. It was almost too much, almost so intense that she floated away from herself. She found herself losing time to the mindless panting and thrashing, her muscles tensing beyond her control as Sam touched her in ways she had never prepared for.

Eventually, though, he moved on, kissing his way south, towards her stomach. She quivered under his lips, her well-defined muscles glinting in the lights of the headboard, and he paused to swirl his tongue around her navel as he dragged her slacks and panties down to her knees in one smooth move. He went to move lower, but in the reduced sensation of him moving on, she was able to understand his intent. “No,” she said, tapping on his shoulder, “No, I want you to—”

He paused and looked up, raising his eyebrows. “You even know what I was gonna do?” he asked. His mouth was dark and swollen from working her over, and she felt a her own mouth spreading in a helpless, happy, hedonistic smile.

“I think I’ve got a pretty good idea,” she said, hearing her own voice and the way the accent flattened the vowels. “I’d rather—” She almost lost her nerve again, but didn’t, this time, managing to spit it out. “—I’d rather have you in me.”

Sam’s face changed, something dark and delighted moving under the surface as he finished tugging off her pants. “Well, hey; if that’s what you want...” He kneeled up and crawl-walked towards her, then reached up, taking her face in his hand again, pressing aggressive kisses against her mouth. She opened for him, a shiver of delight walking down her back as she realized all over again that he _wanted_ this, he _wanted_ her. And not just because it would make her happy, or because he was supposed to. He didn’t want her _because_ of anything, he just _wanted_ her, and oh, god, it was like a _drug_.

She could have kissed him forever, clutching him, scratching claw marks over his shoulders and
back.

He reached up, brushing a hand over her ear—she shivered at the delicate touch—and then reaching behind her into one of the cabinets of the headboard before coming back with a bottle and a foil packet. The packet made sense—Gwen knew what a condom looked like in this day and age—but the bottle had her a bit more confused. “What—?”

Sam glanced down, a trace of surprise in his face, and she touched one finger to the bottle with a curious expression. His face cleared, and he gave a small shrug. “Lube,” he said, “in case we need it.” He flipped the bottle in his hand like a bartender and popped the cap, squirting a line down her arm. “So that you know what it’s like,” he explained. He rearranged his knees so he was in a more stable kneeling position beside her, then tapped her hip and gestured with a circling motion to indicate she should spread her legs.

She did it, but the motion came with a sudden awareness of what she was doing, brought by a thread of cool air hitting her in her warmest place. All of a sudden, she became keenly aware that she had known Sam for two days—and not very long on either occasion—and that, had she done what she was doing back in her own time, she would have been reviled, would have been considered light-skirted—or, given the color of Sam’s skin, worse.

A flush spread down her face and neck, and the pleasant heat which had been shutting away her mind for the past however-long-it-had-been sagged, dissipating.

She closed her eyes and gasped, trying to shift the self-consciousness away, trying to remember the heady insanity which had been gripping her...

“Hey.”

A firm hand gripped her shoulder, shaking lightly.

“You with me?”

Gwen’s eyes popped open, alarm sparking. “Yes!” she yelped, trying to sit up. “Yes, I’m good! I...”

Sam had one eyebrow raised, and she felt her bluster wilt. “I just... had a moment... of...” She trailed off, turning her head to look in confusion at her arm. There was a tingling, there, a warm, white-noise sort of feeling, and she raised it to examine it closer. “What on earth...?”

Sam smiled, although without his usual full-hearted warmth. “Warming and tingling lube,” he said. “Feels nice... pretty much no matter where you put it.”

Eyes wide, she rubbed the little stream of liquid across the surface of the skin, where it spread sparkles like fourth of July fireworks. She watched it glint in the half-light—she thought it might actually have glitter in it—and said, “Huh!”

She thought about Sam’s hands—she picked one up and pressed a kiss the palm—spreading this over her, thought about her flesh warming under his touch, turning on like a slow-heating furnace. Thought about the pulses and aches he had managed to raise in her already, about the way she wanted him to turn on the rest of her, just as much.

Thought about the way the sparkles would look, spread across her inner thighs, smeared over her chest like stars... and for the second time in less than a week, she found herself wanting to paint.

She looked back at Sam, and swallowed. “Need,” she managed. Her throat was scratchy, and her
vocabulary was a dried up well: she didn’t know how to say it, but it still needed to be said. “Please touch me. Please make me feel...”

No word; her mouth was suddenly cotton dry. She didn’t have a word to go there, but she meant it.

Sam nodded, gravely, like he heard it. “Yeah,” he said, “yeah, babygirl, let me make you feel good,” and good wasn’t exactly the right word, but it was pretty close and it was too hard to think for her to be able to pull it apart anymore.

Sam pulled the bottle from her hand and popped the top again, dumping a puddle into his hand. He rubbed his palms together, then planted both on her stomach, rubbing up towards her breasts, then down towards her hips. She gasped as the electric feeling spread across her, like lightning across the sky, and then arched up, a movement that came mostly from arousal and overstimulation and desire, because she wanted.

She barely knew what she wanted, but she knew that she did.

“Damn,” Sam muttered. His eyes were on her, watching her writhe, watching her go crazy, and then his hands were, too, spreading another load of the warming oil across her hips and down the powerful muscles of her thighs. He lifted her left leg, propping it on his hip, reaching down and tossing her the condom. “Here,” he said, “my hands are too slippery, you open it.”

“No, they’re just right,” she contradicted dazedly as she tore into the foil packet. She pulled too hard, ripping the entire thing in half, and a rubbery scent filling her nose; she cursed, then reached into the cabinet over her head where he had found them, digging around until she felt the crinkly-square outlines of another. She got it open along the side this time, sliding out the skin and passing it over to Sam, who slid it on with a motion quicker and far more efficient than Gwen would ever have managed.

His glance flicked again to the little orange lube bottle, and he reached down, brushing a hand lightly over her folds, eliciting a needy whine from her. She shoved forward a little, into his hand, the leg she had around him tightening; he laughed at her, only to cut off with wide, appreciative eyes when his thumb slipped a little deeper.

“What?” she asked, panting, “What?”

His licked his lower lip and swiped smoothly in and out, pulling his hand away to reveal a glistening tendril of slick coming from—

Oh.

Coming from her.

Sam tossed the bottle back on the bed. “Ho-kay, guess we’re good there,” he said in a puff, smirking.

“Sam, please!” Gwen shifted her hips again, impatient.

“Yeah,” he agreed, yet again. “Yeah, I got you.” His fingers slipped inside her, twisting for a moment, and then he was pulling back, spreading her folds, and then he was there, it was time, and she couldn’t stand it anymore, so she tightened the leg she had on his hip again, driving him forward so that he laughed.

Sam had a beautiful laugh, she thought, distracted, and her brain shut off abruptly as she became aware of the length of him sliding inside her.
After that, she mostly just thought *ohhh!* instead.

He probably wasn’t really, but he *seemed* enormous, thick enough that she felt taken, felt owned, and she shuddered at the idea of that. The slide seemed to go on forever, although obviously it couldn’t have; by the time he came to a stop, fully inside her, he was so deep it ached, and she moaned, lifting her face for kisses, which he gave her, pressing them against her lips over and over and over again.

“Yeah,” he said. His voice sounded hollow. “Yeah, that’s it, baby. You let me know when you’re ready, okay? I’ll just wait—”

“I’m ready,” she said instantly, cutting him off. “Ready, ready, Sam, Sam, *please*; come on.” She tugged at his shoulders, then shifted her other leg up, so that she could link her feet behind his back. “Please move.”

Sam’s teeth had a little gap between them that showed whenever he smiled, and he smiled a lot. It was one of the things Gwen liked about him....

“You know, I think I like it when you beg,” he said, pulling out slowly—Gwen moaned—and then sliding back in, just as torturously slow. “You should do that some more.”

Gwen gasped for air, *betrayed*, her chest heaving, glistening with sweat and lubricant and Sam’s saliva smeared all over her in the process of their lovemaking. “Sam.”

“That didn’t sound like a *please*,” Sam pointed out. He ground into her, pressing close enough to send sparks all through her, hitting deep enough to press against her inner walls.

“Saaaa-am!”

He leaned forward and bit her over her collarbone, teeth tightening delicately in her skin, until she panted and whined underneath him, thrashing but not significantly moving him. Then he thrust, a very short, aborted thrust that made stars explode behind her eyes and her resolve broke like a dam, the begging and pleading spilling from her lips like a flood. “Oh God, please; please, oh, Sam, God, please move, please, come *onnnn*—!”

He grinned against her shoulder, then braced his arms, pulling out and sliding, piston-like, an inexorable motion that hit in just exactly the right place inside of her. She let the moan spill out and tipped her head back, enjoying the hot, damp feel of Sam’s skin pressing against her throat, against her chest, between her legs...

She tightened her muscles, rising to meet him as he stroked in and out of her, finding his rhythm and working together; the movement itself brought her some satisfaction, but the feeling of the two of them working together brought more. The copious slickness pouring out of her made squelching sounds around him, and their skin slapped where it met, but Gwen found herself focusing in instead on the words pouring out of Sam, muttered under his breath. She wasn’t even sure he knew he was saying them: “Yeah, that’s it, come on; good girl, come on, that’s right; yeah; yeah; you’re so good, so sweet, just right—”

She felt herself flushing, her nipples pebbling, and her bones seemed to go limp of their own accord. She *wasn’t* sweet; she never had been. But somehow, hearing it in Sam’s voice, watching the fine trembles of his lips as he said it, she couldn’t help but to feel precious, somehow. Cherished.

She melted into the pillows, then, and the orgasm took her by surprise, exploding into being
around her. A rough cry ripped from her throat, and her hands spasmed where they clasped Sam’s biceps. Her hips tightened, her legs pulling him in, pulling him deep, and he shouted in triumph as he followed her over, pulled down after her like a leaf in a wind tunnel, thrusting twice before burying deep and collapsing on her, breathing out hot onto her collarbone.

It wasn’t a hot night out, but the window of Sam’s bedroom was closed and covered with a blackout curtain, rendering the room close and private. The lights right over her head fell directly on them, and the whole effect made it feel like they were the only two people in the world, their harsh panting the only sound, their sweaty selves the only humans. Sam wrapped his arms around her and rolled, taking them to their sides, and he pressed her head down onto his chest, running his hand along her hair.

She had never even taken it out of its twist, she realized.

Sam had pulled off his socks and shoes when he entered the bedroom, and he had tossed his shirt and undershirt over his head somewhere around the time he had pulled off hers, but his trousers, including belt, boxers, and all, were still hanging loose around his thighs.

She tried to feel ashamed, and failed miserably, a smug smiling curling around her lips.

“Mmm!” she said sensuously, rubbing her nose along Sam’s pec. “Mmmmmmm...” She reached up and started pulling pins out of her hair, letting the length of it tumble down onto the pillow now that it wasn’t going to get pinned and ripped out by the movement.

Warm fingers covered hers, and then Sam was helping, pulling pins into his hand one after another. He reached up and put them on the shelf behind their head, then dug his fingers in, rubbing along her scalp, massaging. If Gwen’s bones hadn’t already been completely liquid, she would have melted; as it was, she merely moaned and pressed into his hand.

Sam smiled, pressing a kiss against her cheek. “Feeling good?” he asked.

Gwen moaned again, more emphatically.

He chuckled. “No, but seriously: no regrets?”

“Mm-mm.” She shook her head, feeling his fingers brush her scalp with the movement. She rolled out enough to get her arm over her head, stretching, and then brought it back down to wrap around Sam. “No, no regrets. It was time, and also...” She looked up at Sam, smiling into his eyes. “I trust you,” she said. “Instantly, completely... You’re good people, Sam Wilson.”

There was something perfect and sweet in the look that came over his face, then. Delight danced in his eyes. His arms, possibly without him even knowing, tightened around her.

She pushed on his shoulder, rolling them so that he was on his back, and propped herself up on her elbows before leaning in to kiss him. It was a good kiss, solid and gentle, and then midway through he snorted at something and she had to pull back to ask him what it was. He grinned up at her. “You know, for a novice, you picked the whole thing up reeally fast.”
Gwen went red. “I’m not a complete beginner,” she muttered. “I did do it once before. And, I mean...” she shrugged awkwardly. “We did... uh... ourselves. You know.” She ground her hips against his in what was probably not actually a helpful shorthand for masturbation.

He snorted again. “And, at some point, someone taught you about oral,” he pointed out.

“Oh! Yeah, that was Bucky. Surprised the Hell out of me the first time he did it.” She grinned down at him, feeling giddy, and added wryly. “Surprised me several times in a row, actually.”

Sam guffawed, throwing back his head and laughing so hard that she shook on top of him. “Yeah, okay; I wasn’t expecting you to say that one,” he admitted.

She frowned. “Is it... okay?”

“Course,” he said. Then he yawned, pressing down against the back of her head so that she lay her head on his shoulder. “Everything that’s happened tonight has been okay,” he said clearly, then mumbled something else she couldn’t make out.

She watched his eyes drift closed, ridiculously long lashes brushing his cheeks. “I’d like it to happen again,” she whispered, watching his beautiful face.
His eyelashes fluttered, and he opened his eyes up just enough to look at her, but that look said it all: affection, satisfaction, and a sort of possessiveness which, given their short acquaintance, was wildly inappropriate, but which made Gwen’s heart squeeze excitedly all the same.

He was warm beneath her, and the sound of his breathing—slow, and becoming steady, the comforting, long-familiar sound of a man falling asleep beside her—made her feel at home in a way she hadn’t in... years, she thought. He almost glowed in the low light, his skin picking up warm highlights from the bulbs, and she stared at him, memorizing his features before reaching towards the headboard and finding the switch for the lights.

The movement jarred her muscles, making the deep aches from their lovemaking spring all over again into prominence, and she sighed at how ridiculously happy the dull pain made her. It almost felt good; it was like belonging to someone, or...

She wanted to feel it again.

She wanted to feel it again, soon.

...And that was fairly out of the ordinary for her, wasn’t it? Wasn’t she the same woman who had married Bucky, unconcerned about the bedroom because, after all, she hadn’t missed sex in nineteen years, she wasn’t going to miss it in the future? Wasn’t she the woman who had stayed with Bucky for all those years, because all things considered, she was happy? Wasn’t she the same one who had been secretly relieved to have missed her tryst with Howard, because frankly it had sounded messy more than anything?

What was she doing, panting eagerly after Sam, when she had never done that before?!

What was wrong with her?

But—her shoulders shook once, twice, the kind of tremors the promised an earthquake made of tears if she didn’t do something to hold it back—she knew what the answer was: nothing.

Nothing was wrong with her, not one damned thing. Maybe something had been wrong—maybe her relationship with Bucky had been broken, no matter how much they had loved each other—but this, tonight... This wasn’t broken. This was actually fixed.

She felt normal, for once.

Now she was crying, damn it, but she could at least manage to do it silently, the shudders wracking her shoulders but not a sound escaping.

This was what it looked like for most women when they fell in love: not a timid feeling, not ashamed, not detached; they felt want, and then they took, and it was glorious.

She closed her eyes and moaned, low like a wounded animal, and played the thought back again:

This was what it felt like for women who fell in love.

Because that was what she had done, wasn’t it, like the great impulsive idiot she had always been? She had gone and fallen in love with Sam Wilson. Sam, who had been so careful with her, so patient, but—she smiled to herself—so good. Sam, who had turned his sharp eyes in her direction and called her by the proper name and wanted to take her home anyway. Sam, who—she shifted, rolling off of him and onto her side—was still wearing his belt and slacks, because he had been so focused on her that he hadn’t even noticed his own self.
Sam is extraordinary, she thought, her heart squeezing. *I never stood a chance.*

*But oh, God, it’s going to hurt when he tells me he doesn’t feel the same way.*

Chapter End Notes

Religion: Gwen seeks out a new religious community in both the spiritual and social senses; succeeds in finding only the latter.
Gwen made breakfast the next morning, but she found herself not feeling particularly hungry.

Sam had woken up early—earlier than Gwen did, even, and she usually woke before the sun was up, even in summer. She had roused when Sam opened the closet, watching in the darkness as he put on running gear: shorts and a t-shirt, socks. He grabbed a pair of running shoes and went to sit on the bed before obviously thinking better of it. He turned towards the door, then jerked back again, apparently catching the gleam of her eyes watching him.

“Hey,” he said softly, a delighted greeting and a good sign. A slow grin coming over his face as he knelt next to where she lay in the bed. “Go back to sleep, I was just going for a jog.”

Gwen let her eyes roam over him, down his long legs and powerful hips, back up towards his shoulders and arms. She thought about him being ex-military, and working with vets, and the tidbits Darlene had dropped in her ear. “Sam,” she whispered into the pre-dawn stillness, a warm, delighted expression creeping over her face, “Do you really expect me to believe you ever run less than five miles at a time?”

He laughed softly, eyes crinkling deliciously at the corners. “Well, now I don’t,” he answered. His voice was husky, his face gentle. “Seriously, Gwen; go back to sleep. I’ll be back before you know it.”

She thought about it.

“No, I’m awake now,” she said, raising herself up to a sitting position. She swung her legs out of bed and smiled wryly over at him, leaning in to steal a kiss. He returned it easily, then pulled back to study her face.

“You okay this morning?” he asked.

She felt her lips draw back automatically, a smile appearing in what was apparently her instinctive reaction to Sam talking, now. She brushed her early-morning hair, thick and heavy, out of her face. “I’m fan- tastic,” she said, her voice coming out a lot more sultry than she had intended. “You okay with me making some breakfast? I could have it ready when you get back from your run.”

Sam pursed his lips and raised his eyebrow. “Oh, I think so,” he said mildly. “You know, a man could get used to a morning like this one.”

Gwen felt her heart squeeze, and looked away, letting her lashes fall down to shade her eyes. She didn’t answer him.

So by the time Sam got back, there were potatoes on the table—diced and fried, salt and pepper, easy enough—and scrambled eggs, along with some grapes she had found in Sam’s fridge and a
bowl of those little mini-oranges. (She had thought about pancakes, but had decided that, all things considered, that might have been over the top.) She was pretty much always going to be able to get some food down—her metabolism ran too fast to not eat—but still, she only had three eggs, two cups of potatoes, and two oranges: practically nothing, by her standards.

Sam kept looking over at her, and smiling to himself.

She kept blushing, in response.

It was intolerable.

“So,” he said at last, tossing his napkin—unlike apparently everybody else this millennium, Sam Wilson had cloth napkins—back on the table beside his plate. “I think you said something about wanting to do this again...?”

She nodded eagerly, leaning forward, and then remembered their schedules and frowned. “I do...” she said slowly, “...but when? We’re both fairly busy...”

“Yeah,” Sam snorted, “And trust me, I now understand that fact in a way that previously I did not. Not until I realized who you were.”

Gwen smiled weakly.

“But that’s how it goes, man. You have to make a choice; you have to decide what’s important to you. You know, the military—” Sam cut off with a hollow laugh and a shake of his head. “—they like to take whole decades of our lives. The whole time you’re in, that’s all you are, is in—one hundred percent, all the time. And then when you get out... it’s all gone, all that structure, all that support...” He sat back in his chair and reached one long arm out for the coffee. “And then there’s people like you,” he continued.

“Like me?” Gwen leaned back, crossing her legs.

“Yeah, like you.” Sam waved his mug in a lazy arc that had no risk whatsoever of spilling the contents. “People like you are the cops, the doctors, the paramedics... People who are done with the military, but aren’t quite done serving, yet. So they find a different master, a related but different field, and they dive right back in, and they’re so busy serving, they forget to take care of themselves.” Sam shook his head slowly. “Lotta burnout among those people,” he said musingly.

Gwen tossed her hair back and forth as she thought about it. Her hair was loose, and all she was wearing was one of Sam’s oversized t-shirts and a pair of his boxers, so it was brushing and swaying at the back of her neck. It always made her feel deliciously feminine when it did that, even though she knew she really wasn’t. It was a nice feeling, though. “...Are you talking from personal experience?” she asked eventually.

“Nah.” Sam flashed that gap-toothed smile at her again. “I’m a different, but related, kind of bird: I knew I wanted to keep serving, but I wasn’t quite sure how.”

“So you became a counselor?” Gwen wasn’t challenging, only curious.

“Sort of.” Sam blew on his coffee, and they both watched the steam eddy in the slanted morning light. “I stalled.”

“Stalled?”

“Yeah.” He shrugged. “I didn’t know what I wanted to do, but I knew I needed to do something.
So I got a fast degree you can apply to anything, pitched in to help out my fellow vets... I’ve been keeping my eyes open for opportunities ever since.” He pursed his lips and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. “Treading water, until I knew which way to swim.”

“Huh.” Gwen bounced her leg across her knee, thinking, and was gratified to watch Sam’s eyes drop down towards the curve of it appreciatively. “...And how long have you been treading water for?”

Sam snorted. “About three years,” he said, voice even. “I haven’t really found what I was looking for, yet.”

Gwen served herself some more fruit and potatoes, finally getting her appetite back. “Why did you get out in the first place?” she asked, her hands busy with spoons and bowls.

Sam’s eyes canted away, dark under eyelids that drooped, suddenly. “I lost someone,” he said shortly.

Gwen felt it like a punch to the gut. “Oh, God,” she said. The spoon she was holding dropped, scattering fried cubed potatoes across the tablecloth. “I’m so sorry,” she said.

He nodded shortly, then hesitated, but continued, “Riley... my wingman,” and briefly told the tale. Her heart ached for him—and her soul, too, at the mention of falling.

“It was like I was up there just to watch,” Sam said, and she bent one of his forks straight in half.

Sam snorted, nodding at it. “Yeah,” he said, “that’s how it is. We all got the same problems, Gwen. Guilt. Regret.” He watched her face. “Gets hard to keep doing it when you don’t remember why you’re even there.”

Gwen bit her lip and straightened out the fork, the muscles in her arms bulging. Her face felt like a mask as she raised it to meet his eyes squarely. “I know why I’m there,” she said grimly. “I’m just not sure that there is exactly the right place to be.”

She took her bike back to the apartment, getting in while it was still early enough to hope Kate would sleep through her passage through the hall.

Or not; the door opened as soon as Gwen passed by. Kate took one look at Gwen’s clothes—obviously the same clothes she had been wearing the night before, and second day panties were disgusting, by the way—and shot her a Look.

Gwen shot her one right back. “Don’t,” she said, her voice sharper than she had really meant for it to be. “I like him.” She put the key into her lock, intending to leave the conversation as quickly as possible.

“I’m glad,” Kate said. And then she tilted her head to the side in visible reluctance—even her hair looked embarrassed as she added, “But tell me you used protection.”

Gwen laughed shortly, a sudden visceral memory of kneeling over a bowl while Erskine prodded her from behind striking her. “I had had sex one time in my entire life before I managed to get pregnant, and that was back before my cycles got regular. Trust me: we used protection.”

Kate made an embarrassed but pleased face, like she might make if her mom had just shown up
bragging about her performance in the third grade spelling bee or something. “Nurse,” she said, waving a hand at herself—not quite an apology, but certainly an explanation. “And—you know. I didn’t know how much they managed to brief you on... all that stuff.”

“Say no more,” Gwen answered, and flashed a sympathetic smile before turning away distractedly. “Now do you mind if I go change? I’d like to go for a run, and what I’ve got on isn’t exactly suited.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah...” Kate retreated behind her door, letting it thump slightly as she yawned and went back inside her own apartment, presumably to bed.

Gwen opened her apartment door, chewing on a lip in absentminded thought. It was nice of Kate to check in on her, especially since she had to have stayed up all night to do it. Still, something was off about the whole conversation... Something...

Still, it wasn’t like Kate had to stay up and wait for her... She shrugged off the twinge of guilt with an uncomfortable shake of her shoulders. Gwen had been a fully-grown woman for a very long time, and there was no point in anyone acting like they were supposed to be watching over her or what have you, no point in anyone making themselves her guardian. And besides which, Kate’s worry had been unfounded: I didn’t know how much they managed to brief brief you, she had said, but pregnancy and STD’s had both existed back in Gwen’s time—

I didn’t know how much they managed to brief you on—

Gwen stopped what she was doing and stood very still. Slowly, she pivoted, a frown digging in between her brows as she turned to look back over her shoulder at the door.

...Did nurses use the word briefing? Surely they would be more likely explain the dangers, more like to warn a person or inform them, or...

Kate and I have been talking for months, Gwen reminded herself.

...yes, and in all that time, how often had she gone into Kate’s apartment? Had she ever? She couldn’t recall the color of the walls...

Gwen stared at her closed and locked apartment door and thought for a long time, and in the end she never did manage to go for that run: Natasha texted her with a mission before she got the chance.

The trouble was, Gwen knew enough to know when she was out of her depth, but she had never, ever learned to admit she couldn’t swim.

As a result, she spent the entire trip back from the mission—ten hours in a QuinJet, and that was a vast improvement over any other mode of transport—surrounded by people who were frustrated and angry, trying not to let her own frustration and anger leak out all over them. The rescued hostages were all trying to look hard-faced, but really just looked shaken and sullen; Natasha was furious with Gwen for being furious with her, and that was a stroke of hypocrisy Gwen was really having trouble stomaching; even the Strike team seemed edgy about something, although Gwen couldn’t have said what. Something about the data they had pulled, that mysterious flash drive; that was all she was able to piece together.

She went to go see Fury.
He showed her a technological marvel, a vision of a future that she wanted no part of.

The revulsion took her by storm, a swamp of feeling that closed over her head and threatened to drown her. *No!* shrieked her hindbrain, *No!  No!  No!* It was so strong, so powerful, that all she could do was get out of the building, out of the Triskellion, out of the lair of spies. She thought about Sam—of course she thought about Sam; she had thought about Sam approximately twice every five minutes since she had left his apartment—but in *this particular case*, she thought about Sam, who was out of the military, who apparently spent his days counseling other men, who *also* were freshly out of the military. She thought about the patience in his eyes, and the wisdom, and she wondered what he would think of all this.

She knew that if she went to visit, as she had been invited to do, she would absolutely tell him about this. Would compromise the project, would spill it all and ask for advice. And she couldn’t do that, because regardless of what she thought of the project, there were still confidential procedures involved. It was one thing to risk her heart by trusting Sam, but it was another to risk national security, and she couldn’t do it.

No, if she wanted to see somebody for advice, it needed to be someone with clearance.

So she went to see Peggy, instead.

Later, she would kick herself for not reacting faster, at... at every stage of that evening, really. If she just had gone through the front door when Kate warned her about the intruder, she would have had time to hear Fury’s whole message... but of course, she had had no way to know that it wasn’t a trap. (Except that if it were a trap, the intruder surely wouldn’t have taken such care to warn her... Stupid, *stupid* Gwen...!)

And then, if she had talked faster with Fury... but of course, she couldn’t have known what he had been trying to say.

But the worst of her sins was this: when Kate—when *Agent Thirteen*—broke in, Gwen was too furious, too beside herself at the deception, to put it aside. When she got back from chasing the assassin, she had even shouted at Thirteen, arguing with her: “Give me one damned reason to trust you when you’ve been lying to my face for months!” And yes, it was still a real question—and a good one—but it had preyed on her mind when her focus needed to be elsewhere, and maybe, *maybe*, if she had put it aside and actually turned her attention back to what she had been doing, back to the mysterious attacker who had shot Fury based on a reflection in a glass picture frame from two blocks away...

Maybe, if she had been *paying attention*...

But she wasn’t, of course.

Fury told her to trust no one, but it seemed to Gwen that she had to choose. She couldn’t do it alone; she didn’t have the know-how to go on the run in this day and age, wasn’t subtle enough to go unobserved. She knew it couldn’t be Pierce—Pierce, who gave her the heebie-jeebies, and who anyway looked at her ass even when he knew she was looking—and she had never fully integrated with the STRIKE team, possibly because of her gender.

But Natasha or Kate—*Agent Thirteen*, she supposed she had better start calling her—were both good possibilities.
The trouble was, both had betrayed her in the last week: Natasha on the *Lemurian Star*, Kate by hiding her identity as an agent. And each had also kept her confidence, sometime in the last week: Natasha had found the flash drive, Kate had—for some reason—not mentioned Sam in her reports. Kate’s betrayal was the larger of the two, but so was her display of loyalty...

In the end, though, what it came down to was that Natasha was there and Thirteen was not, and also... Gwen had instinctively liked Nat. Their first meeting was terrible, but after that they had gotten along well. And when push came to shove, Gwen wanted to be able to trust her. She wanted to be able to rely on Nat to use her cunning to make the right call.

It wasn’t until they were sneaking into one of Nat’s safehouses that Gwen realized the problem with that.

“If you can read the flash drive, we can figure out what we’re dealing with,” Gwen said, hopping up the sheer concrete wall by her fingertips.

“Sure,” Nat said, but she sounded pissed off, and Gwen didn’t think it was a distortion caused by breathlessness from the climb.

“What?”

“What?”

“Nat.” Gwen flipped in through the open eighth-floor window, then turned and poked her head out, watching Nat climb. “Why’re you mad?”

Nat didn’t answer her until she had come through the window and was straightening from her crouch, and every second’s delay riled Gwen’s temper up further. By the time she was standing in front of her, Gwen was fuming, partially because Nat was being impossible, but more because of all the myriad-and-eleven ways everything had gone wrong.

Natasha had to look up to meet Gwen’s eyes—Gwen was most of a foot taller than she was—but Gwen didn’t think that was the real reason Nat looked uncomfortable. It probably had more to do with asking Nat to express herself directly.

“Reading the flash drive...” Nat’s eyes shifted to the right before rising up to meet Gwen’s squarely. “It’s not our biggest priority right now, Gwen. We have just a few other issues to deal with first.”

Gwen spread her arms and tried, so hard, to throttle back her temper. “So tell me what they are, then!”

Nat jerked backwards and blinked, her face going mask-like in surprise.

“I’m not used to this, Nat! This is not what I do—”

“Well then, there’s a chance you may be in the wrong business—”

“—this is what you do.” Gwen glared. “We’re a team—or at least we’re supposed to be—but I can’t make decisions, I can’t lead, if you’re not doing your job, feeding me info and telling me what the Hell is going on!”

And then, just for a second, Natasha looked lost, and finally, Gwen realized what exactly the problem was.
Natasha had worked for SHIELD; in fact, she had worked directly for Fury. She had also worked with the Avengers. She had set up her life meticulously to ensure that she never had to make decisions about when to use herself as a weapon. Never. Those decisions were always outsourced, put into the hand of someone Natasha respected, someone Natasha trusted to do the right thing.

Someone Nat trusted more than she trusted herself, if Gwen was reading between the lines correctly.

For a moment, Gwen considered taking over, stepping into that spot and becoming Nat’s new boss, new moral compass.

She shook her head, rejecting the thought firmly.

“Look, you’re right; the drive isn’t our highest priority right now, because not getting caught comes first. You’re the one who knows this world, Nat; it’s up to you to take the lead on this.”

Gwen reached out, clasping Nat by the forearm bracingly, just like she would have one of her men seventy years ago. “I know you can do it, if anyone can; let’s make it happen.”

Nat’s eyes were wide, but she nodded and led Gwen further into the safehouse.

“The problem,” she said, “Is that you have a fairly distinctive look.”

“True.” Gwen looked down at herself. She was absolutely never going to regret her newer, scientifically-enhanced body, but there were only so many ways to hide a woman who was over six feet tall and 250 pounds, most of it muscle.

“...for a woman,” Natasha continued.

Gwen’s head snapped up.

In her hand, Natasha had an electric trimmer. When she hit the button, it buzzed threateningly.

There were a lot of layers involved in this disguise. And it turned out that when you bound Gwen’s breasts, they actually wound up looking like the puffy-chested male celebrities did these days.

The glasses felt over-the-top, but Nat seemed to like the way they looked, so Gwen didn’t argue.

She did pick up a pack of cigarettes at the nearest corner store, though, feeling a sense of vindictive pleasure as she lit up the first one.

“Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable,” Nat said, putting her hand on the back of Gwen’s head and pulling.

Natasha’s mouth was actually exactly as soft as it looked, gently moving against hers. If this were a real kiss, Gwen would have called it affectionate, or comforting. Gwen thought about how they would look to someone watching—to Rumlow, coming up the escalator below them—and wrapped a hand around Nat’s back, lifting her and pressing her closer, letting her mouth so-gently nuzzle against Nat’s.

It was nice, actually; a moment of softness in the midsts of a truly terrible day. She let herself relax, enjoying the low, curling feeling below her belly, the sweetpeas-and-leather of Natasha’s perfume, and the slow, comforting movement of their mouths and bodies together, like water
nudging and lapping against the sides of a boat.

The escalators moved. Rumlow ascended; Natasha pulled back.

“Still uncomfortable?” she asked, and the arched nonchalance of her voice was absolutely a dare.

They slept in their borrowed truck that night, after escaping the building and the STRIKE team sent to hunt them down by far too narrow a margin. Gwen rolled Nat in her arms and covered them both with one of the five million jackets Nat had wrapped her up in, laying her head back to watch the stars. She used to be able to read them, once upon a time; seventy years ago—or two—she had navigated across half of Europe by the stars. Midge Caerdollan had taught her in the first place, she remembered... All of them had learned during boot camp, not forty miles from where they were now.

The stars were all the same as they ever were, out here. They were far from the city, no light pollution clogging the sky, and there were no cars or sirens. Only the owls and peepers made any noises around them.

The stars were the same as ever.

“I’m sorry about your hair,” Nat said, mumbling with exhaustion. Her face was pressed to Gwen’s chest—the sports bras and tape Gwen had used for binding were piled underneath Gwen’s head for a pillow—and the words were hard to make out because they were muffled, but Gwen was almost certain that was what she had said.

“What are you talking about?” she asked, staring up at the sky. She absolutely refused to cop to the flinch that had crossed her face as she stared down at her hair, lying shorn and broken on Natasha’s safehouse’s bathroom floor.

“You had a lot of hair,” Natasha said. She still wasn’t looking up, but she did turn her head to the side, letting her voice come out clearly. The moonlight glinted on thick lashes hiding forest-colored eyes, and it occurred to Gwen that Natasha was avoiding looking at her. “I didn’t exactly give you a lot of choice about cutting it off.”

Gwen gave in to the temptation that had been plaguing her since they first settled down, and rubbed her hand in slow circles over Natasha’s back. “It’s fine, Nat.” Her head felt strangely naked without the thick layer of hair she had grown used to, but it had also been pleasantly cool in the East Coast swelter earlier that day. And short cuts emphasized the eyes, she’d been told. It wasn’t a bad thing.

Nat was silent. Pressed together as they were, Gwen was sure she could hear her heart beating, steady and calm.

Nat said, “I still should have asked you, though.”

Gwen got the impression that Nat was maybe not really talking about the hair, or even about Gwen at all, but she also had no idea how to handle it. She had never been good at delicate things; she didn’t know how to wield the deft touch.

Eventually, she just squeezed Nat into a burly sort of hug. “I like the cut,” she said, “and I told you to take charge.” She cupped the back of Nat’s head and rubbed gently with her fingertips, performing a sort of massage on the scalp to try to get Nat to relax. “It’s just hair,” she added lightly. Nat’s eyes half-lidded in pleasure at the movement of her fingers. The trees were arching overhead, taller than she would have dreamed possible growing up in the city. “It’ll grow back;
always does...”

They lay like that in the still night, watching the stars together, breathing softly and in the same rhythm. Gwen’s mind spun with lists, the things they would need to do, the resources they would need to make it happen. Natasha had told her that most of her safehouses were set up by SHIELD; they had already burned the only one nearby which hadn’t been. If they were going to find a refuge, it would have to be Gwen’s idea...

Eventually, her mind whirled away. She drifted into a doze.

She thought and thought as they were driving back towards DC, but there was only one place—one person—she could think of to go to that SHIELD—or Hydra, rather—didn’t already know about.

Maybe. Assuming Kate—Thirteen—had continued her silence after Pierce had showed his true colors and sicked his dogs on Gwen.

Which was a big assumption.

Still, she and Nat ditched the car, switched, stole a couple bikes (not motorcycles, but literal bikes—aside from cussing them out for riding in traffic, no one seemed to notice them at all) and managed to make her way to Sam’s northern Virginia subdivision.

The first thing Gwen said when he opened the door was, “I’m sorry about this,” but God and Sam Wilson must have been kind to the pathetic and the desperate, because he welcomed them in.

Sam wished he could say that the obvious violence—Gwen and the Black Widow were both bruised, dirty, and beat to shit—was the most surprising part of Gwen showing up on his doorstep, but to be completely honest, that part seemed somehow entirely normal.

(He wondered idly if his mother had really comprehended that when she set them up. She was a perceptive woman, his mother, about a variety of topics, but she had never really understood war, not when Sam went off to the Air Force, and not before that, when Sam’s father had woken up from nightmares hollering and flailing his fists. Had she realized that introducing Sam to Gwen was guaranteed to end in a fight? Was she endorsing that idea, or was it more of an unforeseen consequence?)

The bigger surprise was Gwen showing up at all. Not that she wasn’t welcome—she sure as hell was!—but Sam had never been a first-date-hookup kind of guy, so taking Gwen home three days ago had been like some sort of insane fit and there was a part of him that felt guilty, that felt like he had used her. It left him expecting her to call him and tell him that it was fun, it was good, thank you very much, but she would like to maybe never see him again.

Well, that’s one hurdle jumped, he reflected, showing the women the bathroom attached to the small guest-bed, and retreating to his own bedroom to dig out a change of clothes for each of them.

He was still in the closet when he heard Gwen call, “Go ahead, you take the first turn,” and glanced up just in time to watch her close the bedroom door behind her. His hands faltered, dropping the t-shirt—too large for the Widow, probably indecently tight on Gwen—back onto the pile.

She paused there, head down, thinking with her palms pressed flat against the white-painted wood of the door. The fingers of her right hand tapped, one-two-three-four-one-two-three-four, and then
she nodded decisively to herself and crossed the room, facing Sam squarely.

“I don’t know how much the other night meant to you,” she began.

His heart seized for some reason.

“I know that things are...” She nodded sideways, a woman acknowledging a fair but unwelcome point. “...are more casual, these days. But it—that night, and the morning after, they—they meant a lot to me.” She was close enough to touch, now, and she did, raising her hand and setting it, palm and fingers in one flat line, over Sam’s sweaty, post-run chest. He flinched a little—he was smelly, sticky, she probably wouldn’t want to—and then she pushed, oh-so-lightly, pressing him against the closet door.

He gave ground, but only one step—there was only one step to give, even if he had been inclined to let her push him around. She followed, moving in close, meeting him eye to eye partly because she was half an inch taller than him, but mostly because she was the sort of woman who was always going to meet a man eye to eye. She came into his space, but didn’t squash herself against him; she was touching him, but just barely, with the tips of her breasts and the swell of her muscular thighs.

She spoke plainly: “It meant a Hell of a lot to me, Sam. I think maybe you don’t know how much. But I still shouldn’t be asking you to do this.”

She flexed the hand she had still pressed against him, and he watched her watch her fingers move against his purple running gear.

She was beautiful, even shorn like a poodle and beat to shit; the power in her arms and shoulders didn’t detract from the vulnerability of her eyes, from the lush curve of her lower lip. The sunlight came through around the edge of Sam’s blackout curtain, painting a sharply demarcated line across her cheek, and her shirt hung, loose in some places, tight in others.

Sam flexed his fingers, then reached out, hooking the index fingers on each hand through her belt-loops.

He tipped his head forward, resting it against her forehead, and breathed. “Okay,” he said, “okay.”

He thought about how to say it, how to articulate that nagging sense of yes, this! which had been plaguing him since he met her, since he had realized exactly what his mother had gotten him involved with this time. It wasn’t about the sex, although that had been pretty damned great, and it was much too soon to say it was about the feelings... But Sam had been saying for years that he was keeping his eyes open, was waiting for the right opportunity to make a difference to come along.

Well, here was the right opportunity, staring him right in the damn face. He’d have to have his eyes closed shut and welded that way to miss it.

“You don’t have to ask,” he said calmly, still resting his head against hers. “It’s the right call, babygirl. It’s the right thing to do. I got you.”

He reached up and around the back of her neck, feeling therightness of it settle over him. This was it; this was the opportunity he had been waiting for. Whatever happened—and he could see the future enough for this, at least, he knew there was some shit about to go down—but whatever happened, it was the right call, right now. He could feel it. It was in the way the constant tingle of Where is more? that lived under his skin was subsiding, and it was in the way the hard ball of Let’s
do this! in his stomach was coalescing.

So while Gwen went to take her turn in the shower, Sam got the purloined *Exo: Falcon* file out of the hidden safe in his office.

“I THOUGHT YOU SAID THIS SHOULDN’T BE A PROBLEM?!!”

He had to scream to be heard over the sounds of the wind and the artillery, but he was *also* finding the screaming pretty satisfying.

“ARE YOU SAYING YOU’RE NOT HAVING FUN?” Gwen shouted back.

*She* certainly was. *She* had a grin pasted on her face and a wild look in her eyes, and it was at that moment—not later, after everything was done, or even much later when he got the formal invitation—but at *that* moment, Sam knew *for a fact* that he was going to be fighting beside Gwen for the rest of his life.

Because *yes*, actually: *he* was having fun.

Gwen got her feet against his chest and backflipped out of his arms to the ground. Sam let out a war-whoop and dived,ducking the incoming fire to go pick up the Widow.

Sam had not previously considered the applicability of his wings for extortion purposes, but he did have to admit they were pretty effective.

Sam snuck up on the man firing at Gwen, his pocket knife clenched in his right hand, mentally cursing up a storm because his *I-don’t-know-what-she-is-but-we-had-sex-and-now-we’re-saving-the-world-together* friend had just gone over the side of a *fucking interstate bridge*, and his other *we-did-not-have-sex-but-you’re-cool-and-you-got-me-my-wings-back* friend was down there, somewhere, being shot at by some kind of *homicidal maniac* in an S&M mask, and seriously, *fuck that shit*!

And all he could do was *watch*, it felt like. *Again*. Except that this time was a *little* different, because yeah, he was up here and they were down there, but now he had a gun, and targets, and he could *help*, at least.

*Shit, that’s all I wanted*— he thought, and then physically stopped moving for a second because the import of it hit him so hard.

He shook it off started moving again. *Philosophy later; save the day now!*

The only people moving below were Nat, Gwen, and the Murdergimp, and all three of them were moving out of Sam’s range on the bridge.

He went to go find his wings.

He didn’t see it.

Whatever happened, Sam wasn’t close enough to see it—or hear it; it seemed kind of likely that Murdergimp said something, instead. But whatever it was, it shut Gwen the hell *down*.

She froze, going completely still, like a child’s toy robot whose batteries ran out. She straightened
out of her defensive crouch, not paying a single damp Cheeto’s worth of attention to the fact that there were dark-tinted HUM-Vees closing in on her or to Sam winging in as fast as he could, or—anything, really.

Murdergimp pulled a gun on her, and she didn’t even flinch.

No, Sam thought, No! You don’t do this, you don’t just give up—

He tried not to rage.

We don’t have time for this! I guarantee you my mama is on Insight’s list, we do not have time for this—!

Thank God for the cameras; they were taken prisoner, taken in. Sam almost laughed, because they had enough cuffs for Gwen and Nat, but they weren’t counting on him being there, apparently—the Squad of Assholes left Nat loose and cuffed him instead, counting on the wound in her shoulder to keep her docile—which, Sam had known her for approximately eight hours, but he could already tell that was a dumb as hell idea.

They settled down, and the prison tank started moving.

...Yeah, that was enough time for sulking, he decided.

Sam kicked Gwen.

It wasn’t hard, or anything. Not enough to even be noticed by their captors, or objected to if they did. Just a nudge with his foot, that was all.

She didn’t look up.

He kicked her again.

She still didn’t look up.

She said, “It was Bucky.”

What. The fuck!

He kicked her again, harder this time.

“It was him,” she insisted, and went on to spell it out, how it could have happened, when and how her husband could have survived. But Sam wasn’t listening, because he was picturing instead the moment when Murdergimp—Bucky, apparently—had pulled a gun on Gwen and would have shot her if Natasha didn’t have her back, and that was just...

Sam’s teeth hurt from clenching his jaw so hard. I don’t care, he thought furiously. I don’t care if this guy is Bucky or not, if he’s the second coming of Jesus with a peanut butter sandwich or Julio the pool boy in a bright red thong, I do not care. He took a gun to Gwen, he killed countless people but let’s start with Jasper Sitwell, and he tried to kill Gwen, I do not care if he is Bucky Barnes or Jehovah or Spongebob Squarepants or what.

He is going down.

I am going to kill him.

And then Natasha practically passed out in mid-sentence, and one of the guards was attacking the
other guard, and Sam didn’t have time to fume anymore.

For now.

He found her later on top of the dam. She was looking out over the spectacular expanse, and not seeing a bit of it. Her face was closed, highlighted by the late-afternoon sun in colors of purple and gold but completely devoid of expression, the only hint of emotion on her the hunch of her shoulders against the overwhelming weight of grief.

Sam’s heart ached at the sight of her, but if she’d been one of his sisters he would have smacked her upside the damn head.

He stopped about five feet away—further away than he wanted to be, but he didn’t want her feeling blocked in—and waited for her to look up, to look away from the water spilling out beneath them and acknowledge his presence.

After a minute, he realized that that was going to have him waiting there a while, and spoke instead.

“He’s gonna be there, you know.”

Her hands dug further into the pockets of her jacket. “I know,” she said.

She still hadn’t looked over.

“Whoever he used to be...” Sam kept his hands by his side, his shoulders and face open; if he crossed his arms or let the anger show, she was never gonna talk to him at all. “The guy he is now... I don’t think he’s the kind you save. He’s the kind you stop.”

Now she did turn, and it was just as bad as Sam had been afraid of. Her eyes were flat, her lip faintly curled; the rest of her was preternaturally still, her back straight, her feet—

—Aw, hell.

She was in parade rest.

“I don’t know if I can do that, Sam.”

*There is nothing I can do to make her understand this,* Sam realized, but it didn’t matter. He had to try, anyway.

*That’s what I do.*

Even in the privacy of his own mind, the thought sounded furious and bitter.

‘That others may live.’

That sounded bitter, too.

“He might not give you a choice,” he said.

*If any man had pulled a gun on one of my sisters the way he did to you today, he would already be dead,* he didn’t say. He settled instead for, “He doesn’t know you,” and watched the wave of it break across her without leaving so much as a mark.
She turned back to face the view, alone in her grief and loss because she flat refused to let him in there with her. “Yeah?” Her lip curled. “Well, that’s gonna change.” She did at least turn and jerk her head at him, inviting him to follow as she proceeded down the walkway away from him. “Now c’mon, let’s go. It’s time.”

Her back was safely turned to him, and he took the moment to let it all show, on his face and in his body, and just barely not in a primal scream: all the frustration at not being heard, the disappointment in Gwen for not listening, but above all the murderous, homicidal rage that someone was threatening her, threatening Gwen, threatening a woman who was objectively one of the best people on the planet, and it was just...

He took a deep breath and choked it all back, picking up his feet to follow after her and knowing that, regardless of what happened between them—he hadn’t forgotten that Bucky Barnes used to be this woman’s husband—she was still the Avenging Angel, and he was still Sam Wilson, and that meant that he probably always would follow after her.

“She should have known it would come down to this.”

She was on the third helicarrier. All she had to do was switch the chips and she was set. It was all she had left to do.

But Bucky was standing, unmasked, between her and the targeting array.

Really, I should have seen this coming...

She lowered her shield, and charged.

Enemy target approaching with barrier in place.

Secondary targets located at scalp, groin, leg—

He fired.

Deflected—she moved that shield fast—well-practiced—

— still charging!

He dodged, tried for the blow to the back of the head with the grip of his gun adding weight to his right hand, but she blocked that, too—

Electricity-stinging-ow-ow-ow!

—and planted a portable taser-detonator on his arm.

She must have gotten it from—

But he couldn’t remember who the source of the taser must have been. The arm, shorted out by the small round charge, drooped, remaining paralyzed for 6.7 seconds during rebooting.

Hyper-powerful hips twisted, and her full weight landed against his chest, advancing unstoppably until he was pinned against the railing of the small, circular deck around the targeting apparatus. He came up with a knife, but she blocked it with the shield; it skittered across the surface before
plunging into her bicep with a wet *ssschik* sound.

She screamed. He flinched. He braced his shoulder against the shield, his pulse pounding in his ears, wondering *what the hell was wrong with him*.

(And how did he know she would come here? What had been in his briefing, the briefing he couldn’t remember...?)

She jostled the shield away from him and, unable to control the metal arm, he couldn’t stop her from moving it out of his range. Then she slammed it forward again, striking against his shoulder and chest again, but no matter; her upper body was weaker than his, and she was never going to be able to overpower the arm.

Words.

She was speaking.

“I don’t wanna fight you, Bucky.” Blue eyes were distressed above the collar of a black tac vest, black turtleneck tactical shirt, black kevlar trousers. Geared for war.

Words. What was she saying?

“I don’t wanna fight you... but that doesn’t mean I won’t.”

What did it mean?

His breath rattled harshly as it passed over his lips.

What did it *mean*?

Who the hell is Bucky? he wondered, because it sure as hell can’t be me—

What did it—

With a whine and a rapid clicking of the servos—and tinges mixed with stabbing pain—his arm came back online.

He powered a fist through the air, towards her head, she would have to dodge—

She did. She ducked, but came up at a diagonal, shoving the shield into his stomach, hoisting with powerful hips and lifting him off his feet—

He went over the thin metal bannister, plummeting towards the motionless metalloplasticine fanblade below.

Sam ducked Head Asshole of the Asshole Squad’s punches, coming up with a block-block-*shit*, he was skittering halfway across the floor, Head Asshole was *fucking deplorably good* at what he did —

“*Charlie Target locked,*” Gwen said in his earpiece. “*Commence fire when ready.*”

“*Yeah, how about we wait on that?*” said the new girl—Hill, her name was. “*Get out of there, Rogers.*”

“*Trust me, I’m working on it. Again, fire when ready.*”
Head Asshole paused, backing up a step. He frowned, suspicious. “Why are you smiling?”

*Because you all just lost, Asshole.* But no need to bother telling Asshole that. Sam wiped the smear of blood from the corner of his mouth, and stood up again.

Primary objective failed; secondary objective engaging.

He drew a gun, hopping down another level to the plastiglass pane below and sprinting ten meters away to get a better angle on the shot, then turned, only barely in time to block the shield barrelling at his face. He deflected, it went flying, he looked up—

*BOOTS!*

—he ducked and rolled, coming up four point three meters away from secondary target.

Secondary target was on her feet, circling in a crouch.

She was also *speaking* again. What was it with her and all these *words*?

“It’s over, Bucky. Helicarriers are going down.” Her head twitched to the side, invitingly, but her body language said *come any closer and I will punch you a thousand times before I let you touch me.*

Reasonable; there was blood seeping out around the knife still lodged in her arm.

He kept his distance.

“Sure would be nice if we weren’t on ‘em when they did,” she called.

Unobtrusively—behind his leg, where she couldn’t see it—he drew a stiletto.

“What’ve I gotta do, Buck?” She watched him from eyes far too canny to trust, but somewhere inside him a voice was shouting unreasonable things: *Trust her! Trust her, you can trust her!!!!*

He didn’t listen to it, rushing her with his arm behind him, but swinging the blade up at the last minute, driving it deep into—

—into the space where her stomach *should have been*, shit—

—a knee took him in the side, driving the air out of him and cracking a rib; a fist flew at his face, pain exploded across his cheek; he was spinning, suddenly, his own knife sinking into his chest as she pinned him on the floor, arms under him, her breath hot on the back of his neck.

“What’ve I gotta do?” she repeated. Her mouth was so close to his ear, if she bit she could take the lobe clean off, those took *forever* to regrow—

“We’ve earned our happy ending, Bucky.”

Pain in his shoulder as the pin pushed at the joint, pushed, pushed—*oh jesus fuck* it was out, dislocated, his flesh arm sagging limply against his side.

*Mission failure imminent.* Shit, shit, shit—

“We’ve earned the right to live happily ever after, by now.”
"Mission failure imminent."

Yeah, no fucking kidding!

"...But you’re not gonna let us do that, are you?"

Panicked, he snapped his head back, biting near her ear. He couldn’t reach it—not quite—but her flinch let him wrench out of the pin, whirling across the not-glass flooring to face her.

He pulled the knife—his knife, dammit, his stiletto, and it felt like it’d pierced a damn lung—out of his chest, trying to pinch the wound shut with his right hand. But the arm wasn’t working, wasn’t moving properly, and he needed to be fast, faster than he had been, faster than her—and she was already too quick, even when he wasn’t wounded.

She managed to look about one-third disappointed, two-thirds pissed the hell off that he was standing. She growled, “Never could do it the easy way, could we, Buck?"

Someone was screaming into her earpiece; he couldn’t make out the words, but he could make out the tone. She answered them without touching the comm, raising her voice, or looking away from him for even half a second: “Acknowledged, Maria; rendezvous point intact?”

From the general tone of things, yes, the rendezvous point was intact. And also, Maria thought the target was an idiot.

“Fire when ready, then,” the target said, cutting ‘Maria’ off.

Then she smiled.

It was not a nice smile. The disappointment/fury ratio was shifting steadily towards that second one.

“You sure we’re doing this, Bucky? Last chance to stand down. We have a date, Bucko; you don’t want to be late, do you?”

He was out of knives, but he still had a supply of grenades, he remembered. Almost anything he used would be just as like to hurt him as it was to hurt her, but damage to the Asset was of secondary important to mission success. Slowly, he palmed one from his belt.

They closed, charging each other.

The plan worked, such as it was—the grenade he tossed a mere two feet behind her, and she didn’t stop it in time to block the explosion, which staggered them both, separating them as it blew them backwards. The target caught the worst of it, both from being closer to the concussion, and from having gotten caught on a railing: he could hear her ribs snap from twelve feet away.

He pulled a gun once he had the distance on her, but that didn’t help much; she blocked with the shield and then—he was torn between impressed and indignant—turned the bullets so that the ricochets came dangerously close to hitting him.

And then he reached down for the glock in his boot, only to find it gone.

What.

Where was it—

—in her hand, shit, shit! He ducked, ducked, pulled back, caught a bullet on the metal arm—
—bullet aimed at thigh; what the hell, why not the center mass?—

—but that left him open to a charge on the left, and in came the shield again, and again, and again, each time smashing into his face, his head, his temples, and soon he was on his knees, on his belly, blood pooling under him from the wound in his chest, and **still the blows kept coming**—

*Rage,* his brain told him, *she is full of rage*—

But what did his brain know, anyway? Why would the target be so angry with *him?* He was only the weapon. *Save your anger for the handlers, lady...*

As the beating went on, though, he stopped being able to deny it. Blow after blow after blow, raining down on his kidneys, his stomach, his chest, his face, his face, his face, over and over again, pain lancing through all of his limbs...

*Why so angry?*

Something snapped, something else tore, the dull ache in his stomach told him *something* in there was bleeding—

*Why is she so angry?*

He didn’t understand... She was, though, gone utterly *berserk,* screaming in rage the entire time, and the beating didn’t stop, *didn’t stop,* harder than any he had could ever remember taking, and he couldn’t remember much but he *knew* this—

He could take a lot. She could give a lot, too, though, and he was already down.

From above him he heard the target say, interrupted by gasps of mingled exertion and strong emotion, “You—goddamn—*asshole...!*” She stumbled, falling against the ground beside him, and he remembered the knife in her arm, the damage from the explosion. He would have smiled if he weren’t dying; her injuries were catching up to her. But then the floor shook beneath him, and he realized that, no, that wasn’t it; the ship itself was under attack. *Like a submarine getting torpedoed: everybody loses their feet.* When had he gotten to experience that? No matter. The ship was in the air; if they were taking fire, going down, then they were *both* dying, now.

The target gasped, and gasped again, her voice full of agony from thoughts and wounds. He could, just barely, see her glare at him. She had tears on her face, he noticed. “You never did much like coming home to me, did you?”

A final blast blew his questions away and shattered the plastiglass beneath them, and he tumbled into unconsciousness.

---

**Chapter End Notes**

**Violence:** This is the chapter that covers *The Winter Soldier.* Includes the Helicarrier scene, which has approximately the same level of actual violence as the film (or less), but greater intent to harm.

Crossdressing, not for kink: Gwen dresses as a male to escape detection while on the
run.
Chapter Notes

I messed up! I forgot to include one of the absolutely beautiful pieces of art my incredibly talented artist Esaael did for chapter 7. I've retroactively added it to the chapter, but for those who missed it, the tumblr post is here: http://esaael.tumblr.com/post/164426572517/art-45-for-you-would-be-in-clover-a-stucky-big

Chapter warnings: Dom/sub undertones.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sam helped dig bodies out of the Triskellion for two hours before the Black Widow found him and ordered him to go rest.

“Yeah, sure,” he snapped, “I’ll just drive back in my car. Oh, wait!”

She got him an Uber.

The driver, “Stan” according to the sign on the back of his seat, eyed him dubiously, taking in his torn clothes, the black eye and various other contusions, and the multiple weapons he was still wearing. “You better tip,” he said.

Then he opened the door for Sam and offered him a water bottle and some candy. (Sam took both, because his mama didn’t raise no fool.)

It was five o’clock by the time Sam finally stepped foot in his house—the helicarriers had launched around eleven—and the first thing he did was go for the gun, because he knew within half a second of getting the door door open that there was someone there.

Luckily, it turned out to be Gwen.

Even more luckily, he figured that out without shooting her.

She looked like shit, shorn-off hair burned and matted with blood that seemed to come from her ear. She was moving stiffly with some kind of broken bone, too. Her eyebrows were completely singed off, and Sam was sufficiently tired that the sight made him have to bite his tongue against hysterical laughter.

She lowered the shield—raised when she heard him moving through the front hall—and glared.

He lowered his gun, and blinked at her. “Honey, I’m home!” he said, in the most dog-tired impression of Ricky Ricardo ever performed.

She sagged, a picture of exhaustion taking over. “I don’t know what that’s from,” she said, “but I’m glad you’re here.”

“Yeah,” he said, “So’m I, ‘cause you look like shit.” He walked into the kitchen, noting bloody smears on half the cabinets which would need to be cleaned up, and opened the fridge for the
orange juice, drinking straight out of the bottle. He closed his eyes for a second, wiping at his mouth and trying to pull his brains back up from where they were, scattered around his aching feet and back. He looked over at her. “What’d you need?” he asked. “How can I help?”

She looked vastly relieved, and came around the kitchen island to wrap him in a hug, clinging as much as she was comforting with it. “God, Sam... You have no idea. Today has been...”

She buried her head against his chest, and he raised his hand automatically, rubbing it through the short, sticky-feeling nubs that were all that was left of her hair. She shifted and made a small noise in response, so he did it again, more deliberately, this time, pressing her into him and dropping a kiss on her forehead.

“How can I help?”, he asked wryly.

She was silent for a good long while before she answered, and when she did her voice came out full of horror and shame. She was definitely not voicing all of her thoughts when she said, “I hurt him, Sam. I really... I had to really hurt him.” She sounded guilty, too guilty considering what the guy had been planning, and Sam didn’t believe the picture she was painting of a reluctant defensive takedown, not even a little.

He shook his head anyway, though, and pushed her back enough that she could meet his eyes, although she winced under his hold. “No way,” he said. “No way. That is normal, that is how I would expect you to act, hurting him was the right decision today because he was threatening literally millions of people, and I am proud of you for doing what you had to. Okay?” He gave her a little shake.

She nodded, wide-eyed, then winced again and pulled her arm out of his grip. “Ow,” she said.

“Sorry.” She looked a lot more solid after his little pep-talk, and he figured they were back to business as usual. He brushed her upper arm with his thumb, gently. “You got a graze there?”

Later, he would distinctly remember thinking: She doesn’t have that arm bandaged, so it can’t be too badly hurt. In his defense, he was very, very tired, but he still should’ve known better than that.

She pulled out of his hold completely, then started stripping off her shirt, pulling it off over her head to reveal her breasts, which were squashed almost flat in a sports bra. She made a noise as the motion swung her arm up and over, and then she was pulling the last of the sleeve off her wrist and Sam abruptly no longer cared about her breasts.

He swore out loud, checking the wound, which was scabbed over but still oozed blood when he poked at the puffy, reddened skin around it. The whole area was warm—and on the back, too, as he discovered when he moved around it—and his heart sank as he thought about all the things that could be causing infection.

Hell, he knew Gwen had gone into the damned Potomac; she practically had a fucking shrimp hanging out of her cleavage, there was so much debris on her. Plus, the smell. And there was a zero percent chance the wound had been closed up when she hit that nasty water.

He swore again.

“What else do you have?” he demanded. “Through-and-through—what was it, a bullet?”

“A knife,” she cringed.
“Of course it was,” he said scathingly. “...and some kind of explosion, given the burns—I’m guessing there were a lot more that healed up already?”

She had the grace to look ashamed, at least. “Well... yeah....”

“And what else?”

She shifted from foot to foot, stepping towards the kitchen—he kept a spare first aid kit in there, as well as under the bathroom sink, because more is better than less and also because you never know when and where disaster will strike. “Probably a concussion,” she admitted. “Also some broken ribs... nothing too bad.”

He shot her a very bitch, please sort of look. “Broken-cracked, or broken-broken?”

“Broken-cracked,” she said confidently, then moved, winced, and backpedaled. “...mostly.”

Sam sighed deeply, trying to make sure she knew how absolutely 110% disappointed he was that she hadn’t taken care of herself, and then gave her an out with absolutely no attitude whatsoever. “I assume you were just waiting for me to get back before you went to the hospital?”

She blinked. “Why would I need to go to a hospital?” she asked, and Sam resisted the urge to slam his head into a door. “No, I just need your help to—”

She started chasing after him as he walked—alright, stalked—towards the bathroom, where the med-kit with the really heavy supplies was stashed. “Sam—Sam, I need to tell you this before you go in there—”

She stopped.

He stopped, too.

There were times in life where you really just had to stop and take the hell stock of the situation.

The Winter Soldier was lying passed out and half naked in his bathtub.

The thing was, for a super-deadly Hydra assassin, the Winter Soldier looked like absolute shit. It took about five seconds of staring at the guy to realize that even Sam’s grain-of-salt understanding of how that fight had gone was still wildly underestimating the level of pissed the hell off Gwen had brought to it: Barnes had a large square of bandage against his lower right ribs, already staining through with blood and indicating what Sam was betting was a punctured lung. He was covered in bruises—literally; Sam would estimate that better than ninety percent of his torso had some kind of blue, black, or green mark on it—and his shoulder wasn’t currently dislocated, but from the angry redness and swelling around it, Sam was willing to be it had been. Gwen must have shoved the damn thing back into its socket.

Sam flashed back briefly to his pararescue training. Shoulder dislocations are a bitch to heal because every part of the socket gets stretched and torn when the break happens, was how he had phrased it once to Riley. He looked at the Winter Soldier now, and shuddered, but he also felt the trickle of relief that if the guy woke up angry, he would have a handicap.

Truth was, though... Dude looked strangely helpless lying in Sam’s bathtub. Gwen had taken his shirt off—presumably; Sam was assuming he hadn’t just started stripping down in the middle of battle, although Hydra was pretty fucked up, so you never knew— and started treating his wounds, but that just made the guy look even more pathetic, not less. He was pretty clean—cleaner than
Gwen, who was covered in river gunk everywhere except her face and forearms, which Sam assumed was because she had scrubbed them off before starting to patch up His Assassin-ness, thank heaven for small mercies—but the bruising made him look kind of shabby anyway. His hair was singed on the ends, uneven with the damage, and his face was so swollen and purple so that he looked lopsided.

He was also missing one typical feature of the facial anatomy. “What happened to his eyebrows?” Sam asked, even though he didn’t really want to know.

“Grenade,” Gwen answered.

Sam gave her the hairy eyeball. “You don’t carry grenades.”

“No, I know; it was his grenade, he—he just threw it, he was less than two yards away when it off and he just threw it—” She stopped, closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose. “I think—I think he has some...”

“Issues?” Sam stared. “You think?”

“Yeah.” Gwen actually relaxed at that, like she had just been waiting for somebody else to put the damn problem into words.

Sam turned back to the unconscious man in his tub, considering him.

Eventually, it dawned on him that the dude was actually seriously fucked up, and he turned back to Gwen. “You were patching him up?” he asked.

“As much as I could,” she nodded. “I got that chest wound all bandaged, that was the scariest one.”

It would’ve been bleeding like a stuck pig. “You know if you hit any organs with that?”

She shook her head. “Not a clue, Sam; I’m not a medic.” Then she hesitated, adding, “Maybe a lung. I’m pretty sure I didn’t get the liver; there would be—there would be a smell.”

How do you know that? Sam wanted to ask, but couldn’t quite make himself do it. Still... “You could’ve knicked it.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Not with my nose, Sam. It’s one of those...” She waved a vague hand in the air. “...things. Like being able to run, or jump, or see all the colors. Those things.”

Sam’s eyebrows were about to declare war on his hairline. “You have a super sniffer?”

Gwen turned red and blotchy, not meeting his eye, and it was fucking adorable until Sam looked down at the mostly-dead dude in his tub and remembered that Gwen had made him that way with the sheer power of her rage. “It’s not usually worth mentioning,” she muttered, and Sam just shook his head.

Alright,” he said. “Alright.” He sighed, and rubbed his hands up and down his thighs as if he were drying them off, although in his tactical pants, which were water-resistant, that had about a zero percent chance of happening. “...alright. Okay. So: The Winter Soldier.”

Then he stared at the lucky-he-was-still-breathing guy in his tub some more.

“...Is he stable?” he finally asked.
Gwen shrugged helplessly beside him. “Physically?”

“Oh, Jesus.”

“I mean, yeah—yeah, he’s not going to up and die on you, or anything. But what I’m worried about...” She tilted her head to the side. “He’s got a lot of internal bleeding—I was pretty rough on him—”

*No fucking kidding,* Sam thought, and tried to ignore the slow, sick turn of his stomach that came with the thought.

“—but he’s also *got* to have some form of the serum, and he’s used to putting up with a lot; I don’t know when he’s going to come around. And when he does, he’s gonna try to leave.” She stared down at him with haunted-looking eyes, like she kind of knew what all had to have gone into breaking the guy, and she was blaming herself for every minute of it.

She set her jaw, and looked back up into Sam’s eyes. Her brows drew down—Sam couldn’t help but note that she still had eyebrows, which probably matched the burns on the back of her head, come to think of it; she must have had her back to the blast—and her eyes were very blue, and burning. “I can’t let him go again. I *can’t.*” She crossed her arms, ready for a fight Sam was nowhere near stupid enough to give her.

“Okay,” he said immediately.

She blinked at the unexpected acquiescence.

“But he seems pretty out of it, and I’m pretty sure I’ve still got cuffs, somewhere around here.” Now was really not the time to mention why Sam had handcuffs in his bedroom, but he was pretty sure she wasn’t going to make the connection. And Sam had gotten them from an ex who was a cop, way back during his “cheap as hell” phase, so they were actually decent cuffs, too—or they were if your purpose was actually restraining someone, at least. “How about we cuff his hands, and—he have any leg wounds?” Gwen still hadn’t pulled the guy’s pants off yet, and they were black; dude could be bleeding out, and Sam wouldn’t be able to see it.

“He might have a graze, but nothing serious,” Gwen dismissed. “Beyond the bruising, I mean.” Which Sam took to mean that when she had gotten done *punching* the shit out of the guy, she had gone about *kicking* him, too.

Girl had issues.

*Join the fucking club, though.*

Sam had felt more alive getting shot at today than he had in the last three years. *Cumulatively.* If Sam actually took his own damned advice and saw a therapist, they would definitely be talking about that, but as it was he had firm plans to repress it until he felt like dealing with it, which had always worked for him in the past.

...That was a lie.

He still wasn’t dealing with it, though.

“Okay! No significant leg wounds,” he ruled. “Here, let me go find him some jammies and we’ll strip him, take away any picks or weapons or what have you.”

They ended up propping the guy in Sam’s recliner with a big old beach towel underneath him and
his hands cuffed in front of him. Then Sam tucked a couple throw pillows his Nana had given him for Christmas around him, covered him with a blanket, propped a steaming mug of hot chocolate beside him (not that he thought it would still be hot by the time the guy woke up), and taped a sign that said “YOU ARE SAFE DO NOT RUN” to the TV-table.

Gwen stared at all of this with a baffled expression. Ever since this guy had come back, Gwen seemed lost, constantly struggling to find her way, swimming upstream but also having to check that the water was water and not, like, maple syrup or something, every twenty minutes. Sam felt pretty bad for her, honestly. Although…. he felt a lot less bad when he remembered all the bruising currently hiding under his favorite Lakers jersey...

“Now what?” she asked.

Sam nodded to her arm, where blood had started to seep from the re-opened wound again. The skin around it had only gotten puffier and redder. “Now, you go to the hospital,” he said.

“I can’t, Sam, I have to—"

“You have to get checked out, is what you have to do,” Sam interrupted. “You have an open bleeding wound thoroughly contaminated with some seriously disgusting water, you have at least one but from what I can see probably three broken ribs, all of which are threatening at any moment to puncture in towards the lungs—"

Gwen winced, and laid a protective hand over her ribs, while looking just guilty enough for Sam to realize that she actually had been worried about just that. He literally felt his voice get louder, then, scraping the sides of his throat as he shouted at her: “—and you need at the least some painkillers, but probably also transfusions and shit, none of which you will be able to get in my living room!”

Gwen got that maple syrup look again, staring around like the world was turning brown and goopy, baffled and confused.

Sam sighed and left the room, coming back with his favorite semiautomatic from the gunsafe. He grabbed a second hot chocolate and settled into the couch to guard. “Go to the hospital,” he said, sipping his hot chocolate and adamantly refusing to acknowledge the foam now in his goatee. “Go directly to the hospital, do not pass go—"

“I understood that reference!”

“Fan-tast-ic. Did the gangrene currently taking root in your arm understand that reference? Because I’m pretty sure it’s not too far from sentience—”

“I can’t get gangrene, I have magically-enhanced everything,” she said, somehow looking prim and setting her jaw, both at the same time. “Plus I’m not just going to leave Bucky—"

“You are not leaving Bucky, because that is why my ass is sitting on this couch drinking a stimulant instead of curling up in bed with any one of the several bottles of wine I have earned through my actions today—"

“I’d still be leaving him, Sam.” She blinked, looking suddenly much rockier, as if he had unlocked a door and all of Bluebeard’s dead wives had come tumbling out, and their names were Trauma, Isolation, Depression and PTSD. “I can’t leave him alone. Not—” She turned away, her spine stiffly erect but her voice suspiciously thick. “I can’t do that again.”

Sam took a deep breath, remembering that in Gwen’s case Bluebeard had a fifth wife, and it’s
name was *Survivor’s Guilt*, because everyone else she had ever known was *dead*. “Okay,” he said. It was his therapist voice, and he hated to use it with her because he was not and absolutely refused to be her therapist, but it was obviously also what she needed right now. “Okay. But you’re not leaving him alone, Gwen, you’re leaving him with me, and I promise I will be here when he wakes up.” He swallowed another gulp of his hot chocolate—too hot, it burned his throat, but it gave him something to do with his hands. “I will stand guard,” he said. “I promise you. He will not be alone.”

She turned to him, maple-swimming and blinking big tragic eyes. Then she crumpled, both metaphorically and also literally, her hand going to the place on her side where her ribs were obviously hurting like hell. “Alright,” she said, “al right.” She turned away, and tried to make her voice sound like she was rolling her eyes, but Sam was not fooled, not even a little bit. “I’ll go to the hospital and get it checked out. I’m going to the George Washington, and if I’m not back in four hours you have to call them and tell them there’s a Hydra emergency and they have to release me; you can’t leave me there overnight.”

Sam kind of thought a course of good strong sedatives might be just what she needed, but he also figured that the Winter Soldier was a) pretty likely to wake up sometime that night and b) more than capable of beating the ever-living shit out of Sam, so he nodded and agreed.

And then he was left, sitting alone in his empty-ass house with the Winter fucking Soldier.

It was definitely weird.

The guy was *out*—he hadn’t even twitched when Sam took his combat pants off, not even when they stuck to the graze which, yes, was along the side of his thigh, scabbed into the fabric and ripping open when Sam pulled them off. But he was pretty much the same height as Sam was—which in turn was the same height as Gwen was—and he wasn’t exactly tiny, so even unconscious and wrapped in Sam’s jammies, he still managed to loom. Plus, he was in Sam’s favorite chair—and damn, Sam had really not thought that one through—so it wasn’t like Sam could just ignore that he was there.

Plus, Sam really couldn’t ignore him, because he was guarding him; if Gwen came back her ex was gone—or, hell; was he her ex, or was he actually just her current husband? Did fake death dissolve real marriage?—if she came back and the Winter Soldier was gone, Sam was gonna be in some serious trouble, and deservedly so.

That left him in the awkward, and also boring, position of keeping watch. He threw something up on the TV—Syfy, currently showing old *Twilight Zone* replays—and sipped his hot chocolate, and studied the guy while he slept.

Gwen really had done a disturbing amount of damage. Sam wondered for a moment if the guilt over that was her real reason for wanting to take care of the guy, but then dismissed it. For one thing, there were plenty of better, more-accessible reasons for her to fuss over the guy. And for another, there were also plenty of better, more-accessible reasons for guilt.

*Keep it simple, stupid.*

So okay: the damage was a secondary characteristic; maybe a factor in Gwen’s tenacious grip on the guy, but not the main one. The best candidate for the main factor was obvious, and it made Sam’s balls shrivel up every time he thought about it:

Dude was her husband.
Obviously, she wanted him back.

It probably shouldn’t have made Sam feel quite so sick as he did, to be honest. He’d only known her—stretching their acquaintance to its furthest possible reach, starting at his mother’s charity gala to-do thing—for about ten days, and most of that time had been spent not talking because she was off Avenging Angeling, or whatever she called it. And then bringing down most of a large government agency filled with traitors.

*You know, standard first- and second-date stuff...*

And yeah, they had slept together—*magnificently*, Jesus, Sam still felt a clenching in his stomach just thinking about it—and yeah, Gwen had seemed pretty into him, but... *Two weeks.* Not even that, really. And she had been married to this guy for *years*, if Sam was doing his math right. There was no way Sam could compare to that.

It hurt a lot more than Sam would have expected it to, though.

He sipped on his hot chocolate, finishing it off and putting the mug on the floor beside the couch, and watched the guy.

Dude was handsome—Sam would give Gwen that; she had fantastic taste, apparently—all regular features and big eyes and fucking *flowing chestnut-colored locks*, Jesus Christ. He had a plush mouth, too, one Sam kept finding himself staring at over and over again, trying to pull it apart and put it back together to figure out what it was about it that was so... so...

It was the slant, he decided eventually. The upper lip came out at a slant, a girly sort of thing, but it was a powerful wide recurve of a cupid’s bow and it looked *obscene*, glistening and pink even as the guy’s face was pale and slack.

Sam was willing to bet dude had been *real fucking popular* once upon a time, blessed with a mouth like that. No eyebrows, status post being blown the fuck up, but he had a nice straight prow of a nose; no eyelashes, either, but Sam was willing to bet that when he *had* had them, he had looked all romantic. He had probably known how to flutter ’em.

And now here Sam was, sitting up late with his empty mug, not able to go into the other room because God forbid dude might wake up and bolt, and Sam would be too far away to get a good shot in. “How the hell did I get here, again?” he asked.

His voice came out loud and kind of squeaky and thin, the way it does when you’re talking to yourself after not talking at all for a while. It sounded awkward in the room, bouncing weirdly off the hardwood floor and bright-painted walls. The Winter Soldier didn’t answer.

Sam sighed.

He rearranged his legs, shifting so that the palms of his feet were pressed together, his knees bent on either side, and pressed until he felt the stretch. Then he double-checked his gun, put it flat on the couch in front of him, and bent forward at the waist, pressing his arm down with the other so that he stretched his shoulders. Slowly, he worked over his body, listening to his breathing because he had tried that yoga class on a dare, okay, but he felt good as *shit* afterwards, and just because he had not returned to the class didn’t mean he wasn’t going to use the principles of it in his life, because Sam was not actually a fool.

When he was done—stretched out as much as he could be, considering his own not-insignificant collection of bruises and the part where he had to keep watching Gwen’s husband-slash-prisoner—
he slumped sideways into the couch, cradling his gun comfortably against his thigh, contemplating the Winter Soldier’s face, the nature of the universe, and the absurdity of his situation.

“How did I even get here?” he asked aloud, tapping his index finger against the side of the trigger guard on the semi. “How is this my life?”

Possibly this was Sam’s life because Sam was the kind of guy who didn’t object when his girlfriend dragged her secret-agent ex-husband (current husband?) into his bathtub; Sam thought that, in retrospect, he probably should have been more upset about that one.

It was just that it hadn’t been a surprise, that was the thing. Sam wouldn’t have said he had expected it, but it also hadn’t really been a shock: he had just thought, “Oh, so that’s what she did with him,” and then moved on to the more relevant problem. Sam would insist to his dying day that this had been a more functional course of action, definitely more than picking a fight with her, but... Well, it did sort of set him up for this.

But also...

“Shit,” Sam said, then said it again, more feelingly: “Shit!”

He’d known he liked her; he had. She was very likeable in general.

But he was currently guarding one of the deadliest assassins in the world who was wearing his Lakers jersey because Gwen had looked lost, and that... that was a whole different level of magnitude, was what it was. That was Sam being in love.

Fuck!

It opened up inside of him like a chasm as soon as he thought it, a tilt-a-wheel dizziness and nausea like the top of an arc when he was flying, and he felt his own eyes widen in... something. Some strong emotion; he thought for the sake of his dignity he might claim it was horror.

(It was not horror.)

Fuck! Shit!

His throat closed up, and he set the gun down hurriedly, because the last thing he needed was to be holding it while feeling like this. His hand was shaking by the time he pulled it back towards his lap, the enormity of the shittiness of the situation hitting him, over and over and over again.

Because of course, Gwen’s heart was not as free as it had been a week ago.

Not as free as it had seemed to be a week ago.

He had less than a fraction of a chance, now...

...and he already knew he was going to swing for that ball just as hard as he could, even knowing that he was going to strike out.

Because it was Gwen. And he couldn’t not.

But it complicated the hell out of the situation, that was for sure.

Fuck! Fuck! FUCK!!!

Trapped in a room, with his girlfriend’s husband and Replay Rod Serling, neither of whom were
exactly good listeners, waiting for the doctors to give in to Gwen’s entirely unreasonable demands long enough for her to be released, unable to do actual work or move or anything because he couldn’t really look away from the guy...

Sam was pretty sure this literally was a form of torture. Like Chinese water torture, only with boredom instead of a drip.

He watched two more episodes, but when the TV listed the next one as “The Long Morrow”, he turned it off. Little too on-the-nose, there.

He sighed. “You are a pain in my ass,” he told his... prisoner? That didn’t seem like quite the right term... spitefully. “If you don’t wake up, I’m wasting my time; and if you do wake up, there’s a pretty slim chance I could actually stop you, anyway. What the hell does she expect me to do, shoot you?”

“Please don’t.”

If Sam hadn’t seen the guy’s mouth move, he wouldn’t have believed he was actually talking. Other than speaking, his face stayed completely still; he didn’t open his eyes, didn’t turn his head—he didn’t even have micro-expressions, or eye-crinkles, or anything. Just the words.

*Please don’t,* he had said.

Okay, then. Sam could work with that.

“I’m not planning to,” he said soberly. “But man, I need you to stay where you are and not try to move, okay?”

The guy nodded. He still didn’t open his eyes even when he did it, but he nodded.

“Do you know where you are?” Sam asked.

The guy tensed, obviously listening for a second. Then he shook his head.

“Good,” Sam said, a little too heartfelt, “because if you knew where you were you would know where I live, which you could only know if Hydra knew where I live, and that would be just a little too creepy for me.”

The guy licked his lips, then went still again, but Sam was familiar enough with guys who didn’t want to share that he was able to spot it for what it was: a tell. “Yeah? You wanted to ask something?”

The guy hesitated, then nodded.

And waited.

Sam sighed. “Yeah, okay, so ask it,” he clarified, and sure enough, the Winter Soldier relaxed again back into Sam’s favorite recliner.

“Who are you?” he asked, and suddenly Sam was ashamed.

The guy had sounded genuinely lost and confused, there.

Sam was coming directly face-to-face with the dichotomy of the guy who had torn his wings apart and thrown him off a building being totally helpless and in his power less than twelve hours later, and that... Well, it didn’t make Sam feel great, that was for sure.
“My name is Sam,” he said to start off with, because that was important and because it was a hell of a lot easier than I’m in love with your wife or I’m in love with the woman who stabbed you or those two are synonymous statements. And then he was sort of stalled out on where to go from there, until he had a brilliant flash of insight and practically jumped at the chance to ask, “What’s your name?”

Because he had just realized he had been calling the guy the guy in his head this whole time, or dude, or the Winter Soldier, and none of those seemed like quite the optimal way of referring to him.

Unknown personage opened his mouth, and then paused, obviously not quite having the answer. For the first time, he showed some expression, his forehead wrinkling strangely until Sam realized it was his burned-off eyebrows drawing in, knitting until a pin-scratch line appeared between them.

Sam stared, unexpectedly shaken because Gwen had worn that same exact expression no more than two hours ago. Hell, she was probably wearing it now.

Dude licked his lips. “I don’t... know,” he said. His voice came out somewhere between cautious and terrified, and all of a sudden Sam remembered how merciless the guy was supposed to have been, and wondered how often he had been allowed to hesitate.

If the Winter Soldier is a weapon, what exactly does that mean about the guys who wielded him?

Sam thought he might be sick again.

“There was...” The Winter Soldier hesitated again, correcting himself: “The Target. Secondary Target, alpha level threat, but she kept talking to me. She called me... Bucky?”

Sam was really not looking forward to calling this guy Bucky, on account of both of them were grown-ass men, but if that was what dude was gonna pull, then that was what Sam was by-God gonna use.

“Is that my name?” the poor guy asked. His voice was dull and exhausted, like the uncertainty of not knowing his own fucking name had taken everything he had. On the other hand, Sam remembered, he was also healing at least one stab wound and basically all the internal bleeding ever; he had a right to be tired.

“It’s a nickname you used to have, yeah,” Sam said. “You don’t remember?”

Gwen had said he “looked right through her, and didn’t even know her.” Sam had hoped she would prove to be wrong, though.

“No,” said the Winter Soldier—or Bucky, rather, because apparently they were going with that for a name. “I don’t remember.” His voice dropped half an octave and thickened, developing some weird Russian accent. “Prep was completed successfully.”

“Well, that’s... awful,” Sam said.

Bucky didn’t react to that.

“Is she here?” he asked instead. His pin-scratch was still in place, but the Russian accent had gone as suddenly as it had come.

“Who? Gwen?”
It didn’t seem like the brightest idea in the world to lie to the guy—for a number of reasons, including compassion and honor and he might well know I’m lying—but it also seemed like a bad idea to tell the truth—for reasons including he might split my head like a melon and run off into the night.

“She should be back soon,” he compromised. “Do you remember her?”

If Bucky had had eyebrows, they would have been pulling together dubiously. “Pretty memorable,” he said. He managed to maintain an even and professional tone while still implying that Sam was a moron, which was pretty impressive for a guy in his condition, if Sam was honest.

“Not just from today,” Sam clarified. “You knew her before, too.”

It was heartbreaking.

Sam could see him wrestling with it, trying to pull up the memories. He watched the blankness of the face move from I can’t remember to Why can’t I remember? to What have they done to me, and the whole time Sam’s stomach knotted and turned.

Bucky never answered the question.

When he spoke again, Sam was careful to keep his voice gentle. “Can’t pull her up, huh? Okay, we can work with that. Don’t worry,” he added, and then immediately wondered why he had added it.

It worked, though; the Soldier’s—Bucky’s—face smoothed out, the frown line between where his eyebrows should’ve been fading away and an expression of peace coming over him. He relaxed into the chair—Sam hadn’t realized how stiff the guy had been until it all went away—and his toes flexed, just a little. It took Sam a moment to place it, but when he did, he almost laughed: it reminded him of his niece, kicking her feet against the rungs of a stool much too high for her.

Sam watched him for a minute, but Bucky didn’t do anything else. He thought about turning the TV back on, but Twilight Zone would still be playing the same episode; he thought about getting some food, but he still couldn’t risk turning his back on the guy. And most other activities would require that, too.

He supposed they could just wait—it was what he would have done if Bucky hadn’t woken up, after all.

“...Do you want to open your eyes?” he asked.

Bucky did, popping them open with a speed that suggested he had been waiting for permission, taking in the room with the sort of glance that automatically identified and categorized every weapon in it before focusing on Sam. “Oh,” he said, going very still—scared, if Sam was any judge, which after three years as a counselor he had better be. “Oh, you were—with the wings.”

Sam smiled, slightly, because even given that his wings had been torn in half, he was still damned proud of them. “Yeah, that’s me,” he said calmly. “You’re safe, now; battle’s over. We don’t have to be enemies anymore.”

Hard to categorize the look that crept over Bucky’s face then; if he could only have one word, Sam would probably have plumped for cynical, but there was more to it than that: it was tired, it was wary, it was defeated...
Bucky’s eyes landed on the gun in front of Sam, then rose back up to meet his gaze. The cynicism got distinctly more pointed.

“We don’t have to be enemies any more,” Sam repeated, “And we’re not planning on turning you in, to the FBI or the CIA or whoever, to be tortured. But Gwen wants to talk to you, and if you try to leave before she gets back I will shoot your ass.”

Bucky studied him, evaluating probably. Sam noticed that his posture, which had relaxed into the recliner earlier, was back to being tense. His gaze flicked from Sam to the gun, from the gun to Sam...

He relaxed into the recliner, again, a faint smirk crossing that slanted recurve of a mouth. “You could try,” he said dryly.

But he made no move to leave, not from then until Gwen walked through Sam’s front door forty-five minutes later.

“Sorry it took so long,” she said, “I stopped on the way home to get pizza.”

Neither man was listening to her by that point, because the smell.

Bucky stayed pressed back into the recliner, but his eyes followed the boxes in her hand even more than the shield still strapped to her back; Sam’s stomach gurgled so loudly Gwen blinked and looked over.

“I’m guessing we all approve of that decision,” she said dryly, and then she looked back over at Bucky.

Sam could see her spine stiffening, could see her belting on her armor, holding herself back. He could see the way she wanted to fold forward, pulling Bucky in towards her, and it made his hands ache that she wasn’t doing it yet.

“I see you’re awake,” she said. Her voice came out formal, or kind of formal, anyway. Not like the PSA’s the publicists had had her making when she came out of the ice, but still—not the way you talked to a friend. Definitely not the way you talked to a husband.

Bucky kept his eyes down, not making eye contact in what Sam was willing to bet a lot of looted Hydra dollars was a conditioned response. He lowered his head even further, then raised it up again: a single nod.

Gwen came around the edge of the couch, tossing the pizza boxes casually on the seat next to Sam. She kept going until she was in front of Bucky, then leaned down, her hands resting one on each arm-rest. Sam almost yelled at her—she was in the guy’s way, she was blocking his exit, you didn’t do that with vets—but then he realized she knew exactly what she was doing.

She dropped her head to the side a bit, making a point of forcing him to see her face.

“You gonna run?” she asked, and Sam almost jumped at her voice: lower than usual, but also a lot more Brooklyn, the borough coming through loud and clear in the broad vowels and attitude.

Bucky pressed himself back into the soft padded back of the recliner, moving away from her physically—watching his body language, Sam had to repress the urge to hunt down and defenestrate every Hydra asshole who had ever touched the guy—and his eyes skittered from side to side. Sam wondered whether he should pull Gwen back, out of the guy’s space, but it was pretty obvious that Barnes was reacting to her like she was some Hydra higher-up, an authority figure and
a source of fear. Sam kind of figured, if that was all that was keeping Barnes in the chair, that it
didn’t make much sense to give it up just yet.

Bucky shut his eyes again, flinching, but when he opened them he looked straight into Gwen’s, a
dramatic change of affect accompanied by a straightening of the spine and an almost-demure tilt of
his head. His voice was different, too, when it came out, soft and with an accent that after a
startled minute Sam identified as Irish of all things. “If you ever start runnin’, lass, they’ll never
let you stop,” he said.

Gwen froze, her eyes wide, and broke out in incredulous smiles all over. She laughed, delighted,
while somehow also managing to look as if her heart was breaking. “You remember that?”

Bucky was pressing so far back in the recliner that it actually rocked backwards and threatened to
tilt.

Gwen’s hands pressed hard on the arms of the chair, and it rocked forward again under her weight
as she leaned in and kissed him. It was a hard kiss, possessive and with tongue, and Sam’s
stomach clenched into a sort of iron ball, seeing it. Shit, he thought, shit shit shit shit—Sam, you
are one dumb motherfucker—

She tore away.

Barnes was still pressed against the back of the chair, obviously terrified of her.

Shit, Sam thought again, but this time for a different reason.

Being afraid of Gwen was sort of like being afraid of a golden retriever who bounced up to you,
barking and wagging its tail: completely unnecessary, but some people were gonna be scared
anyway because they had trauma. Got in a dogfight, got trapped with a hungry dog, whatever—
some people would still be scared, based not on the dog but on their own personal history. And
here this guy was, displaying nothing but submissive behavior this whole time, and Sam wasn’t
willing to bet on the odds that he hadn’t been sexually abused by his captors.

Sam raised his voice gently, trying to reach Gwen without metaphorically beating her up: “Looks
like he doesn’t remember that, at least. Maybe give him some room, Gwen.”

Gwen shot him a wounded look, but backed away, releasing the arms of the chair and
straightening. “I’d like you to stay here tonight, Bucky,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest
and looking like Butch Wonder Woman, “and you’re gonna agree to that. Hydra is dead, or dying
—and I think you’ve figured out by now that we have a history
together. A history that goes back a long damned time, Buck—way past yesterday.”

“Today,” Barnes corrected, before freezing with the stillness of someone who has just realized they
have made a massive mistake.

Gwen blinked rapidly, then glanced over at Sam as if to double-check she had heard correctly.

Sam gave up on both of them and started reaching for the pizza, pulling open the first box to find
pepperoni, sausage, black olives, and what he was desperately hoping wasn’t broccoli. He
shrugged, tugging the slice free except for a long, gooey strand of hot cheese. “He seems to have
developed amnesia sometime between yesterday and today,” he told Gwen, pulling at the cheese to
break it. “I’d blame Hydra, but it seems at least possible that it has something to do with how
much he was hit in the head.”

Gwen winced, then looked back at Bucky worriedly.
Bucky looked from one to the other slantways, not quite meeting either of their eyes: his glance darted from Gwen’s chin, to Sam’s ear, and back to Gwen’s chin again. “‘S Standard prep,” he muttered. “Wipe. Briefing. Orders. Equip.”

Gwen and Sam exchanged a look again, a look of mutual Jesus fuck I hate Hydra so goddamn much! Except Gwen’s version had less profanity, probably.

Sam reached down and started pulling off another piece of pizza, resting his old one on the lid of the box. “Hey,” he said, keeping his voice mild because the last thing Bucky Barnes needed was someone shouting at him, “here’s an idea: how about you stick around, with us, also known as people who don’t wipe each other’s memories—” His voice started to rise at the visceral fucking horror of that, and he swallowed hard to force it back down. “—and we’ll keep you all tucked in, with blankets and pizza, for as long as you want to stay.”

Bucky pressed himself back again at that, tilting his head back expectantly into the embrace of the recliner, then frowned as if only just realizing he was doing it. He jerked his head back down, eyes darting squirrely around the room, and asked, “Why?”

“‘Cause you’re my husband, Bucky.” Gwen reached out and put her hand on Bucky’s shoulder, clasping it and smiling like she was about three horrifying revelations away from crying. “And I’m with you, for better or for worse.”

Barnes’ eyes widened, and he managed to look her dead in the eye for once. “My wife,” he repeated incredulously. “My wife?” Sam wasn’t sure what the breaking point was on that idea—there were a number of possible contenders, starting with Bucky was gay and ending with Gwen basically just put him in supersoldier-traction, but whatever his concern was, looking at Gwen in all her implacable goodness seemed to assuage it. Bucky pulled back, clenching his hands and pulling against the restraint of the cuffs, obviously thinking fast. Eventually, he shuffled in further under the blanket and then looked up, placid once more. “Okay,” he said. “If you say so.” He did not sound as if he believed her, but the important thing was that he agreed not to leave. “Sure,” he said, “I’ll stay.”

Sam’s guts clenched, and he suppressed the need to punch things by moving, instead. He stood up with the most recently liberated slice of pizza, carrying it across and holding it out to Bucky, who had to be just as hungry as he was, if not more so.

Instead of taking the piece from him, though, Bucky just leaned forward and took a bite, as passive as a damn trained pug.

Gwen looked like she was gonna puke, and Sam felt a little sick, himself. He dropped the slice and bolted, stomping off into the kitchen and grabbing a Dr. Dynamite out of the fridge, leaving the Winter Soldier to figure out for himself how to eat pizza with his hands cuffed.

Sam leaned, unexpectedly shook, against the counter, pressing the icy can to his head and closed his eyes for a minute, thinking.

Here was a thing: It had been a long damn day, and Sam was not prepared for the level of awful that dude had been disclosing. His stomach was in knots— the lone bite of pizza calling out to its fellows wasn’t helping— and his shoulders were, too. He wanted, very badly, to go to bed, but he couldn’t yet, because they still had to decide what they were doing with Bucky.

But here was another thing, and this was the one that had really sent Sam scurrying to the kitchen: he had kind of liked watching Bucky eat from his hand, and not just because it kept the guy’s hands pinned under the blanket, either.
There was some kind of strange, proprietary-protective bullshit—like an instinct, only stupider—which made him want to take care of the guy. Dude had literally torn up Sam’s flight suit before kicking him off an airplane earlier that day, and Sam still wanted to make sure he was okay. Some kind of aura, some stupid hindbrain thing...

It wasn’t like Sam was actually gonna do it. He was a grown man, in control of his actions and capable of rational thought, thank you very much, and also dude was a murderhobo, he did not actually need coddling, even a little bit. But the urge... The urge protect the guy was a real thing, a thing that rose up in response to big vulnerable eyes, in response to the shy, lost expression on a very handsome face... Sam shook his head at himself, but there was no denying it: Bucky Barnes was innately, fundamentally, inescapably charming...

...that motherfucker!

So Sam stayed in the kitchen, and cracked open his store-brand soda, and thought.

Without being asked, Sam made up his spare bed for Bucky—it seemed only logical—and once the poor guy had advanced past the doorway, he got to watch Gwen hesitate. Because, of course, where was she gonna sleep? She had to know she would always be welcome in Sam’s bed—and one glance at her revealed that she kind of wanted to be there—but at the same time, that was her husband in the other room...

Sam had just talked himself into manning up and yielding the field when Barnes beat him to it. “I promise not to run off,” he said, in his soft, totally-not-a-psycho-killer voice. “If you don’t want to stay with me.”

Gwen wrapped her arms around herself.

“It’s not that I don’t want to stay with you,” she said carefully, “but... I thought you were dead, Bucky. I grieved, I—”

Bucky was straightening, staring at her. “You moved on,” he guessed, like it was the answer to a question he’d been asking himself for hours, which—hey! It probably was!

Gwen being Gwen, she didn’t pretend to be ashamed when she confirmed it. “Yes,” she said. “I actually had just started to move on.” Her glance flicked up and met Sam’s. “I would like to continue to.”

Sam felt every inch of his body light up, like there was sunshine coming out of his fingers and toes like in Beauty and the Beast.

Bucky tilted his head to the side, and despite his eerie overall stillness, there was still a smile in the corners of his mouth. “I promise not to run off,” he repeated softly, “if you don’t want to stay with me.”

Gwen looked back over at him and blushed, little pale-pink roses in her cheeks. And then—

Sam would have paid good money to figure out what the next thought that occurred to her was. He would rather have known that thought than had his car back. He was dying of curiosity, because after about a second of staring there, all pretty and pink, Gwen went bright schoolhouse red, all over, up to her hairline and down to her shirt, and she was wearing some kind of camisole-tank thing that she had had under her tactical shirt so that was actually pretty far down, and it was solid, it was a vibrant flush, and Sam just really needed to know what the hell she’d been thinking about to cause it.
“I’ll stay with Sam,” she choked out, and fled down the hall.

Sam watched her go. “Huh,” he said, and then turned back to the Winter Soldier. “You okay to sleep in that?”

He nodded at the jersey and gym shorts combo they had re-dressed Bucky in; it made him look a little like a kid in his jammies, which was a thought Sam had no intention of ever sharing with anyone.

Bucky looked down at himself, frowning slightly—which was still kind of hilarious with no eyebrows, especially now that Sam was less worried about the guy stabbing them all—and then shrugged. “Fine,” he said.

“Cool. How’s your stomach?”

Bucky raised up the hem of the jersey without hesitation, showing off the padded bandage taped to his right side.

Sam frowned. “You’re bleeding through that,” he noted. “You know how to change it?”

Bucky nodded, then hesitated. Sam guessed what he was thinking and jerked his head in the direction of the spare bathroom. “First aid kit under the counter in there,” he said neutrally. “We’ll probably check on you in the middle of the night.”

“You should.”

“Yeah. That’s what I thought, too.”

They stared at each other in silence for a minute. Sam kind of thought Bucky had a whole bunch of questions, but he was obviously not going to ask them; whether because of programming, or caution, or natural reticence, Sam couldn’t tell. Finally, he uncrossed his arms—which, huh: maybe he shouldn’t have had crossed in the first place, good going, Wilson, can really see all those years as a counselor at work, there—and extended his hand.

Barnes’ eyes went very wide, but he reached out and took the hand, shaking it.

“Good night,” Sam said, and, his neck crawling the whole time, turned his back on the very-recently-ex assassin to walk down the hallway to his damn bedroom.

Gwen was still in his shower by the time he got to the bedroom, which frankly he was grateful for because girl had been dunked in the Potomac, she smelled like dirt and old fish. He stripped down while he waited for her—he hadn’t showered yet, either, and thanks to his time spent on search and rescue he smelled like broken concrete and blood—and brushed his teeth, and was just contemplating whether they were at a stage where he could take a piss with her in the room—did that come before or after the ‘governmental overthrow’ stage? Sam was inclined to think after—when Gwen stepped, dripping and Venus-like, out of the shower.

She froze when she saw him, just staring, eyes wide and travelling up and down his body. Sam smiled. “See something you like?” he joked.

“Yes,” she said immediately, not joking at all.

Sam felt his eyebrows shoot up, felt himself thicken at the desire in her eyes. He took a step closer, getting into her shiny-clean space. “I’m going to shower,” he said seriously, “and then I am going
to bed. But my understanding is, you’re going to be in that bed, so if you want to...” He laughed, shaking his head. “If you want to, I will not be too tired.”

Gwen bit her lip savagely, eyes tracking up and down him again. Then her face changed, reluctance taking over her features, and she grudgingly stepped out of the way of the shower. “I can’t,” she said, “not this first night. Let me make sure he knows, understands—the last thing I want is for him to think we were lying.”

And that was reasonable, it was, but he still felt the stab of rejection. “Sure,” he said, and pulled down a towel to sit on the back of the toilet on his way into the shower. “Your ass is the one checking on him during the night, by the way. I intend to get a solid six and a half hours of sleep.”

Gwen laughed, then groaned. “Six and a half sounds great. Yes, I will check on him. I’ll make breakfast in the morning.”

He turned on the water, but Sam could still hear her moving beyond the curtain, the sounds of someone brushing their teeth, combing their hair, drying off with a towel. It was all strangely domestic. Sam thought he could maybe get used to nights like this.

Sam thought he had maybe better not.

Neither one of them needed an alarm to get up, Sam because he had woken up at six in the morning for years and he wasn’t going to let a little thing like the complete dismemberment of a governmental organization the day before stop him, Gwen because... serum, maybe? Sam wasn’t sure. But she hadn’t seemed to have any trouble waking up the last two times they’d had a sleepover, so he figured it was as ingrained in her as it was in him.

They rolled out of bed on opposite sides, their feet hitting the floor almost in unison without them saying a word to each other. Sam waiting on the edge of the bed for a minute, while Gwen stretched and stood. “Bucky’ll sleep for another few hours,” she said, her voice falling into the stillness of the room like the fat flakes of DC snow at three in the morning. “Want to go for a run?”

Sam thought about it. “Nope.” He got up and walked around her, fetching his cell phone off the dresser on the other side of the room. “I want to call my mama, tell her I’m not dead in a river. No way she didn’t see my ass flying around yesterday; she has gotta be worried.”

Gwen snorted and took the phone out of his hand. “I called her yesterday, actually. From the hospital. And also, it’s six in the morning.”

“Oh, so you think that matters? My mama is like the devil, Gwen, she never sleeps.” But he was willing to let the phone stay where it was. “Did you check on our guest last night?”

“Three times. Asleep for two of them, lying there with his eyes open for the third. He’ll be out for at least another couple of hours, he always did sleep late.” Her hands curled into fists and released at her side, curled and released... Her throat bobbed as she swallowed. “We should talk,” she said, her voice strangely tentative. Sam had a memory-flash of the confident woman who had busted into the SHIELD headquarters and made a rousing speech over the intercom, and shivered. This was the Gwen nobody else got to see, he thought. This was the Gwen who was vulnerable, private...

“Yeah,” he agreed, his voice coming out scratchy and hoarse. “We should talk.”

And then, a moment later: “But you know, we should probably make coffee first.”
They made coffee. Sam cut fruit and mangled eggs while Gwen made pancakes and breakfast potatoes and—“Okay, what the hell is that?”

Gwen scowled. “If you don’t like them, you don’t have to eat them,” she said, her face grim, and continued chucking mangled pieces of... dough? It looked like some kind of dough, and there was flour everywhere... onto the tray.

When the tray of... things... was in the oven, the eggs on a plate, the fruit in bowls, and the potatoes sizzling cheerfully, Sam leaned back against the counter, cappuccino from the Keurig in his hands. He eyeballed Gwen thoughtfully, and decided that he would man the hell up and take the first step. “We should probably talk about it,” he started.

Gwen looked out his kitchen window, the one he watched birds out of, and nodded. Then she looked back at Sam. “The thing is...”

Her voice shook, just a little.

“...I thought he was dead. I thought he was dead, and I was finally, finally starting to move on, and...” She raised one long-fingered hand with the palm flat up, a hopeless sort of gesture. “...and it was you. And... Sam, I don’t...” She stopped, looking away, hunching her shoulders as if ashamed, and didn’t continue.

Sam’s heart took off, beating faster and faster in his throat, and he felt the sick-happy feeling of hope that came specifically when you were sure there was no actual hope to be found. He had a guess about what she didn’t do, but he almost didn’t dare to voice it...

“You don’t hook up?” he hazarded.

She looked up with a quick, surprised grin. “No,” she said. “That is, I don’t hook up. I just... I don’t like how it feels. To try. So with you...” She looked down at the counter, then back up with a warm expression. “...that was not what it was, with you.”

*That was not what it was, with you.* The words hung in the air between them, curling like steam and winding their way around Sam’s chest like the smell of the fresh coffee.

*That was not what it was, with you.* Implying that it had instead been something more. Sam could feel his cheeks hurting with the smile.

*That was not what it was, with you.*

**Oh babygirl... What was it, then?**

Sam cleared his throat and looked at the patterns of foam on his coffeecup. He felt like there were a storm of titmice inside of him, fluttering their wings all over his insides. It tickled. “Well,” he said, “I don’t normally follow a person into battle on the first date, either.”

Gwen smiled and laughed, ducking her head. “I should hope not. Strictly second date behavior, that.”

Sam set down his coffee cup and crossed the kitchen to her, crowding into her space and just standing there, close, closer, pressing against her... He nosed up by her ear, watched her head tilt back invitingly. He kept his voice low, a murmur, and asked, “Which date are we on now...?”

Gwen gasped, and it was the good kind of gasp. “Number enough,” she answered with a hint of a
whine in her voice. She turned into him, catching his mouth tenderly, hitching herself up to sit on the edge of the counter. She tasted like sugar and cinnamon. Sam hummed happily and leaned into it, his hands finding their ways to her waist, her knees coming up to clamp on either side of his hips.

They necked there for long, slow, lazy minutes, enjoying the early morning sunlight and the play of hands over skin, but eventually they both pulled back. Sam licked his lips, and then sighed and jerked his head toward the guest room.

“What about him?” he asked.

He woke up in a shockingly comfortable bed.

He listened, first: some kind of fan, distant traffic noise, birdsong—Eastern seaboard, somewhere, judging by the mix of chickadees and seagulls; the fractured remains of his memory gave him Washington, DC as the most probable suggestion—and a dog barking not too far away... He opened his eyes and sat up—

PAIN!

A small noise escaped him, something between a breath and a whine: every muscle in his body was sore, and further examination revealed angry yellow-green bruising all over his torso. A sharp pain in his side revealed a stab wound, healing well but surrounded by the angry purple of past internal bleeding. His hair swung into his face, still smelling of char, and although he had obviously gotten at least hosed off, he still felt gritty with grime and soot.

Incomplete debriefing, his brain supplied. *Couldn’t even give me a goddamn shower before tucking me into bed.*

He blinked, and shook his head to clear it.

There was a stack of clothing folded on the dresser—including underwear, a new pack; someone had gone on a supply run while he was asleep—and towels. A note, propped on top of the pile, brought back the flood of memory from the night before—

*Mission failure.*


He had learned a long, long time ago, so long ago that it was burned into his bones, that once you were captured, you would never, never, ever escape.

—soft prison: cozy chair, blankets, pillows. *Man, “Sam,” monitored me while I was unconscious, passing familiarity with firearms... Incredibly beautiful in flight—> wings (!!!!). Woman, “Gwen”, equals secondary target equals Avenging Angel equals Sarah Rogers—*

—no, *Gwen Barnes,* he mentally corrected, then wondered why he was arguing with the mission briefing when his mind was obviously swiss cheese. *But Sam called her Gwen, too,* he insisted to himself, then grabbed the comb off the dresser to give himself a distraction, pulling it through his hair roughly enough to pull and sting.

What did he know? Review:

*Secondary target engaged with self during mission yesterday 1100 hours. Secondary target*
successfully destroyed primary target (mission equals protect) during that altercation. Secondary target additionally displayed extreme rage reaction of unknown provenance during that conflict.

...And why had the Avenging Angel been so incredibly furious, anyway? He still didn’t know the answer. All he knew was that it had been highly personal—most of the blows had been aimed at his face, his chest; too focused for an indiscriminate aggression—and intense. He could still hear the screaming.

_Algertation ended in personal loss of consciousness while in the presence of secondary target._

They had been blowing the ship to pieces; neither he nor the target should have survived, much less both. What had she had to do, to bring him through it?

_Return of consciousness nine and a half hours later— there had been a digital display on the DVD player —accompanied by guard, “Sam”, armed with single weapon and to all appearances a baseline human._

But he knew better than to think he could escape after capture, and so he had remained sitting passively in his Chair.

_Recliner, he corrected. Gwen called it a recliner._

Sam had asked him his name, and Gwen had called him _Bucky._

Now, standing alone in the room they had... allowed him?... his breath quickened, and his heart thudded heavily.

_My name is Bucky,_ he thought, testingly, like putting the tip of his tongue to a powder, like calling out into a dark and empty room. _My name is Bucky._ It didn’t taste like anything, but it echoed deep inside of him.

There was something else there, too, something on either side of the name, but when he tried to pull it out, it slipped away like a goldfish. _Later, then._

He would have time; his captors intended to keep him.

He felt his breath speed still further, the burgeoning excitement changing to a fear that coursed through him. He forced himself to return to calm, or at least a semblance of calm. Yes, they intended to keep him—perhaps permanently—but they were hardly the harshest captors in the world. They had fed him _pizza_ last night. The bed he had slept in was _comfortable,_ their gazes were _kind._

_And they gave me a name, _he reminded himself. _My name is Bucky._

_My name is Bucky, now._

_Slowly, the hard, small ball of panic in his chest unclenched, relaxing, and he went back to reviewing what he knew. They had told him that Gwen wanted to talk to him, they had said—_ The panic started again, harder and sharper than it had been a minute ago.

_Gwen said I was her husband._

No. No no no, he couldn’t be—

He tried to remember her—violence and pain sprang to mind, and he cringed—he tried to imagine
her, and pulled up an image—*long blue skirt, swishy; brightly colored jacket, all the colors of the flag*—

He shook his head, sharply. Tried again—

*Pale blonde hair, limp and loose, spread across a pillow; small pointy elbow digging into his side, but I don’t want to move, she’s sleeping*—

The woman in that memory had been far too small to be Gwen.

He shuddered all over, shuddered so hard the comb fell from nerveless fingers, and he gave up on thinking about it for the moment.

There was a note on the stack of clothing which indicated that he was instructed to use the shower to clean himself more thoroughly before nutritional upkeep. *Can’t say getting clean won’t be one hell of a relief,* he thought, and did so, dressing himself in the provided clothing when he was done.

They had bought him new underwear, but no socks; a fresh pack of hair-elastics had sat on the guest sink, but no scissors.

*Guess I’m not supposed to be going outside for a while...*

But bare feet made no sound on the wooden floors of this place, and it brought a level of comfort that he hadn’t expected, to be able to move about silently, a kind of freedom that came from being unobserved. And he was easily able to pause, eavesdropping, outside of the dining area.

“. . .tell Nat not to worry about that. He looks different all cleaned up, anyway, and no one seems to have gotten any pictures of the overpass altercation once his mask was off.”

His heart pounded again, because that sounded like they were talking about *him.* His breath puffed silently out of his mouth—surprise? Alarm?—and he leaned in against the door frame, listening harder.

“I know that. I know. . . .No, but I also don’t care.”

A soft snort from the man—Sam—indicated that he was also in the dining area, and listening to the one-sided conversation.

“Hill. He is. My husband. I can’t—”

Hill apparently had some things to say about that, judging by the lengthy and increasingly cold silence.

A faint *beep,* and then Sam’s voice, startled and laughing: “Dude, did you just hang up on her?!”

“You’re damn right I did.” Secondary target—the Angel—*Gwen*—sounded irritated. “She’ll call back, but she’ll have gotten around to understanding by the time she does. What are you working on?”

“Client stuff.” A shifting sound, like someone adjusting themselves in their seat. “Reassuring everyone I’m not dead.” There was a pause, and then a gentle cough from the man. “I, uh... I also tendered my resignation at work.”

A jerky shuffle and then several slaps as if against flesh, ending in a crash: the woman had dropped something, bobbed it, and then lost it to the floor. “You what? Sam, why?”
Sam had a really nice chuckle, the kind of chuckle that made warm sparks light up in his—in Bucky’s—belly. “Decided I was done treading water,” was all Sam said, but apparently it meant something to sec—to Gwen, because when he—when Bucky stuck his head around the corner, they were kissing.

Bucky stared.

They looked good, kissing, he thought. Sam was seated at the dining table, a laptop open in front of him, a cell phone beside it on the table; one hand still rested on the keyboard, but the other was raised, wrapped around the back of Gwen’s neck and guiding her head down to him. She was bent over at the waist to kiss him, and the clothing she wore—a t-shirt that managed to be loose and clingy, both at the same time, along with khaki cargo pants which clung to her hips—showed off her curves to full advantage.

Bucky stared at her ass for a minute—with her bent over like that, the pants were stretched so tight he could see her panties—and tried to find it in himself to be attracted to her. He believed her when she said she had been his wife—her conviction was too firm to deny—but he couldn’t make himself see it, couldn’t bring the delicious greed of arousal to life. It just... wouldn’t happen, and he was aware of a spiking concern over that.

She looked good, sure, and he could well imagine that there were plenty of guys who would fall all over themselves to be married to a dame like her, but she looked good like a fashion model looked good, or good like a lattice-top apple pie looked good, fresh out of the oven and steaming.

He didn’t want to fuck the pie, though.

The guy she was kissing, on the other hand...

Warm bands of sunlight came in from the dining room window and struck the both of them—both of the lovers, because that was obviously what they were—equally. Gwen’s hair was gilded, her skin turned to ivory and gold; Sam had stripes of cherrywood and cinnamon, the reddish undertones of his skin coming out like he’d been painted by Van Gogh. His fingers on Gwen’s neck were long, and strong, and Bucky wanted them wrapped around his neck, wanted that hand forcing his head down, wanted to move his own mouth against that warm skin...

He made a noise.

The two broke apart.

They all stared at each other for a long, awkward second.

Gwen recovered first, and said “good morning” in a voice like she had just run into the neighbor who kept stealing cabbages from her garden but she had never been able to prove which neighbor it was so she had to be polite.

Bucky didn’t have neighbors; the ability to be polite had apparently be burned out of his brain along with his memory, and he was still seeing the sunlight falling in bars across smooth-skinned biceps. He blurted, “Fuck, are you sure I was married to you?”

Gwen straightened, slowly, and crossed her arms over her chest, looking like she’d rather cross them over her belly ‘cause she was about to be sick. “I’m sure,” she said. “Believe me, I remember every day of it. But I think I’d better brief you on what it was like.”

So she did.
When she was done, he—Bucky—let out a breath and tilted back his head, blinking up at the ceiling before looking back at them. At her, mostly. “Explains a lot,” he offered.

She smiled thinly. “I’m sure you were confused,” she said, her voice coming out flat and... not quite dangerous, but...

There had been something there, as she told him how it had been.

She had listed off the events of their marriage: the failed wedding night which hadn’t surprised either of them, the habitual affection-without-passion which had characterized their relationship, the support he had offered her when she tried to enlist... And then, sounding more tentative, she had told him that they had finally properly made love the night before he left for Europe, that she had conceived and then lost a child in his absence. She had tried to stay clinical, and her choice of words stayed solely descriptive, but the pain in her voice, in her face, had been real, and it had hit him with a shock, a blow both unexpected and impossible to brace against, a stun baton to the face. He had had to fumble his way forward, grooping for a chair and lowering himself into it, his eyes wide and aching with dryness at the thought.

_I could have had a child?!_

_Christ Jesus... I could have had a child!_

How had he reacted the first time, when she told him? Had he been happy, sad? Had he shrugged and forgotten all on his own?

When he had his breath back, Gwen had gone on, telling him about the war, about her own registration into the SSR—finally, something he did know; some of that had been in his briefing, although not much—and about how he had “died,” including her speculation as to why it hadn’t taken.

“That’ must have been...” He had stopped, blinking, distorted funhouse memories of waking up in pain running through his mind. “…that must be how I lost my arm.”

Her face had crumpled, and her mouth had worked, silently.

Now, she was standing in the dining room, watching him over the plate of cold eggs he had stopped halfway through choking down, her eyes bitter and lost.

He picked up the hard cookie she had given him and dipped it in his coffee, watching thoughtfully as the dark liquid wicked up into it, before pulling it out and tapping it against the side of the cup to prevent dripping. The man Sam watched him do it, his eyes narrowed, and Bucky jerked his head sideways at him.

“So then what?” he asked. “What about him? ‘Cause don’t tell me you two ain’t a couple, now.”

She laughed like madwoman at the bald statement of it. “You told me to!” she cackled, then drank hurriedly from her coffee cup in what seemed to be an attempt to suppress the hysteric, gasping and hiccoughing by the time she pulled the cup away. By the time she spoke again, she sounded as if she wanted to be apologetic but couldn’t actually bring herself to regret a minute of it. “You specifically said to find myself someone, actually. And after you died... Or seemed like you died, anyway... it seemed like the right thing to do. To pick myself up and keep moving, because you wouldn’t have wanted me to stop.” Her hands were held in front of her, as if pleading. “You told me so many times not to just give up, and I thought—”

She gave another harsh laugh.
“I had thought... that I was finally doing it, when I met Sam.”

Her eyes flicked sideways and she visibly steeled herself. “I love Sam.” She said it in exactly the same tone she had used the previous day to order the mysterious Maria to fire on the helicarriers, and Bucky saw Sam’s eyes widen in shock: the first time she had said it, then. “I thought... But now you’re back. And I love you, too.” Her back straightened, her arms crossing over her chest; her eyes were burning and fierce. “I’m not giving either of you up. I won’t. I can’t.”

He nodded; he believed her.

She stared at him, and nodded back; she believed he believed her.

As one, the two of them turned to stare at Sam.

Sam was still sitting in the sunlight, still lit up like Apollo only twice as juicy. He had both hands clapped on his head like a middle-aged nurse in a pantomime, and he was rubbing them back and forth—probably the sensation of his buzz cut was soothing. He looked hopelessly out of his depth and perfectly willing to be there, unable to swim but unwilling to stop diving. He looked up at Gwen and shrugged his shoulders, hands still rubbing across his short hair, a portrait of what can you do?

“Don’t look at me,” he said. “I’m not your voice of reason, I jump off of planes in a wingsuit. Call Romanov, ask her what she thinks.”

Gwen ducked her head, smiling at the floor, and when she looked up, her heart was in her eyes. Bucky felt his heart squeeze—how could he be scared of losing her, when he had just gotten her again?

And then the floor tilted and he grabbed the edge of the table for support, because Sam was looking back at her the same way.

Bucky looked down, away from their mutual hearteyes, and ate his eggs.

He didn’t have much appetite, though; the eggs had gone cold.

Chapter End Notes

Dom/Sub undertones: Sam is Dommy, although that term is never used.
Recovery

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings discussed more fully in the end notes: Voyeurism. Dom/sub undertones.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Things happened pretty quickly, after that.

There were a lot of funerals. Gwen went to almost all of them—

*She would*, Bucky thought, then immediately wondered what he knew that had led him to think it.

—and Sam to almost none. There were meetings with the FBI, CIA, Interpol, and half a dozen other agencies, too, all of them wanting to know what Gwen planned to do now that SHIELD was gone, all of them wanting to take over SHIELD’s operations, and most of them wanting to know what she knew about the Winter Soldier.

“Don’t worry about it,” she told him over Thai noodles (it had been Sam’s turn to cook). Bucky was wearing soft, comfortable house-clothes, and had gone still when she had voiced her complaint about the too-obvious agendas of the various officials she had been meeting. “I have a plan,” she added.

“Oh,” Bucky said, his mouth moving in age-old snark he barely even remembered before he could even consider whether it was a smart idea, “well, then; if you have a plan...”

Gwen cackled delightedly, and Sam, poking at his peanut chicken, looked up and smiled in surprise at the sass.

One day, after Gwen had left for the morning, the mysterious Maria appeared at their door. She turned out to be Maria Hill, who had been in Bucky’s briefings as the Assistant Director of SHIELD. She had hard, gray-blue eyes and a terrifyingly no-nonsense affect; Bucky was certain that, had she been on the helicarrier, he would already be dead. She wore the perpetually tired mein of a woman who was in charge of things, but who was constantly having to explain that fact to idiot men who couldn’t comprehend it.

She showed up in an armored vest, carrying several guns and a laptop, and immediately on entering the house, she steered Bucky to the living room, plonking him down in the middle of the couch with herself on one side and Sam on the other. Sam reached out and patted Bucky’s flesh arm; Hill sat sideways on the arm of the couch, watching Bucky, and turned on the TV to something called CSPAN.

Sam nudged Bucky with his elbow. “Deposition day,” he explained. “Gwen and the Black Widow are testifying before Congress.”

Bucky blinked at him, turning it over in his mind. “Why.”

Hill spoke from the couch arm, pulling open her laptop on her knees. “She is attempting to convince Congress to authorize the Avengers to act in the same capacity as SHIELD did. Only
without governmental oversight, on the basis that our previous governmental oversight turned out
to be a Nazi. If she succeeds, it would empower the Avengers to do... well, a lot of things. But one
of those things it enables is for Gwen to get you pardoned.” She made it sound like an offhand
comment instead of the pointed jab it actually was.

“She wouldn’t be out there if I wasn’t here,” Bucky interpreted, feeling guilty.

“Hey, man.” Sam nudged him again. “No way to know what might have been.”

“Actually, there is—we came this close to sending Romanov to do it alone, but in the end, we felt
that Rogers’ reputation was worth the risk.” Hill paused, eyeballing Bucky skeptically. “Or
Barnes, I guess her name is.”

Bucky glared at her, suddenly very tired of games. “Why are you here?” he asked.

On the screen, they cut to outside the Capitol, showing Gwen approaching in a periwinkle colored
suit, followed by the Widow in hot pink. Gwen’s hair had grown out quickly, far more quickly
than was natural, and was already waving around her cheekbones, carefully styled: she must have
gotten it cut this morning, after she left.

Maria Hill said, “Anybody who wants to try to take you back is going to move while Gwen is out
of the house.” She jerked her head at the television. “This is the first time that she has, publicly,
been out of the house. If they’re going to try to take you, they’re going to do it today.”

Bucky watched the screen, where the two women were smiling at the reporters—Gwen politely,
the Black Widow terrifyingly. Then they entered the building, and the display snapped back to the
Senate.

He thought, I don’t want anyone else to take me.

He thought, I want to stay.

He looked at Hill. “Give me a gun,” he ordered.

She bristled. On his right side, the vulnerable one, Sam bristled. He also pulled away, searching
Bucky’s face with a worried expression.

Bucky rolled his eyes. “They’re not gonna take me,” he said, “I won’t let ‘em. Now gimme a
gun.”

Hill jerked her head back and staring at him. “What,” she said, as if it were a complete declarative
sentence.

The room was silent for a minute. On the television display, the Black Widow and Gwen were
seating themselves at a conference table. Gwen pulled out chairs for them both; as she sat, the
Black Widow leaned over and whispered something in her ear that made them both laugh
mischievously.

Bucky’s right hand was stretched out along his leg and palm up, with the fingers still up as if
holding an invisible apple from where Sam had taken his hand away.

Someone placed a gunstock in it.

Bucky turned to look at Sam. Sam raised his eyebrows back at him.
“I’m real happy to hear you making decisions, man. That’s a real good sign. So I’m gonna trust you with this, okay?”

Sam was pretty much always beautiful, but sometimes he looked like a goddamn angel, and this was one of those times. “Okay, Sam.”

“Thanks, man.” Sam reached up, carefully slowly, and clasped his shoulder in a way that stirred up memories—not that Bucky could remember the instance, but he knew how it felt, when something was Old. This was Old.

It was... nice, too, he decided.

Sam nodded at the screen and told him to watch, then hopped up and went to the other room—for a new gun, Bucky assumed; surely he didn’t only have the one.

On the screen, Gwen and the Widow were playing Good cop, Bad Cop with the entirety of Congress and winning, but none of the three sitting on the couch were really focused on it. Hill, as she explained, was monitoring the various electronic defenses that were installed around Sam’s house; Sam was watching Bucky; and Bucky was thinking about what it meant that, given all the opportunities in the world to leave, he had chosen, not only to stay, but to fight for the right to do so.

When he had first come to, after the fight, he had been convinced he was captured. He had stayed, because he had learned, deep down, that once captured, you can never escape. But here—in the light of day, with Sam’s warm thigh pressed against his and a total stranger ready to fight to defend him—the very idea that these were captors seemed... ludicrous. Bizarre, almost offensive, and also at the same time ridiculous.

But if they weren’t captors, what were they, instead?

Gwen looked like he had punched her in the gut when he asked her, later that night after the deposition was done and the attackers who had shown up right on schedule had all been taken into custody. Even Sam, who normally handled Bucky’s brokenness with an equanimity that Bucky could only envy, looked taken aback. It was Hill—still bleeding lightly from a cut on her cheek, but matter-of-factly competent in spite of it—who answered. “I’d call it a family,” she said. She looked faintly off-put by the confusion on his face. “They care about you, they want what’s best for you, and right now they get to make decisions for you but once we all think you’re competent you get to take that back.” She frowned, thinking that over. “SHIELD had standards for competency evaluations, status post brainwashing, I’ll see if I can dig them out of the...” She waved a hand vaguely. “...detritus.”

“Just like that?” The Widow was sitting on the windowsill eating a piece of cold pizza, her legs swinging gently as she surveyed the damage to the room. “Sam, we’re going to need to buy you a new television; that one has bullet-holes in it.”

“We’re not going to buy me anything,” Sam said tiredly, “none of us has a budget.”

Gwen coughed, sounding embarrassed.

“Yes, just like that,” Hill said, answering the original question. “You can’t punish people for things that happen while they’re captive, or at least you shouldn’t. It happens all the time off the books, of course: giving people shittier assignments, lower trust levels, stuff like that. But officially, anything that happens to a POW is not the POW’s fault, and since that’s exactly what Barnes was... Yes: just like that.”
Widow looked unhappy, munching her pizza with a frown on her face. Bucky wondered about it, a little—she hadn’t seemed that expressive on the footage that afternoon...

Sam snickered and pointed a garlic stick at her. “You’re just mad ‘cause he shot you.”

Widow sat up indignantly, widening her eyes dramatically—playfully, Bucky realized; she was *playing*. “I am *not!*” she protested, and now he could hear the joke in it clearly.

“I shot you?” he asked.

Widow bared her teeth at him. “Twice,” she said.

Bucky closed his eyes for a fraction of a second, then opened them and smiled. Slow. Cocky. *I used to know how to do this,* he thought, *I used to know how to play back,* and he couldn’t remember it but he knew the skill was there. Lascivious, wet. There it went: brash, young, confident smile. Flirty.

He said, “Shootin’ a fine dame like you, you’d think I’d remember it.”

And then he widened the smile just that little bit more, and added, “Twice.”

The room was dead-silent for half a breath—

—and then Gwen whooped, and tackled him, landing on top of him and knocking them into the middle of the carpet, pressing closed-mouthed kisses all over his face.

Gwen and the Widow’s efforts on the Hill bore fruit: the Avengers did in fact get their authorization. Immediately, Gwen was inundated with communiques from various agencies, half them asking for basic repeats of the meetings Gwen had just had with them. She forwarded all of these requests to someone named Bruce Banner, informing everybody with a mostly-straight face that Bruce was the pro-tem head of the Avengers until they had all met to nominate an official leader.

“Oh, it’s not a lie,” she assured Sam over cabbage and corned beef (Bucky’s turn to cook). “Bruce can’t be killed—basically everybody’s tried—and he can’t be pushed around, because of course that makes him angry.” Bucky was unsure why Bruce being angry was a problem, but was willing to take her word that it would be bad. “So now they’re all tiptoeing around instead of bein’ jerks, all of which together is the whole reason I decided he should be the leader in the first place.

“He wasn’t going to agree, but I promised that eventually, it would come back to me,” she added. “Nat and Bruce don’t want it, Clint’s the only one of the lot of us who is still reasonably anonymous and he won’t want to give that up, Thor is off-world half the time, and Stark is busy with his toys, or whatever he does to while away the hours. So it’ll come back to me. But for the moment I can be free of it.” She smiled wryly. “I only need a month or two, really. To recover. And that’ll be enough time for the worst of it to die down.”

Sam cocked an eyebrow at her. “You’re not fooling anyone,” he said, poking at his cabbage. “Your ass is counting the days until you hold the reins again.”

She grinned, full and splendid for a minute, and Bucky felt his breath catch at the happiness in her eyes. *She used to look like that when Carter said she was proud of her,* he thought breathlessly.

And then he froze, and spent the rest of the evening trying to remember who or what a Carter was.
Later on, in bed that night, he lay awake and listened to them move together.

They probably didn’t know—no, scratch that; they definitely didn’t know—how good his ears were, how sharp his hearing was; they couldn’t possibly know that he could hear them. But he could: the harsh pants of their breathing, the gasps and moans—Gwen sounded like she was dying, but Bucky was very sure that she wasn’t—the soft slaps and liquid noises, the creaking of wood—the bed frame? Probably—and the softly spoken words of their intimacy.

“Oh, no.” That was Sam. “Not yet, babygirl. You’re gonna go again and again before I get in there.”

A moan—Gwen, definitely.

“You’re gonna be so wet for me, babygirl. You’re gonna be so wrung out that all you can do by then is lie there and take it. You’re gonna moan for it, first, gonna beg me to be in you.”

She did moan, then, but it didn’t quite cover the sound of something—most likely fingers, given the context—moving rapidly in some liquid channel.

A series of soft, happy hums from Sam, along with increasingly desperate cries from Gwen, followed, increasing in speed and pitch until Sam snapped out, “Come on, come on my fingers, right now—” and Gwen screamed, wordless and mindless and glorious.

Bucky shifted, and threw back the covers of Sam’s guest bed, pulling down the loose pajama pants that someone had bought for him.

He was hard.

And he was definitely not going to be able to sleep.

“Good girl.” Sam’s warm, soothing caramel-and-honey voice was still in the other room, but Bucky could hear it as clearly as if he were speaking in his ear. The house was silent apart from the two of them—the three of them, Bucky supposed.

Self-stimulation would be met with punishment.

...He wasn’t a captive anymore, though. And Gwen and Sam had both shown, over and over again, that each, in their own way, wanted him to be happy.

Gwen was making a series of desperate whimpers, the noises speeding up again. “Please,” she begged, and Bucky could picture her, blond hair spread across the pillow, breasts sagging flat to each side, legs splayed for Sam to rest between them.

The picture came too readily, and from the wrong angle: not imagination, but memory. Bucky’s mind was coming back.

He moved his hand closer to his erection, lying burning hot against his hip, his fingers stretched out as if peering around an invisible corner for enemies. A sudden spike of anxiety rose up within him, though, and he jerked his hand back as if scalded, his breath rushing too-fast across his lips.

“Again,” Sam ordered, and Gwen moaned like a dying woman. Bucky tried to imagine Sam’s face during this, tried to imagine the expression as he brought Gwen over the edge, again and again. His eyes would be dark, hooded, commanding; his cheekbones sharp in the dim light. His cheeks would be glistening with her juices, Bucky’s mind whispered, and suddenly his hand was on his dick, grasping it tight, too tight, as he gasped into the night air.
They’re going to hear me! He panicked, but they weren’t, not really; Sam wasn’t enhanced, and Gwen would be distracted to say the least. Bucky was more clear to try this than he ever would have been if they weren’t doing anything.

He gulped, and looked down at his hand.

Tentatively, he moved his thumb up and over the head of his penis as Sam let out a low, happy-possessive growl. Slick sounds and moans, and then the increase began again: sharper, faster, louder... Bucky bit his lip and ran his thumb over the head again, this time almost letting out a moan himself at the intensity. It wouldn’t last—much of the sensation was caused, he knew, by just how long it had been since he had done this—but for now, he found himself squeezing his eyes shut and gasping as Gwen, noisy and unashamed of her pleasure, ramped up and over into orgasm again.

“That’s it, Gwen; that’s my good girl. You got another in you?”

“Oh, no, oh, god, Sam, please—”

“Please what, babygirl? You want me to do it again? I could—”

A loud wail indicated that he had punctuated this offer with some sort of delicious action; from the tone, Bucky was guessing with his tongue. Bucky clenched his jaw and ran the circle of his right thumb and forefinger down, and then back up, his own length, shuddering hard.

“Ah—ahh—ahh—Saaaam!” A loud creak indicated that Gwen had thrown her weight somewhere on the bed.

“Oh, no.” A follow-up creak as Sam shoved her back into place, and Bucky was gasping, now, stroking himself as he imagined it. “Oh, no, you can go at least once more before I get in there.”

“Oh god, Sam, Sam, please—Sam!” The last note went up sharply in pitch and volume into a yelp as the wet noises began again. Bucky pumped his hips into his hand, helplessly, picturing Sam’s long, strong fingers splayed over Gwen’s stomach, holding her in place, the other hand working from the shoulder, pumping, plunging into her as his mouth moved above it... “Sam, I can’t—I can’t anymore, please—please, come on—”

“Yeah, that’s right, babygirl... come on, let me hear you say it...”

Bucky rolled to his left, curling in on himself, trying to keep his movements from shaking his own bed.

“Oh god, I can’t—Sam—”

“Come on.” Soft, movement sounds; Sam moving up her body, maybe.

“Sam—oh god—please—please...” A gasp, and a breathless, “Shit!” and then, all at once as if daring herself to do it, “OhgodSam,please fuck meas hard asyou—mmmmpff!” She cut off, and it must have been Sam’s mouth, kissing her, kissing the filthy words out of it, and then kissing her through it as a muffled shriek indicated he had obeyed her plea. Bucky’s eyes were closed, wetness leaking out of the corners, and he was close, he was so close, his right arm working in short, choked-up strokes around the head, the left arm splayed out flat across the bed, fingers digging into the mattress.

“Yeah, that’s good... Just there, just like that, babygirl...” Bucky pictured Sam’s powerful ass thrusting, and choked on the moan. He was so close... “You just... lie there... No, don’t move
your arms, I’ve got you—just take it—”

A wordless, broken cry from Gwen, but with an undertone of obvious pleasure.

“Just take it, just like that, good girl, so good, just like that...” It went on and on, over and over, but Bucky wasn’t paying attention anymore; with groan that he hoped to God nobody noticed, he went over, coming across his hand and his sheets, shaking, convulsing, finding pleasure for the first time in over seventy years.

He woke before Gwen did, the next morning—which was rare; Gwen was an early riser, and Bucky was not. Bucky had been all set to blame that on any number of things that had occurred over the last few decades, but Gwen had laughed and told him that he had always been that way. “You only beat me to consciousness a handful of times, Buck; always just plain liked to sleep.” And then she had beamed at him over her coffee cup and passed him a plate of eggs.

Not today, though; Bucky was awake early, earlier than either off the others, and made his way into the kitchen, starting the Keurig for a cup of tea. He took it out when it was done, moving to the window. He liked having the view, liked being able to see the approach, and what was going on. Sam’s front door had about fifteen forms of security on it courtesy of Gwen’s five million friends who wanted to keep her safe, and the back door was just as secure, but it was still the point Bucky would have used to enter the house, and he liked to keep an eye on it.

Sam was, like Gwen, a naturally early riser; he came out of the master bedroom—his bedroom, the one he now shared with Gwen—not long after Bucky had moved to the back door, starting a cup of coffee in the machine, frothy with milk foam. “Morning,” he said, keeping his voice low; Gwen must still be out. “Didn’t sleep well?”

“Mn.” Bucky shook his head, watching Sam as Sam watched the coffeemaker.

“Sorry to hear it, man. Bad dreams?”

Bucky’s dreams had been a blend of fantasy and what had to be memory, Gwen both before and after the Serum, Sam either naked or in his sweat-soaked, clinging running clothes... Explicit and full of skin, but Bucky could not in all honesty claim they were bad.

“Nightmares?” Sam pressed.

Bucky made a non-committal noise.

Here was a thing about Sam: he was a lot like Gwen. They were both fuckin’ hotheads, for one thing, ready to take on the world, although Sam was quieter about it, more likely to lay his plans first. But either one of them would jump out of an airplane—or into a fistfight—in no time flat.

They were also both stubborn as hell, determined to have things work out the way they were sure they was going to. They would stand their ground and hold you by the front of the shirt until you agreed with them, and the only reason that didn’t make them bullies was that they were both careful only to do it to folks who could and would fight back.

But here was a third thing they both had in common: they were both a lot more perceptive than the average Joe, and neither one of them bruited it about. Gwen looked around a situation and figured out what the enemy strategy was, sometimes before the enemy had even done it himself; it was a major part of her dossier that whatever you did to take her out, you had to be fuckin’ quick about it because if you weren’t, then she would evaluate you and analyse you and strategize around you, and at that point you were going to fail.
And Sam, it turned out, had the same kind perception, the same kind of ability to see how the story played out. The difference was, though, his wasn’t for fights; it was for brains.

So Sam saw Bucky awake four hours before he normally would be, and Sam knew it was because he hadn’t slept well, without Bucky saying a damn thing. And when Sam asked if it were nightmares...

Bucky shouldn’t have dodged, because now Sam knew.

He sucked in a deep breath and blew it out again, disturbing the surface of his coffee-foam. Then he took a sip which, from the look on his face, he desperately needed. “Heard us, huh?”

Bucky looked out the window again, his shoulders hunching. He nodded minutely, praying completely pointlessly that Sam wouldn’t see the movement.

Sam did the breathe-in-and-out thing again, then said, “How about we have a seat at the table for this one.”

Sam’s dining table was wood, one of the few generic-looking things in the entire house—ordinarily, Sam’s taste was somewhat dramatic. Bucky was willing to bet it had been a gift from someone, possibly for moving in. There were four chairs spread around it, but from the way Sam had shuffled things around that first morning Bucky had come out, it seemed obvious that he had never used them regularly. If Bucky had to guess, he would theorize that Sam usually ate in his recliner, while working on files that he had taken home from the office—a theory supported by the presence of numerous overlapping drink rings on the tray-table that Bucky had spotted next to that recliner that first night.

They sat at the dining room table. The chairs felt flimsy, and the one Bucky was in squeaked under his weight.

“Okay,” Sam said. He spread both hands on the cheap mid-grade wood, palms down, fingers far apart. They were perfectly equidistant from the coffee mug between them. “Okay. So you heard us last night.”

Bucky didn’t answer, because he wasn’t going to go through that particular humiliation again.

“Okay. And how do you feel about that?”

There was a lot to be said for Sam Wilson; moments like these, they really brought it home. Sam was a thoughtful guy: he wasn’t apologizing—good, because from the sound of things he had no reason at all to feel sorry—but he was being considerate of Bucky’s feelings, here.

A good man, Sam Wilson.

“I’m glad,” Bucky said, “first.”

Sam waited for him to on, not interrupting even though the faint frown of attention between his mobile brows said he kind of wanted to.

“I know...”

It was hard, to say these things aloud. Hard to be out there, hard to show his tender underbelly and then hand someone a knife.

“I know... I can’t have been any kinda lover for Gwen. I know I can’t.”
Sam tipped his head to the side.  *Fair point,* he seemed to say.  *What else have you got?*

“I think she deserves...”

...you.  No, that wasn’t the right way to say it.

“She deserves to be happy,” he said carefully, putting a little space in between each word, testing his footing to see if it would roll on him before moving on to the next one.

Sam nodded again when he’d gotten the sentence out and then went still again; waiting for him to continue, and giving Bucky the space to speak his whole mind.

Bucky sure as hell wasn’t going to say any of the rest of it, though, so he just rolled his eyes at Sam.  “It kind of sounded like you made her happy last night,” he finished wryly, and Sam barked like a seal when he laughed.

“Thank you,” he said, picking one of his hands up off the table to toast Bucky with his coffee cup.

Bucky nodded and sat back, pleased to be through it.

Sam watched him over the rim of the cup, giving him one more minute to change his mind and add something on, and when the minute was up he put the mug down with a little *click.*  “Okay,” he said, “So this is what I heard.” And then he played it back.  He was paraphrasing, not parroting, but he used a lot of the same words Bucky had.  “...Is that right?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, sighing in relief and taking a sip from his own mug—black tea, with sugar in it.

“Okay.”  Sam spread his hands on the table again, the same way he had earlier, and Bucky realized he might not be entirely in the clear yet.  “So here is my problem with that answer:  you just told me a bunch of stuff about how you *believe,* how you *think.*  And what I asked you is how you *feel.*”

Bucky’s breath started speeding up again, the same way it had last night, the same way it had the previous afternoon when he realized he remembered Gwen the way she had been in the War.  “I can’t,” he blurted.

Sam’s smile was patient and kind, the gap between his two front teeth disproportionately disarming.  “Yes, you can,” he said gently.

Bucky felt a whine building behind his teeth, and he choked to cut it off, kicking his way back from the coffee table.  Sam leaned forward, instinctively following him, but his hands stayed flat and still on the plain wood surface.  “It’s okay,” he insisted.  “Just tell me how you feel.  I promise, it’s just feelings; I’m not gonna get mad at you for feeling a certain way.”

Now Bucky *did* whine, humiliatingly, staring into Sam’s warm, too-perceptive eyes.  “I’m jealous,” he blurted, and then started sucking furiously at his tea to stop the damned words from coming out anymore.

Sam took a deep breath the same way Bucky had, earlier, and leaned back.  “Okay,” he said.  “Okay.”  He tapped his fingers on the table, one-two-three-four, one-two-three-four, as he thought.  Then he slapped the table lightly—decisively—and looked up.  “Okay.  So the first thing is, I understand that.  She’s your wife, and you love her, and...  I don’t know how much you remember?”
It was a question; it was *obviously* a question, and from the imperious tilt of Sam’s brow, he wasn’t gonna have a choice about answering any more than he had the last one. Bucky took his mug away for a fragile half-second to admit, “I’m starting to get some things—flashes, mostly, and not in a row,” and then hid behind it again just as fast as he could.

“Okay. So either you’ve gotten a flash of something, or your mind knows it’s there, and you’re jealous,” Sam said, reasoning it out in completely the wrong direction. “That’s fine; that’s natural. Now, Gwen is a grown-ass woman who makes her own decisions, and also—” He stopped looking towards his bedroom, then looked back at Bucky. “Is she awake yet?”

Bucky listened. Deep, even breathing, the faint hint of a snore, as familiar to him as his own face—moreso, even...

He shook his head.

“Okay. Then I’m gonna tell you what I don’t have the guts to tell her yet, which is that I’m in love with her and I intend to stay with her for as long as she’ll let me. You’ll note that’s a decision-making process that doesn’t include you.”

Reasonable enough; Bucky nodded.

“But she’s also been a big part of your life, and it seems clear that the relationship is multi-dimensional…” Sam smiled, heartbreakingly. “…as I would say to one of my clients. Which you are *not*, by the way. And I think it’s *also* important that you know that you could be putting the moves on her, if you wanted to. I don’t think you want to, though.” He waited, but Bucky didn’t say anything. Couldn’t move, couldn’t *twitch*.

After a moment, Sam went on: “The point is, it’s okay to be jealous. I get it.”

Sam did not get it.

Bucky suppressed hysterical laughter at *how much* Sam did not get it.

Sam had completely the wrong end of the stick, and Bucky absolutely didn’t *dare* to correct him.

“I can try to give you some space on it,” Sam was saying, “And also, since we’re going to be moving soon anyway, see about maybe some soundproofing—”

And then he stopped, his face changing. He was watching Bucky again, more closely this time, searching and evaluating. *Dangerous*, Bucky remembered, and then had to try very hard not to shiver.

“…does all that sound right?” he asked slowly, consideringly.

He was still watching Bucky closely. Bucky swallowed, and didn’t dare move. It did not sound right, but he couldn’t *say* that; couldn’t put into words that it wasn’t *Gwen* who had got him riled up last night. And worse than that, maybe it *was* partially Gwen? He had been listening to both of them, after all, and he must have desired her once upon a time—she had made that very clear, and there was only one way she could have gotten pregnant, right?

And anyway, Bucky could already feel it, the worry for her danger and pride in her accomplishments, warmth and tightness that alternated in his chest entirely without his volition. He had loved her, once; he *still* loved her, somehow. Even in the face of seventy years and amnesia and programming and God knew what else, he loved her.
So he couldn’t nod—it didn’t sound right. It sounded completely wrong, in fact. But he couldn’t say *that*, either, because that would *also* come out completely wrong.

So he just sat there, hands frozen on his empty mug of ex-tea, and stared helplessly at Sam.

After a long couple of minutes, Sam nodded to himself, and rose, staring at him hard. “Soundproofing,” he repeated, and went to the kitchen to put his mug in the sink before putting on his shoes to go running.

“Oh, Lordy,” Gwen said in despair as Bucky, a coward all over, let Sam tell her about their early-morning conversation.

Sam had gone running, and when he came back in, for once, Gwen was still asleep. It didn’t happen often, Bucky remembered; not that he could pull examples, or anything, but by now he didn’t question the knowledge. It didn’t happen often, but when it did, he knew, Gwen would wake up—

“Got any music?” he asked.

Wilson’s eyebrows shot up, and he laughed, incredulously. “You want music?” he echoed. “Sure; I’ve got a whole iPod—”

Bucky rolled his head to the side to meet Wilson’s eyes, his own gaze sardonic.

“I want,” he said deliberately, “sound camouflage.”

Wilson did a double-take.

Then he found him that iPod.

Then he went back into the bedroom.

Bucky had plugged the tiny earpieces in, and let it cycle randomly through Wilson’s highly-varied taste in music, blaring it as loudly as he could in a private concert for his ears. It helped significantly, both in masking the sounds in general, and in giving him something to focus on as a distraction. He washed his sheets and made breakfast while they fucked, and it was only when he became peripherally aware that the sound levels had died down that he realized they must have finished.

He pulled the earpieces out, one first to test and then, when he heard nothing but a murmur of conversation muted by the thumping beats of the song in his other ear, taking the second one out, as well.

Then he realized what they were talking about, that Sam was telling Gwen the gist of their conversation that morning, and—

“Oh, Lordy,” Gwen said. “You could’ve told me, Sam, I would’ve been quieter—”

“Now why would I want that? Barnes has my iPod blaring in his ears, he’ll be fine. And I’ve got other things I want you to focus on than just being quiet.”

Gwen made a small noise, like kitten being woken from a sound sleep by the smell of roasting fish. Sam laughed, low and confident.

Bucky put the earpieces back in.
Despite the implications, though, the other two ambled out not much later, particularly considering they had both obviously showered in the meantime. Gwen’s hair was sticking to her cheeks, still—she had combed it, but not dried it—and Sam’s skin was glistening, both of them fully dressed and maintaining a discreet distance. Bucky considered what to say, and then gave up and decided not to address it at all. He just put out fruit and boiled eggs and toast and then, when they had sat down at the table thanking him for breakfast—unnecessary; he had to eat, too, after all—he said, “I remembered something last night.”

That drew their attention, all right, and in a hurry, too.

Gwen’s face was a study in pain: the worst kind of pain, the kind that came from hope. “What was it?” she asked, voice tearing in two longways like a reed.

He shrugged uncomfortably. “Not much,” he warned. “Just your face—a flash of it. And the way you used to look around Carter...?”

Gwen beamed, delighted by this news, and he snorted at her, waving a single finger in her direction. “Yeah, about like that,” he said.

She rolled her eyes, and picked up her toast. Between one breath and another it was airborne, flying flat like a chakram, zooming across the table towards him. Without even thinking, he brought his fork up—the eggs he had been scooping went flying everywhere—and stabbed the toast out of the air.

Their eyes met over the bread, still hanging in midair, caught on the tines of his fork.

The dining room had gone completely silent.

And then...

...Gwen giggled.

Flushing, Bucky dropped the toast down, pulling it away from the utensil—and Christ, he had managed to stab it with so much force it was past the tines and halfway up the connecting part—and twitched his shoulders. Sam was laughing, too, sounding half-startled and half-incredulous about the whole thing. “Man, food fights now? Is that what we’re doing?”

“Sorry, Sam; Bucky and I have been having food fights since 1927,” Gwen said through her laughter. Bucky felt his eyes widen, and looked up to double-check that he had heard right.

“Since 1927, that would be... oh, right: since you were literal children,” Sam said, rolling his eyes expressively. He overplayed it, watching Bucky out of the corner of his eye; he was obviously pretending to be much more annoyed than he actually felt, mobbing for Bucky’s sake.

Bucky flushed. His heart pounded, but he could do this; he could. He could dip his toe in this water, he could stick out his tongue for these snowflakes... A soft underhanded toss landed the toast back on Gwen’s plate. “Here,” he said. He pulled a demure face, letting his eyelashes come down to half-cover his eyes, not looking directly at Gwen. “Have something to stop the giggles,” he said softly.

And if they both gaped at him for a second before erupting in snickers again, that didn’t make his foray any less of a success.

When they had all calmed down again, Sam turned to him. “So you’re starting to get some memories back?” he checked. “Seems like that might be the sort of thing a supersoldier brain
would do faster than most. You wanna try to kick-start this process at all?"

Bucky blinked at him, slowly, uncertain what he meant. “Sure,” he said. It felt like compliance, but it wasn’t, really; it was just that he didn’t have an opinion on it one way or another, and he didn’t see any harm in giving it a shot.

Sam watched him in that thoughtful, insightful way of his, almost as if he knew Bucky were just going along with it, and then nodded.

Romanov was called in, and then Hill; they all seemed to be having a fine old time of it, so Bucky let them push him around and dress him and pull his hair back into a hat.

Then they went to the museum.

Barnes was being damned quiet tonight, ever since they got back from the Smithsonian. He let them steer him, but he didn’t make any moves on his own; he ate when they called him to dinner, but didn’t seem hungry. Sam started to worry, but when he started to ask Barnes about it, dude cut him off with a short, “I’m fine.”

Then his face softened, and he added, “Just thinkin’, Sam,” so Sam actually believed him and let him be.

Which was fine; it left him plenty of time to call his mama—not the first time he’d called her since the helicarriers, but she kept sounding worried every time they talked, so he kept calling her back sooner than he otherwise would have—and then, inevitably, to think back over the little talk they had had that morning.

The thing was, Sam wasn’t stupid; he knew what it looked like when he was barking up the wrong tree, and once he’d gotten his fool act together enough to actually use his damned eyes, that was exactly what had been right smack in front of his face: Bucky demonstrating all the classic signs of “smile and nod.” He had been too stuck in his own damned assumptions to see it at first, but once he...

There just weren’t many alternative explanations for the bare handful of facts Sam possessed, and he wasn’t sure which he wanted less: for it to be some strange, new thing that he hadn’t seen coming, or for Bucky to actually have been saying that he wanted Sam. Or not saying, really; because on reflection, Bucky had been very careful about that. He was trying to hide it—assuming that Sam was right this time about what it was, which, when the guy had trauma even before being a POW for seventy years, was kind of a big assumption—but he had sure been cagey as hell, trying so hard to keep his mouth shut... Which kind of did make Sam think it was the obvious answer.

And then that brought up a few more questions, like a river that spread out into a delta:

Was it emotional or physical? That seemed like a great place to start. Was Bucky interested in Sam because Sam was a) the proper gender and b) a person with an active sex life? (Did Bucky even know Sam was bisexual—did Sam register as a possibility, or just a fond if-only?) Or was it the other possibility, that Bucky was interested in Sam because he was forming an actual, honest-to-god, emotional attachment? And if he was...

Was it a healthy emotional attachment? Sam had no illusions about his own sainthood, but he thought he wasn’t the devil, either; it wasn’t totally inconceivable that anybody might get a crush
on him. But there was a difference between that and Stockholm Syndrome, and Sam was one of two people that Bucky saw every day... It was definitely an area of concern. Particularly considering Bucky’s history as a POW in the worst circumstances ever; he had to be fighting the urge to please anybody with anything even resembling authority.

And that brought Sam around to the part where he was helping Bucky heal mentally. Because he was; there could be no doubt of that, not after the Museum Trip. Sam had been working on Bucky, and that in itself presented some major ethical hurdles. To what extent was he acting as a counselor, and to what extent was he just trying to be a friend?

This wasn’t something Bucky could answer for him; Sam was going to have to work that one out, himself.

And once he had, what did he want to do about it? Because—and he could not, could not afford to, look away from this—there were definitely limits, here. Any attempt to act as Bucky’s counselor — instead of his good friend, or even, God help them all, his wife’s boyfriend — was a clear, unambiguous ethical breach. And he couldn’t do that. Not to Bucky, who, despite being two hundred pounds of murderhobo, still inspired a sort of delicate worry, like Sam was a housecat who was adopting a wolf puppy. And it wouldn’t be fair to himself, either. Sam deserved better; he deserved to be better.

The house was quiet, that night. They were all gathered together in the same room, but isolated by their thoughts.

The next morning, Gwen went for a run, pounding her way through the suburbs of Northern Virginia, winding her way around and back over the bridge to DC, and then pelting around the Mall to lap Sam a couple of times (always a blast) before heading back home.

Or rather, before heading back to Sam’s place; there was a difference, and it was about to become relevant.

Bucky, for whatever reason, had embraced the spirit of domesticity. It was one of the more baffling changes that had occurred in him since the forties, and she couldn’t seem to figure out why he was doing it. He had never expressed interest in the role of househusband before, and she couldn’t imagine that it was something he had been programmed by the monsters of Hydra to do. He also wasn’t particularly good at it: his meals had simple recipes, and were burnt fully half the time, and the laundry had dyed some of Sam’s shirts lavender before he got the hang of sorting. But he looked upset whenever she cooked for them instead of letting him do it, and Sam attempting to take charge just led to copious eye-rolling on both men’s parts. So she sat back, and let Bucky make breakfasts and dinners, and quietly adjusted to the taste of burned toast. It was hardly the worst thing in the world; she always had liked bitter tastes, anyway.

So she walked in, and twenty minutes later Sam also staggered in with a wet cat sort of look on his face, and by that time Gwen was clean and on her second cup of coffee, chatting with Bucky while waiting to sit down at the table almost the same way they used to. Bucky had apparently decided to attempt to burn French toast, today; the taste could be ameliorated by the large jar of syrup on the table, which mostly disappeared over the course of the meal.

Afterwards, she pushed back in her chair, folding her arms over her chest. She tilted her head down —her hair swung free around her chin, still not long enough for a ponytail or braid—and said, “I have to go to New York today. And I think we’re going to need to move.”

Sam raised his eyebrows; Bucky scowled.
Gwen tilted back in her chair, nudging it up onto two legs, and sighed. “There are too many people with too great an interest in Bucky, too much difficulty coordinating the Avengers if we have to in a hurry, and not enough support staff here; we need to merge with the group Stark has already hired.” She let the chair clack down again. “And, on a more personal level…” The blush was creeping up near her ears, now, but she resolutely ignored it. “…we need accommodations with better soundproofing.”

She looked at Bucky to see what he thought.

He had a wry look on his face, and shrugged. “Where?” he asked, standing to gather the dishes.

“Manhattan,” she answered. “Avengers Tower.”

She looked at Sam, too.

His face wore a multifaceted look she couldn’t quite manage to interpret, and he also shrugged in almost the exact same way Bucky had. “So if it’s such a good idea, why are you looking for a way out of it?” he asked her. Bucky paused in the middle of the kitchen, swinging back around with a stack of dishes in his hands.

Sam shot her a don’t bullshit me look. “Sometimes people ask for opinions less ‘cause they want them, and more because they want someone else to say what they’re thinking,” he said, and graciously didn’t comment when she winced in response. “You know all the reasons it’s a good idea, but you’re still teeing it up for us to shoot it the hell down. Why?”

She blew out air in a huff and reflected once again that if she had wanted someone stupid, she shouldn’t have picked Sam. “It means asking for a favor from someone who hates me,” she admitted. “Not really a good enough reason to avoid it.”

“Sounds like a good reason.” Sam was giving her the hairy eyeball, skeptical down to his left little toenail. “Does he hate you, or do you hate him?”

She wrinkled her nose dismissively and reached for her coffee-cup, only to spot it across the kitchen going into the washer. “It’s mutual,” she said sourly, and then added in answer to the obvious question, “Don’t worry about him saying no, though; he’ll agree.” Her lip curled up. “He loves it when people owe him favors.”

Tony Stark had dark hair and beard, a quick mouth, and eyes that made Bucky’s head ring with echoes of a hatred and violence that he couldn’t quite pin down into fact. He met them in the parking garage—Maria Hill, who was apparently now a Stark Industries employee, had transported them up from Washington in a dark-windowed SUV—and within a minute of meeting him, Bucky realized that Gwen’s summary had been correct: Tony Stark hated Sarah Rogers (as he called her), and Gwen Barnes hated “Howard’s boy” right back.

It was baffling. Bucky could understand fighting Gwen—from, well, personal experience—but he couldn’t understand the level of animosity that Stark was obviously bringing to bear. And he was even more puzzled by the fact that Stark, despite clearly loathing Gwen with every fiber of his being, was still helping them out.

A mystery, then; a man with layers. He looked at Stark with renewed curiosity.

He didn’t have a whole lot of time for studying him, though; within minutes, they were hustled up an elevator and to their new lodgings, which turned out to be luxe rooms on one of the top floors, decorated in a plain, almost Spartan style and with a seemingly endless maze of rooms: multiple
bedrooms, bathrooms, even two kitchens; dens, offices, living rooms and game rooms, and so many storage cupboards....! “Stark, were you planning that I would move an army in here?” Gwen asked dazedly, looking around in confusion.

“You are an army,” Stark answered, not looking up from his phone.

Bucky stopped at one office in particular, located on the south-east corner of the building. “Oh,” he said dumbly, staring at it. “Gwen—”

“What is it?”

The group came up behind him where he stood in the doorway, looking around at the office which did, admittedly, look much like every other office they had seen (five). “Do you—do you think you could move some of the furniture out?” Bucky frowned at it, trying to see it in his mind. “And put some cloths down? For painting,” he explained, turned towards Gwen. “It has the light.”

Gwen’s face lit slowly from within, a smile spreading over it. “You remember that?” she asked. The hope in her tone was especially heartbreaking considering the answer wasn’t exactly a yes.

“Remember what?” Stark asked sharply. He turned to look at Gwen, too, a frown between his eyebrows and distrust around his mouth. “You paint?” he demanded.

“I used to, yeah,” she said, looking around. “Do you think I could get an easel set up where that fern is?”

“You can get anything you want,” he dismissed. “Why didn’t I know this?”

Gwen shot him a baffled (and irritated) look. “I don’t know, probably because Howard didn’t know. It’s not exactly like I had a lot of time for it during the war.”

Stark stared at her, his face twitching for minute, then turned away. “You’ll have painting supplies before noon tomorrow,” he said, tossing it over his shoulder like a grenade as he made for the elevator.

“What? No! Stark, I can buy my own paint—!”

Bucky watched her chase after him, then turned back to the room, only to stop when he saw Sam. Sam was already watching him, a thoughtful expression on his face. “Couldn’t remember it, huh?” he asked.

Bucky cut his eyes away, and shook his head.

They stood there, in the doorway, studying the room, as the sunlight slowly crept sideways. The fern’s leaves, in particular, made interesting shadows on the floor. Kind of a pretty design, he thought, and then followed it up with, I bet you could disguise your silhouette really well with it.

He turned on his heel and left to go make dinner, Sam still standing in the doorway behind him, watching him go.

Sam had genuinely expected Stark to give him a room with like a twin or something. He was very aware of being essentially a stray Gwen had picked up along the way in this relationship, and Gwen had if anything understated the level of would-kick-you-down-a-mineshaft-for-five-dollars-
and-a-smoothie she and Stark had going on; petty revenge by proxy being a pretty human-nature sort of thing to do, Sam had been expecting maybe a coat closet with delusions of grandeur. He hadn’t expected that Stark would be putting him in the same room as Gwen, because they weren’t being obvious about their relationship and also because Stark seemed like kind of an ass. And he definitely hadn’t expected what he got.

The bedroom was obviously his-and-hers, and Stark had looked at Gwen, looked at Sam, and then just glanced at Bucky before waving at the door and saying, “Your room,” his body language indicating that he meant only the first two. So Stark did, for sure, know about Sam and Gwen, which in turn meant Sam had to wonder who had told him. Was it Maria Hill, who worked for him now? Gwen herself? It wasn’t like Sam could just ask the guy.

There were two walk-in closets—because, why have one, when you could have two? Ignoring the fact that Gwen had about enough clothes to fit into a hotel closet at this point; she had worn her black suit about three days in a row during all the funerals—and the bathroom actually had three sinks, which told Sam that as much as someone had obviously clued Stark in, there were still some gaps remaining to be filled, because Barnes was in no way going to be using that third sink between them.

Or... not as things stood now, at any rate.

Sam wandered over and sat on the bed, thinking. The bed was his own, moved up by some very efficient Stark-provided movers, along with the contents of Sam’s kitchen, living room, and so forth, which meant that Sam could run his palms over the warm familiar hardwood and think about what it all meant.

Bucky had been subtle about it. He was subtle about everything, these days; Sam sort of thought he’d gotten punished for smiling or something during his captivity, because he tended to be quiet until spoken to—although he was verbal enough in his answers, which was a blessing, because he could have been communicating solely in a variety of pitches of grunts and that shit got real old, real fast. There was a reason Sam worked—had worked—with the support groups, and not the intensive one-on-one recovery shit, at the VA; he did not have the patience for that stuff.

Barnes was a different kettle of fish from those guys. In fact, he was astonishingly well-adjusted, considering all the shit that had happened to him. Considering the file Natasha had provided, considering the fucking bank vault they had found in Maryland which still made Sam’s blood boil hard, considering the literal decades of torture—

Sam grunted, and forced his fingers to stop cramping around the bedpost, bringing his hand to his knee and curling it into a fist, white-knuckled on a forearm as tight as violin string.

So Bucky, who was doing very well by all reasonable estimates, possibly because of the serum or possibly just because of some innate Bucky-ness, was finally getting his dick back after however many years of having it stepped on—except, no; it wasn’t just that. As far as Sam could tell, it wasn’t even mostly that.

From time to time, Bucky looked at him with the slumberous eyes of desire, yes; and Sam was a confident guy, and a good-looking guy, so he kind of just figured that would be more human-nature stuff. But more often than that, Bucky just looked at him. For cues, for approval, for thoughts... Bucky seemed to be interested in Sam, and interested in what Sam thought and how Sam felt and honestly, what Sam thought and felt was that the whole situation was just damned complicated considering that Sam was pretty head-over-heels for Bucky’s wife.

But then there was that third sink in the bathroom.
Damn Stark’s too-perceptive ass, anyway, because that sink being there? It wasn’t precisely wrong. It wasn’t right, either—that wasn’t how it was between them—but maybe that would be how it was someday, some time in the future. So maybe it was easier to just put the third sink in now, and if they didn’t use it, they didn’t use it, but if they needed it...

Well. If they needed it, it would be there, wouldn’t it?

Sam tested the thought like a sore tooth, but he found it...

His fingers were back on the bedpost, tapping out a rhythm with no particular pattern; his legs were crossed underneath him, the knees pressing down and making dents in the coverlet.

That third sink... it was a surprisingly easy thought, was the thing. He could see it, in his mind, the way it would feel, all three of them standing in a sun-lit forest clearing like the ones in the Park. Only, instead of all standing in a line they way they were now, with Sam looking at Gwen, who was looking at Bucky, who was sneaking glances at both of them and who was the reason the line couldn’t hold... Instead of that, they would be in a circle, so that each one could see the other two, both at the same time. He could feel the way the ephemeral shape of the relationship would change, swinging outward and then rebalancing, and the period of adjustment before it stabilized during which they would all walk around with wide eyes, like cats who had been into the nip.

He knew it, this future. And he kind of liked it. It wasn’t a bad future.

If.

If Gwen wanted it; hell, if Gwen could stand it. (Sam wasn’t willing to destroy what they had with jealousy, neither his nor hers.)

If Bucky wanted it—wanted it enough to speak up, that was. And if Bucky was in a sound enough mental state to make that decision—which Sam wasn’t convinced of, frankly—and if Bucky was clear enough in his own head to know what the hell he wanted in the first place.

If the concept of polyamory didn’t scare one or both of them off—which it might, despite the fact that they were both obliviously modeling the whole concept already. But they had grown up in a time when what you wanted and what you tried to get were two different things, especially if it was about sex, and this? This might be a bridge too far.

And then there was the other if. The most immediate if, and the only one Sam could answer without speaking up:

If Sam was willing to spend the rest of his life with Bucky.

Because the only way this was going to work was if Sam wanted Bucky back the way Bucky wanted him. The guy had been through hell; he deserved better than Sam wishy-washing on him.

Sam sat on the edge of his bed, and tapped his fingers on the wooden post, and thought.

The gym, which was one of the few rooms on any other floor Bucky was granted access to, was Avengers-personnel-only: a safe place for Bucky to be while the pardon was going through. It was also enormous: it took up half of the entire floor it was on, which had a raised ceiling and well-circulated air to prevent the room from going stale, and it was the only gym any of them had ever seen with a full bar. The machines, Stark had informed them smugly, were all rated for their weight class. “And then some,” he had added, making himself a scotch.
“What’s on the other side of the floor?” Gwen had asked, making her way towards the curiously-matte punching bag and trying not to look like a kid on Christmas morning.

“Banner’s lab.”

Gwen had paused, looking up at the height of the ceiling again, and around at the room. “Sensible,” was all she had said, but Bucky had been left really getting curious about this Bruce Banner fellow.

So the gym was amazing, and Bucky wound up spending a lot of time there over the next few months, as his pardon was processed and his name restored. And as his memories came back: he ripped his way through reps with weights no one human should be able to manage as images filled his mind of Gwen, skirt kilted up around her waist to reveal trousers and an honest-to-God utility belt, climbing a tree or boxing or throwing the damned shield.

He ran for miles and miles on a treadmill the first day he had a flashback—to that damned march, the one after Azzano. He was stuck in the way his body had ached (but not enough) and his mind had raced (but he had always been conscious of the movements of animals and the sounds of the forests and he had known, had known, when that patrol got too close), and he had pounded his way along both the treadmill and the trail, and both parts of him at once had known that if he told Gwen he wanted to leave, she would let him, and that that was why he had to stay...

That was when he had finally met Banner. The small, scruffy scientist had come around from his lab and watched him for several minutes before calling him back to himself. He ordered Bucky off the treadmill—Bucky had obeyed without question, and only realized later it had been because of Banner’s white coat—and led him to a weight bench. He passed over a literal beaker full of juice—a half liter, based on the markings on the side—and told Bucky to drink it all, then sat on the floor at his feet and introduced himself.

“I heard the treadmill,” he said, with a quiet, humble sort of smile. “People... forget, sometimes. That I have it, too.” He held out his arm next to Bucky’s flesh arm, both of them dark with hair the same way Gwen’s was, although hers was more golden. “The Serum. I don’t get much, like this. Mostly it’s the other guy. But I don’t have any scars—” Or writing calluses, Bucky noticed. “—and I’ve got the signature hirsuitism, and I did get the ears, a little bit.” And then he tipped his head to the side, apologetically.

“D’you have the personality?” Bucky asked before he could think better of it.

Banner laughed. “I think the other guy got that one. But, uh... Thanks for saying it. The personality thing, I mean. Most people... don’t.”

Most people didn’t like to acknowledge possibility that the Avenging Angel was as fucked in her way as the Red Skull had been, was what he meant. Bucky smiled grimly. “I kinda have to,” he said, feeling sour.

“Was that what the flashback was about?”

Banner must not have been able to see Bucky’s head come up; he was polishing his glasses, looking down.

“You weren’t looking at anything when I came in,” Banner explained, “but you were pretty wild-eyed. It seemed...” He shrugged, fitting the lenses back on. “...likely.”

Bucky looked down at the ground. “No,” he said hoarsely. “Or... mostly not. It was a concern,
but—No, it was just a, a memory. Something I hadn’t…”

Banner didn’t press him; he just waited, holding the empty beaker with the traces of fruit on the sides.

They had been coming more quickly, the memories, ever since Bucky’s Museum Trip (as Sam called it). Now, a month out, he was almost able to bring some of them up consciously. It wasn’t reliable, but he was getting better at predicting that, too; he would get a feeling when he was asked to remember something, a sort of “this is going to be there when I reach for it” which was far from consistent.

It was like having his weapons strapped on: ordinarily, he was awake when he was equipped, and he had known without having to look whether he still had his knives, his guns, his grenades, and how many of each, and where they were. With his memories, however, it was more like he had been equipped while blindfolded, and had no idea what was in his inventory or how many there were. With the grenades—not really grenades, though, this was still a metaphor—he had pulled one out at some point, so he knew how many others there were; but the rest of it… He didn’t even have a sense of whether that gun was there or not, much less how many bullets there were.

But since the Museum Trip, he had a lot more grenade-like memories than he had had before. And if he pushed, sometimes he could even draw them from the holster. So it was an improvement.

The flashback, though… That had been different. With that, it wasn’t like he was reaching for anything; instead, he was the bullet, loaded into the gun, and it was going to fire no matter what, and all he could do was hang on and hope he didn’t hit anything too important.

Bucky swallowed, and looked down into Banner’s mild, earnest hazel eyes. “When you hear that happening…” he said slowly, “it might be best you don’t come in here. I don’t—I don’t know what else I’m gonna remember, and I’d hate…”

Banner pushed his glasses up with the back of one hand. “I’m not too worried about it,” he said, sounding amused. His white coat folded around him on the ground.

“Right,” Bucky said, swallowing, fear clenching his guts. He leaned away from the doctor.

Doctor Banner tilted his head to the side, looking hurt and confused. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I don’t…” Bucky stood up, stepping back from him. “It’s not—” But he couldn’t finish the sentence, because he had no idea what he was even trying to say. “Vy obrabotchik?”

Doctor Banner watched him, then looked down, shoulders shaking. His hands came out from his sides, the beaker now resting on the ground; both his palms were flat, pointed upwards. “It’s alright,” he said, raising his voice just enough to call out to Bucky, who was now fifteen feet away. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

That was what everyone said.

…Hadn’t Banner’s eyes been hazel, a moment ago? They were green, now.

“That’s alright,” Banner called again. “But I think I had better go back to my lab now. I won’t come in here again.”

From across the gym, Bucky watched him as he rose to his feet and left. His white coat swirled around his knees, and as he got closer to the door, he hurried.
“Hey,” Sam said that night over some kind of Indian chicken dish he had picked up on the way home from his mother’s house, “Doc Banner called up. He said to tell you that the gym has passive monitoring, and if you like, you can set the AI to alert you under certain circumstances. Seemed to think it would help you out with something?”

Setting the AI to alert him would eliminate the need for Doctor Banner to interfere himself. It would allow him to keep his promise not to enter the gym.

Something cold in Bucky’s stomach started melting, warming and relaxing at the same time. He kept getting reminded, but he also kept needing the reminders: he was not a prisoner, here. These were not his captors, not his tormentors, not his masters. He was an agent, here: a person who acts.

He nodded. “That would be good,” he said, making solid, direct eye contact with the daal. “Or sometimes.” He bit his lip, but was determined to get it out. “Sometimes. If you wanted. It might be nice. If you came with me.”

He flicked his eyes upward in time to catch the look of surprise and delight on Sam’s face—maybe he had thought he wasn’t welcome when Bucky was down there? Why else would he be so happy about the invitation?

Bucky cut his eyes away, only to catch a glimpse of Gwen, instead. She looked longing, her head straining towards him even as he shoulders held back, so he mentally grimaced and bit the bullet and clarified, “Both of you.”

Gwen lit up like sunshine in April, and Bucky couldn’t even say he was surprised.

---

After that, he was almost never in the gym alone: either Gwen or Sam, or both, would come with him, pretending to punch the bag or use the normal-person-weighted rowing machine while they watched him surreptitiously out of the corner of their eye.

It was hard, at first; he hadn’t realized the extent to which having someone watching him as he worked would take him back to the time when his handlers would measure his status and his progress. Hadn’t realized how much space it would take up in the back of his mind, monitoring their progress around the room, watching their reflections in the mirrors the gym was seemingly lined with. There was never a moment when he was unaware of the space they took up, what they could reach, how much they could see... Handlers must always be able to monitor his progress.

He kept carefully out of the way, so that they could watch his weights and inclines, count his reps, evaluate his form in his katas.

They never said anything, though. The closest they came was, every once in a blue moon—about four times in the first two weeks—Sam would come over and pull him off the equipment, sitting him down and making breathe because he had been in the middle of another flashback.

There didn’t seem to be any pattern to those attacks. One came on while he was on a weight machine, the shape and force of the thing putting him back in the Chair, laying docilely for treatment, but hyperventilating in anticipation of the pain; two came during cardio workouts, and after the second one Sam quietly explained that the physical changes brought by the workout—heart rate, pH, endorphins—would have mimicked those experiences. The last flashback was also the earliest: he was sixteen, and gangling in his growth spurt; four neighborhood boys were beating him in the alley, and all he wanted, desperately, was for them to finish it off, so that Gwen came looking for him, because she would jump in and she would get beat up too, and this way, if they finished it off, he could play it like it was nothing and she would never know the difference...
After that, he left the gym. He went back up to the apartment and checked on dinner—he had started experimenting with crock pots, because they seemed so clever cooking everything for you while you concentrated on something else, but it was nerve-wracking not knowing how things were going to turn out until hours later—and then left the kitchen, wandering, still in his sour, sweat-soaked gym clothes into the south-east office. He sat by the window, there, watching the patterns the easel made along the floor. (Stark had been true to his word, and Gwen had had paints and other supplies within a day of his learning that she would use them.) He tipped his head back against the cool glass of the window-pane—it was fully summer by now, but the window was right under an air conditioning vent—and listened to the hiss of the air through the vent, inhaling the smell of turpentine and trying to remember how things had been, once upon a time.

It helped, a little bit.

After that, he didn't worry so much about the others being able to see what he was doing in the gym. Whenever he started to twitch, whenever he started to feel anxious about them being able to monitor his progress, the specimen will always submit to inspection without delay or obfuscation—he would leave. He would go back upstairs, and smell the paint, or make a cup of tea, or take a hot bath—Hydra had never let him have baths, and the rickety tenement apartment he had shared with Gwen hadn't had a shower head; it was a good sense-memory, bathing was—and sooner or later, the urge to comply would recede, leaving only the urge to be.

It was good practice for being human, instead of being a weapon all the time.

And then, one day, he didn't even not-worry about it. It took more than a month of trying, but eventually, he was able to put himself between Sam and the weight bench, deliberately hiding what he was doing from Sam, who was not his handler, and Sam didn't even notice—or didn't seem to, anyway—just continuing his own workout, eyes shut, earbuds in, blissed out to something with no intelligible lyrics but a thumping bass beat. Afterwards, Bucky had to go upstairs and lie, spread-eagled, in the middle of his bed for an hour, but at the end of the hour he was able to raise his head and lick his lips and be okay.

So he did it again. And then again.

Eventually, one night some three months after moving into the tower, he woke from a nightmare, flashing awake amid fear and pain and, for a moment, just reveling in the feeling of not being attacked. But then he was awake, and not likely to fall asleep again any time soon, and the thought fell into his brain like a penny into a fountain: I could work out. He could, after all; there was no one stopping him. He wasn't required to have anyone with him, and the passive monitoring was still an option.

He dressed silently and in the dark, not particularly caring whether his shirt matched the loose jockeys that people wore to exercise in these days, then made his way to the gym. It was silent as he stepped through the doors—it usually was; he didn't know where Romanova had vanished to after testifying, but she wasn't in the Tower, and Stark didn't seem much like the working out type. Bucky stretched his arms over his head, enjoying the rippling feeling of the muscles along his back, breathing deep and inhaling the silence. He only had a moment of that tight suspension, that pause, though, before he realized the flip side of being alone: no one there. No one to guard against his flashbacks, no one to take him down. The passive monitoring existed, yes, but it had never been set up...

He turned on his heel and left to go find Stark.
“You want to do what?” Stark was looking at him like he had suggested skinny dipping in the Hudson. “iZombie, how long have you been living here? Why haven't you done this sooner?”

“What is an iZombie?” Bucky asked testily.

“You don’t know? I’m shocked.”

No, he wasn’t.

Bucky grimaced, and provided an explanation, anyway—it was Stark’s house, after all. “I wasn't... I wasn't alone, before. Not since I found out you could do it, anyway—programming the monitoring, I mean.” He paused, but Stark, shockingly, did not race in to fill the gap.

Layers, Bucky remembered: Stark had layers, and only the outermost one was prickly.

He kept standing there, watching Bucky, not even looking like he was waiting. He was just... existing there.

Bucky sighed.

“It seemed like a good idea to set it up?” he prompted, and now Stark moved, jumping a little bit and turning, hopping onto a tall rolling stool of a chair.

“Right,” he said, “so this is Jarvis—Jarvis, say hi—”

“Good afternoon, Sergeant Barnes.”

Bucky jumped, his heart pounding, looking around crazily even as he realized that this had to be the AI Stark had mentioned.

“—Jarvis runs the tower, he will hook you up with anything you need, and did you know your wife was sleeping with other men?”

Bucky blinked.

“No, she wasn't.”

Stark had a magnificently expressive face, behind the facial hair: the doubt came through very clearly.

“Back then,” Bucky clarified. “During the war, she wasn’t. Obviously, now...” He trailed off as he realized that it might not be obvious now.

Apparently it was for Stark, though, because he moved right along. “Not once? Not back then, with my father? Because Howard—my father—he was pretty clear that she did. Made it sound like a grand romance.” He toyed with a tool on the bench, but he must’ve been just fidgeting, because he picked it up and set it down again without using it in between. “Used to throw it in my mother’s face, a lot: ‘you’re okay, I guess, but you’re no Sarah Rogers.’ Who, it turns out, failed to master even the basic concept of fidelity, so...”

“She hates that name.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed that.” He tapped a wrench on the machine he was fiddling with, twice, absent motions with no force behind them, and Bucky sighed.

“No offense, Stark... but your dad was an ass.”
Stark responded by doing that thing again, the one where he just watched Bucky, silently existing in his space while Bucky struggled to put his thoughts into words.

“I don’t remember much, still. I get a lot of...”

He made a vague, grasping sort of hand gesture, but Stark apparently understood. He said, “Static on the line,” like it was a term he used often or something.

“Yeah,” Bucky agreed, “that. But I remember—God, I was furious with him. And it was about Gwen, but it wasn’t—it wasn’t ’cause he was sleeping with her. He wasn’t, I know that for a fact, because I remember—”

The fight was just there, waiting, lurking in his hindbrain with full color and surround sound. Even the wind and which direction it had blown, and the scents—

“I kept telling her, yeah, do it, find someone who can do it for you—’cause Lord knows I couldn’t—but she kept not and she kept not and she kept not, and then finally she finds a guy she’s thinking about maybe knockin’ boots with, and it’s fucking Stark, who was an ass, and I just... I felt guilty, yanno? ‘Cause here I was, telling her to do just that, and then when she thinks about doin’ it her taste is just the worst—”

Younger Stark, sitting in front of him, started to shake at the shoulders, suppressed laughter at the truth of it getting past him and out into the air between them. He turned out to have small lines at the corners of his eyes: laugh lines. Bucky was pretty sure his dad had never had those. He even had a flash of a mental-image of an old man without them, but there was no knowing if that was a memory or just his mind playing tricks on him.

“Alright, not the worst,” Bucky amended, smiling crookedly. “She coulda gone awfuller. But he was pretty bad, trying to boss her around and acting like God’s gift to the war effort. Mind you, he was a pretty handy guy to have around, but... only if you were useful.” He shrugged at Stark Junior to soften the blow. “If you didn’t have anything to offer him.... He didn’t even see you. And I didn’t. Have anything to offer him, I mean—not until he found out Gwen and I were married, and then suddenly I did. You shoulda seen his face—that was the only good part of that whole fuckin’ mess, was the look on his face.”

“Yeah, I think I know what that’s like,” Young Stark said dryly. “But why pimp her out at all? Rogers, I mean—Sarah—Gwen.” He snapped his fingers in a dismissive gesture, brushing aside his own fumble. “Your wife. Why go looking for external dickin’?”

Bucky blinked, taken aback. “Stark didn’t tell you that part?”

Obviously, he hadn’t, though; Younger Stark just raised his eyebrows. Maybe Old Stark hadn’t known.

“I’m queer,” Bucky said flatly. “Married her to make life easy, but...” He trailed off, scowling out through the plate-glass windows of the lab. “I ain’t made for dames. Let’s just say that of the two of them, your dad was the more attractive target—and I didn’t even like that asshole.”

Stark stared at him incredulously for a second, and then laughed again, a seal-like bark that sounded as if he’d been surprised into it, and then, finally, he abandoned the topic, and showed Bucky how to set up the AI, instead.

After that, the situation changed, slightly. Somehow, Bucky became the go-between for Gwen and Stark, a bizarre role that he would never have anticipated. But Stark still hated Gwen—although,
whatever Bucky had said that had done it, apparently the hate was less than it had been — and Gwen still completely loathed Stark, who had a ways to go before he lived down his bad first impression. So Bucky went back and forth between them, running interference and coordinating with Maria Hill, who had been doing it before Bucky.

It was surreal—two grown adults, coworkers and literal superheroes, being so childish—but it afforded Bucky a purpose, an honest to God role to play that wasn’t just cooking dinner, and so he took it, and was thankful for it, and did not crash the two idiots’ heads together or lock them in an elevator together for six hours.

He was tempted, though.

Chapter End Notes

Before talking about the warnings, just a note: I love Tony Stark. I love Tony Stark as much or more than I love Bucky. Therefore, please do not dis him in the comments.

Voyeurism: Bucky listens to Sam and Gwen having sex without their becoming aware that he is doing so. He does not have their permission to do this.

Dom/Sub undertones: Sam is Dommy, although that term is never used. Bucky is still subby, although that term is never used. Both things influence the sex scenes in this chapter, although never overtly.
Gwen had loved two men in her life, and now both of them were acting strangely.

She scowled, and added more carnelian to her painting, her eyes flicking towards the office-turned-studio’s door. She wasn’t exactly fuming, or seething, or anything, but there was certainly some strong emotion simmering in her chest. It was just that it was a little too timorous to be rage, a little too nervous to be excitement—but too aggressive to be straight-up fear.

Something was changing. And that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing—all change was good change in regards to Bucky’s mental state, given how he had been when they first brought him in, and even Sam was doing better now that he was able to let his inner adrenaline-junkie loose—but it was an unknown thing, and it was making Gwen very...

She sighed, staring at the mess on the canvas.

It was making Gwen very prone to overloading her paintings with reds and oranges, that was how it was making Gwen.

She put the paints away for the day, and decided to hit the gym, instead.

The problem was...

She hit the triple-reinforced heavy bag as hard as she could with a grim sort of satisfaction.

The problem was, they had really just found a sort of equilibrium. Things were... not stable, exactly—the world itself was still reeling from the Hydra revelation, the Avengers were still all scattered to the winds at least in part because gathering them together was considered a threat, Tony was still a walking stack of misogyny, and Bucky still didn’t kiss her—but them, the three of them—Bucky, Sam and herself—they were stable.

They had a routine. It was working.

Except—her fists echoed as they hit the bag, a faint squeak-crack coming from the fabric being compressed under the thud-thud-thud impact of it—except that now, things were changing.

Bucky was acting squirrely, for one thing. Over the most-of-a-year they had been living in the Tower, he had grown more comfortable in her presence, allowing her to accompany him on the errands he ran, sassing her when acting as a go-between for her and Stark—and how had that happened?—and, in general, seeming everyday more like the man she had fallen in love with. It was wonderful, of course, but also... the closer he got to the “old” Bucky—not that she thought they could ever really go back—the more she was aware of the differences, too. The more his self-
containment stood out, the more his silences became pronounced... It wasn’t that these were new things, per se; it was just that she noticed the silence more when it followed some comment that had been quintessentially Bucky.

She just missed him, was all.

But now...

Things were changing.

He had brushed his hand over her arm, yesterday. It was only briefly, to move her away from the stove—he had been cooking, which he was still terrible at, but he was oddly proprietary over the chore so she and Sam had both shrugged and let him; it wasn’t like they hadn’t all eaten worse—but still. Hand, elbow, gentle tug, and suddenly she had been in the middle of the kitchen and headed towards the door, and Bucky had let go of her like he’d been burned.

It would have been nothing, except that it had happened again this morning. In the hallway, this time, and with no pretext. He had come up beside her and looked over, his hair pulled back in a sloppy bun, t-shirt too big and sweatpants loose on his hips: clearly just barely awake. He had put a hand on her lower back, the easiest spot given their relative positions in the hallway, and leaned in, brushing a kiss over her cheek. “Good morning,” he said, and then drew back and walked back on his way towards the kitchen, and breakfast, and his morning cup of tea.

Gwen couldn’t be sure, because his back was turned, because she was still shocked at the contact, and because Bucky walking away in low-slung sweatpants was frankly damned distracting, but she thought maybe his movements had been.... careful? They seemed paced, almost; choreographed, as if he had had to brace himself to do it, to touch her and to kiss her.

She couldn't be certain, of course, but she thought maybe the encounter had been planned.

She didn't know what that meant. Was it a bad thing, because he had to brace himself even just to reach out? Was it a good thing, because he was doing it, he was making those plans and following through? These sorts of insights weren't exactly her milieu, and she didn't even know how to start unraveling the tangled mess of it. That's what I have Sam for, she thought, and then punched harder, because now Sam was also acting squirrelly.

He had been staring at Bucky thoughtfully for months; since they moved to the Tower, basically. He kept looking like he was asking a question, and Bucky must not have been answering because Sam kept staring at him until Gwen wanted to shake them both and scream. Until... last week. She thought that might have been when it started.

Their lives were strangely domestic, the three of them; they did their work, and they came back home, had dinner, and went to bed. On Sundays, Gwen and Sam went to church with Sam's mom, if she was in town; if not, Gwen went for an extra-long run, and Sam read a book. While they were gone during the day, Bucky tidied up, and also cooked. (Bucky actually appeared to be role-playing a 1950's housewife, and which Gwen found devastatingly attractive, a fact she hoped rather desperately that no one ever found out about, least of all Sam or Bucky. It was just... Bucky in the kitchen. Bucky in an apron. Bucky with his hair up in a bun because otherwise flour would get in there.

She whined to herself, bracing against the heavy bag for a minute.)

So they actually spent a fair amount of time being shockingly normal. In the months since coming
to the Tower, there had only been three times when Gwen—and, once, Sam—had gotten called away for an emergency; other than that, they enjoyed a level of routine which would have shocked the average Joe on the street. From a chance comment by Hill, Gwen sort of concluded they would have shocked even her fellow Avengers. (Which—why? Did the others not know what they had themselves been fighting for?)

Sam had said something, back when they first got together, about there being two sorts of people. "There are folks who live their lives, and then every once in a while, something bad comes along... and then there are folks like us, folks who make time until the next challenge comes along. Nothing wrong with either, but you've gotta know which one you are." He had been standing in his kitchen back in DC when he said it, watching a woodpecker hammer away at his neighbor's tree. "I've known I'm the second kind since I was sixteen years old; it's why I joined pararescue, it's how I got to be a Falcon pilot... And it's why I follow you. It's not just cause it's you."

He had looked away from the woodpecker and smiled into her eyes. "Not that you're not special; you are. But the real reason I'm following you is..." He leaned in and whispered into her ear: "I'm special, too."

She had ducked her head, and smiled, and when she had looked up she had had to kiss him.

So that was their lives: work to save the world, wait for the next disaster-slash-challenge, board games in the den after dinner (except Monopoly; Monopoly was strictly banned). But last week, Sam had looked extra-thoughtful and bowed out, claiming he needed to go visit a friend, and when he had come home he had gone straight to bed, still quiet.

Sam wasn't normally quiet. He was normally sassy. It was... concerning.

The next night, he had called Bucky over after dinner, and while Bucky and Gwen played chess, Sam had braided Bucky's hair into an elaborate crown sort of shape. (Gwen lost, partly because she had had to focus very hard on not melting.) Then, over the course of the next week, Sam had started touching Bucky, in much the same way that Bucky had touched her the previous day: carefully, not too fast and not too slow, no tension or jitters but also no hesitancy. And Bucky had been letting him—heck, had been encouraging him, saying “please” when Sam offered and “thank you” when he was done. Bucky would lean into those touches like a cat, leaving no question but that they were welcome.

Gwen had no idea what it meant.

And she wasn't going to figure it out sitting around down here and punching things, either. She steadied the bag, and then went for the disinfectant spray before unwrapping her hands and washing off the dust.

No point in dancing around it: the only way to find out what Sam was about was to ask.

And then, after all of that, the explanation turned out to be ridiculously straightforward.

It had happened right after breakfast one day, Sam told her, basically as soon as Gwen had headed out to get dressed: Bucky had tilted his head back just enough to look at Sam out of the corner of his eye and said, "You don't touch me." He was just stating it, like a fact, like an observation. There was no kind of demand to the tone at all, but still, Sam couldn't help but to hear one underneath, anyway.
e had frozen.

Bucky was right; Sam had remembered how, just minutes before Bucky spoke, Sam had ghosted his hand over Gwen's hip, one last casual, affectionate touch before they had pulled away, each going their separate ways until the evening.

So when Bucky pointed out the difference, he had turned slowly towards him, and, after a moment of hesitation, asked exactly the question he was burning with: "Is that something you want?"

Bucky had swallowed, and cutting his gaze away. "Gwen doesn't touch me, either," he said, voice just as neutral as before.

So that was a... no? It sounded like it might be a no. More specifically, it sounded like Bucky was saying, *Nobody touches me, please change that, please don't leave me touch-starved*, which: yeah, actually—that was a pretty reasonable thing to want! And Sam was even willing to fill that need, but before he did it, he needed to be absolutely clear on what the need was, because throwing a wrench into the already-unbalanced, fucked-up, three-way-relationship thing they had going was *not his idea of a good plan*.

And also... "Gwen thinks you don't want her to touch you. You want things to be different, you maybe need to let her know it’s okay."

Bucky frowned. "She can," he said, as if it were obvious.

"No, she really can't." Sam crossed his arms, considering the guy. "Your ass spent seventy years with people in a position of power telling you what to do and where to go, and—not even getting into the sex stuff, which in your case would be rape stuff, but just basing it on the torture—you have had people touching you without your permission for literally longer than I have been alive. So, no: Gwen cannot just touch you if she wants you. Partially because she is a decent person, and partially because I will *beat the shit out of her* if she tries."

Bucky's eyes went wide, and he drew back a little.

Sam tried to throttle it down a little, back off. "Look... You want her to touch you? Easy enough: you touch her. Gwen's a grown-ass woman, she's in charge of the whole damned Tower, she is not going to worry about telling you no if she means no. You, we have a little more concern over.

"You want something started? Fine. But you're gonna have to be the one to start it."

"And then what?"

Sam shrugged. "Then he didn't say anything, at all, for about five damn hours, and eventually I got bored and left the room. Damn well took his time to think about it. But he’s been doing things..."

Gwen’s head came up like it was on strings.

“Stuff like... I’ll be sitting there, and he sits at my feet. Stuff like, he reaches out and grasps my arm to make a point in a conversation. Stuff like, he came over and *sniffed* me the other day.”

Sam crossed his arms over his chest. “I told him he needed to signal, and man, he is *signalling*. Can’t say it’s not follow-through.”

She was *staring* at him.

He sighed, and tried again.
“Look, what are you even looking for from me, here? I think he’s finally got something he wants. I think he is coming to terms with wanting. But I am not going to rush this, because I am not actually an asshole, Gwen!”

She bit her lip.

Gwen’s body-language, here, was all fucked up. She wasn’t looking at him at all. And, yeah, she was sitting in the window seat—Gwen loved the window seat—and all of New York was spread out beneath her, all angles and lines and perspective which Sam knew her artist’s soul loved, but that didn’t really have anything to do with why she wasn’t looking at him, and he knew it.

Sam was pissed. He was missing something, here, something that was huge, something that should have been obvious, and he could already tell he was gonna be kicking himself when he saw it it.

“If you did,” she said. “If you—if you found out that he was... wanting. Like you say. That he was wanting. Is that something...?”

Sam blinked at her, rallying his patience to deal with her stupid-ass repressed 1940’s bullshit, and tried to figure out what the hell she was really asking. “Is that something...?” he repeated.

She pressed her lips together and jerked her head, sharply, to the side. “Is that something... you would want.”

Sam waited, drawing out the silence until it went well beyond the threshold of awkward, but she didn’t give him any more than that.

He sighed, hugging himself more tightly with the arms crossed over his chest. “Are you asking me if I want him to try to ask for what he wants in life? If I think that seeking out physical contact with other human beings is good for him? Because the answers to both of those things are yes. He’s been through a lot; he deserves to be happy.”

Gwen ducked her head, and when she came up again she looked shamefaced.

Which pretty much confirmed Sam’s suspicions. “Or are you asking me if I’m attracted to him.”

She nodded immediately, like she had wanted desperately not to say it. She probably had wanted just that, actually; Gwen was consistently bad at putting her desires into words. “Yes,” she said, “that.”

Sam snorted. “Sure,” he said immediately. “I’m bi, he’s a good-looking man even without considering anything else, and—much like your repressed ass—he is my type.”

“Oh,” she said.

Sam waited patiently, again, but once more she didn’t go on.

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Did you not know I was bi...?”

Gwen shook her head. “I just—” she said, but then stopped short, cutting herself off.

Okay, Sam was definitely missing something in here. Gwen’s arms were wrapped around her stomach like she was going to be sick, and every inch of her body language was shut down, curled in and tight. Even her still-wet hair seemed to be clinging away from him to her neck. If she were one of his vets, he wouldn’t have let her go home alone; as it was, he was the only line she had to
cling to, here, and he had a feeling she was about ten seconds away from opening her hand and falling away.

Sam had seen enough people fall already; he wasn’t planning to add another one.

He sighed, and uncrossed his own arms, shaking them out a little bit to loosen up and breathing in big to relax his chest and back. He stepped over to her, wrapping his arms around her, and she jumped like she was a cat and he’d stepped on her tail. He ignored that, and tucked his chin over her shoulder, breathing into her ear the way she liked, before pressing a kiss to her cheek from behind.

She melted.

“Sweetheart,” he said. He wasn’t huge for pet names—“baby” was about as far as he would usually go—but Gwen loved them, and he found that in her case, he liked giving them to her. “Babygirl, come on. I can’t solve problems you won’t tell me about. What’s going on in that head of yours...?”

She gasped, and beneath his arms there was a fine tremor: tears. She was about to cry, and that was the last thing he wanted to see, here.

Or... not, apparently. She straightened up, pulling away from him a bit, and swallowed, blinking hard. When she turned her head to look at him, though, she was dry-eyed. “I just—” she started again, then stopped with a furious puff of air. Furious at herself, Sam kind of thought; usually, if Gwen was mad at someone else, they knew it. “I just thought... maybe... I was smart enough not to make the same mistake twice,” she said. She turned her head away before giving a bitter, bitter laugh. “But here we are, so apparently not.”

She started to pull away, and Sam tightened his arms.

“Oh no,” he said, “Oh, hell no. No way. We are not doing this.” He slid one arm down, away from her shoulder but not actually loosening his hold at all—because she would run if he did—pressing it down the length of her torso from shoulder, along the side of her breast, over her stomach, and letting it rest at her hip. She was tense again, her body tight like a bowstring, but Sam had been with her for months at this point and he paid attention, he knew it wasn’t all anger and self-hate. Some of that was desire, and that was kind of his point, so he rubbed with the hand at her hip, small circular motions that grabbed her attention like a baby with a rattle.

“You think I was BS-ing you? You think that instant chemistry—which, by the way, I do not do, okay, that was uncharacteristic behavior on my part, just as much as it was on yours—you think all that was some kind of trick? Like I was maybe sitting there saying, ‘Oh, I know, I’ll just lose my mind with the fucking Avenging Angel, that’s definitely the best plan for convincing people I’m straight’? Let me tell you something, babygirl.”

He let loose just enough to stand, pulling her off of her window seat and moving her to the wall beside it instead, pressing her back against it and getting into her space, in part because she loved that shit and in part because he was kind of getting rid of the escape options until she stopped being stupid.

“Let me tell you something,” Sam said. “This thing, between us? This thing, where I want you so bad I go crazy, and where I love you so much I follow you into hell? This thing? The one where we save the world together and then come home and have dinner like an ordinary couple and even the fucking board games are the most electric experiences of our lives? This thing, where...” He moved in close, breathing into her ear and then reaching out, delicately, with his teeth, taking the
lobe ever-so-gently between them and nipping, lightly, so lightly.

Gwen moaned, the sound cutting off like she was trying to keep it in.

Sam chuckled, low and deliberate, right into the shell of her ear. “Yeah,” he said, keeping his voice carefully low and intimate. “This thing.”

He pulled back. “This thing is not fake. This thing is amazing, and real, and unless your dumb ass does something stupid, it is not going anywhere. Bi means two, which is maybe something you might want to look into, and you?” He ducked his head into her line of sight until she met his eyes again. “You are not my beard,” he told her bluntly.

Then he added as an afterthought, “And anyway, if that’s what I wanted, then babygirl, there are way easier ways for me to get it.”

She burst out laughing, as he had intended, and relaxed, quickly melting into him and putting her arms around his waist, the way she knew he liked. “Are you saying I’m high-maintenance, Mr. Wilson?”

He chuckled again, tucking her in around him like a favorite blanket. “You are incredibly high-maintenance, Mrs. Barnes. And worth every second of the work.”

She jerked like he’d shocked her, and said, “Oh,” with her voice coming out very small.

Sam frowned, and looked at what he could see of her head, which was not much. “Hmm?” he asked.

“Nothing.” But the quickness of it, and the way she ducked her head into his chest, told another story.

She was actually an inch taller than he was. Tucking her head into his chest took some work on her part.

“You’re not used to people willing to fight for you?” Sam speculated, and she didn’t move, which meant that wasn’t it. He smiled slowly, spreading his fingers along her back before running them up and into her hair. “Alright... Mrs. Barnes.”

And right on cue, she shuddered.

...That was either really sweet, or deeply, deeply fucked up, but Sam was a practical man, and knew better than to look too closely at it, on account of he might figure out which. He gently steered them in the direction of the bed, instead, filing the information away for further consideration at a later date, and distracting her in a way he was getting to be very, very good at.

All that was all well and good, but then the next day Sam walked in and found her making out on the couch with Bucky, so apparently things were gonna get weird on him again.

Nothing wrong with that; weird was kind of his life. It was just that he would kind of have appreciated a heads-up about about it before he came around the couch and found out what the wet sounds were.

For a minute there, he didn’t say a damn thing, just stood and watched them. Gwen was pressed in against the back of the couch, lying on her side; Bucky was also on his side, his back to the open air, which Sam was a little surprised wasn’t driving him crazy. Gwen had one hand on Bucky’s
hip, holding him close, and Bucky had his left hand around her shoulder. Sam checked more closely, but the fingers were barely denting her shirt; Bucky was lightly touching, not gripping, with the metal arm. His other arm, meanwhile, was tucked up under the couch’s armrest, by their heads, and Sam could just barely see Gwen’s fingers where they were tangled in Bucky’s hair.

They looked like they were having a good time, but it also didn’t seem like this particular car was actually driving anywhere. They were making out, yeah; but it was a lot of slow, open-mouthed kisses with, from what Sam could see, anyway, barely any tongue. They weren’t pressed together at the hips, rocking together; they weren’t grasping each other desperately, or making needy noises. At one point, Bucky pulled a little bit away, only to kiss Gwen’s chin, cheek, closed right eye, and nose, but other than that, they were sticking to mouths, not letting their kisses drift over other erogenous body parts.

They were just... playing around. Like kids, almost.

_Gwen was nineteen when she got married,_ Sam remembered out of nowhere, and he wondered for a second if this was what their first kisses must have been like.

He lost track of how long he stood there, watching them. He was aware that he should either leave them to it, or at least announce his presence, but he couldn’t quite make himself do either. Even budging from his spot, taking a seat on the recliner nearby, would have announced his presence when it creaked. He couldn’t do it, he found; he would have missed the happy little sounds, almost giggles, coming from Gwen every once in awhile, would have missed the pleased hums Bucky was making. He’d have missed the way her hand flexed and curled, massaging the spot on Bucky’s hip where she anchored him to the couch, would have missed the arch in Bucky’s neck, the way Gwen’s eyelashes fluttered...

Gwen’s eyelashes fluttered again, and then once more, before flying open, her eyes focusing on him above Bucky’s cheekbone.

“Sam!”

Her voice was startled, but her hands didn’t move, not the one on Bucky’s hip and not the one tugging lightly at his hair. In her arms, Bucky didn’t move, either, lying boneless and... passive? Or content? It would make a difference, Sam found, which one it was. His head didn’t even twitch, though, not turning around to face Sam at all, so either he already knew Sam was there, or —more likely by a thin margin, once you factored in his history—he was pretty deep under, whatever spell this was.

“How long have you been standing there?” Gwen asked. Her voice was husky with kisses, groggy-sounding, but not upset.

“A while,” Sam said because he didn’t have a real answer. He crossed to the couch and knelt beside it, reaching up to hover his hand over Bucky’s head. “Hey,” he said gently, making sure there was a smile in his voice. Bucky didn’t even twitch. “Let go of his hair for a minute, would you? I wanna check something.”

Gwen blinked a couple times, then released, half-sitting-up as she drew back her hand.

“Hey,” Sam said again, this time to Bucky. “You in there?”

_Now_ he twitched: his head came up off the cushion, almost exactly like a dog waking up from a nap, and probably for the same sort of reason. “Yes?” he said. He sounded even grogghier than Gwen was.
“And just making sure...”

Sam tried, but found he couldn’t resist running a hand down Bucky’s back, the long line of it spread out in front of him like a picnic, down over the shoulder, the side, the waist... He stroked it once, then drew his hand away before he trespassed irredeemably.

“...was this your idea?”

Bucky made a noise in his throat instead of answering, but it sounded like a yes sort of noise, at least. Sam’s hands rose of their own accord to straighten Bucky’s hair where it tangled against the armrest, and he jerked them back again before making contact. “If you were to change your mind,” Sam checked, “how would you put a stop to this?”

He almost regretted asking it, because a line of tension entered Bucky’s shoulders, and he started to sit up properly. Gwen’s hand on Bucky’s hip tightened, briefly, as he started to move, then released as she realized what she was doing. Bucky squirmed around, craning his neck to squint at Sam. “I would... get up and leave?”

The tone was obviously a question, but Bucky didn’t sound confused about his route of egress; he sounded confused that Sam was asking this at all. Sam sat back on his heels, reassured. “Okay,” he said. “Okay.” He gave in again, one more little toe over the line, brushing his hand over Bucky’s cheek reassuringly before pushing him lightly back down the way he had been. “Carry on, then. Sorry I bothered you.”

Bucky made a confused-but-contented noise, and buried his face in Gwen’s neck. Safely out of his line of sight, Gwen’s face looked like it was Christmas morning and Santa had brought her seventeen golden retriever puppies during the night. Sam laughed at her—out loud and everything, because it was both adorable and hilarious—and then stood up. “You folks okay with me sitting right here?” he asked, gesturing at his LaZboy, carefully keeping his voice casual.

Gwen’s face did something complicated as she thought about that question, but she said, “...fine?” As if she wasn’t sure that was the right answer, but it was the only one she had.

Sam settled into his comfy chair with a little wriggle and leaned back, knees all man-spread and confident and shit. “Right,” he said easily, “so this was... what? Experimentation? Playing around?” He almost didn’t say it, but the urge to snark was too strong— “Trip down memory lane?”

Gwen laughed, but not in a funny way. In a much grimmer way. “Memory lane doesn’t look much like that.”

“I thought it might.” Bucky burrowed his head further into her embrace. “Thought it might bring some things back.”

The room was silent as they both watched him, waiting. Gwen broke first, prompting, “... and?”

He shrugged, not otherwise moving. “It was nice,” he said. Despite his positioning, his voice emerged clear, unmuffled. “It was good. I would do it again. I like being...” His left hand raised and circled, indicating their positioning with a soft whine of the servos before falling back to Gwen’s waist. “...here,” he finished.

Sam and Gwen stared at him, and then at each other. And then at him again. After a minute, he seemed to sense their scrutiny and added, “It felt like belonging.”

Gwen looked up at Sam, shrugging her bafflement at him. Sam shrugged back, accepting the
statement at face value.

“But,” Bucky added suddenly, the words coming out of him like soap bubbles popping in the breeze, “there was something missing.”

There was a sort of awful silence that followed this, heavy like an overripe melon. Sam found himself pressing his back into the recliner, physically pushing away from the impact of it. He realized that he was staring at Bucky, at the mussed-up hair at tumbling onto the cushions because all Sam could see was the back of his head, and he realized it was because he was avoiding looking at Gwen.

So he knocked that the fuck off, and looked at Gwen.

She was very still, was the first thing he noticed. And part of that was the hush-ness, the gross, thick-feeling in the room, but part of it was also that she was still. It was what she did when she was trying to control herself; batten down the hatches, tense all your muscles, and go deer-in-the-headlights frozen: the patented Gwen Technique™.

But, he realized, her face was calm. There were times—all of them awful—when Sam could look at her and imagine that she had been carved from a block of ice, her expression was so hollow and cold; but she wasn’t wearing the ice-block look now. If he had to pick a word, the one he would go with was actually acceptance: Bucky hadn’t said anything she hadn’t known, and hearing it confirmed wasn’t breaking her heart.

So okay, then. Sam let his hands relax on the arm-rests. Apparently, Gwen was gonna be okay. And since Bucky seemed to be exploring the borders of his agency these days, it seemed like he was gonna be okay, too. Maybe, possibly, Sam was even gonna be able to relax for half a damned minute.

So of course as soon as he thought that, Gwen said, “You want that, you should try kissing Sam,” and the Kill Bill sirens started going off in Sam’s brain again.

“She wasn’t.” Bucky didn’t sound upset, Sam noticed, cracking one eye open to peer suspiciously at him. He sounded amused, actually. And when he propped up on his flesh arm and pivoted his head down and out, looking at Sam quizzically, Sam was sure of it: there was no tension in him, no angst or drive to obey. “She was joking,” Bucky said.

He canted his head sideways and blinked at Sam. “But maybe she’s right,” he said, sounding even more amused. “Would it be better for me, do you think? Kissing you, versus kissing her?” He gave a slow blink, and Sam—of course—took that second to remember the sight of him tasting spaghetti sauce the night before, the way his tongue had darted out to just touch the edge of the wooden spoon he held up.

Sam shifted uncomfortably in his chair, thinking about it.

He hadn’t chased this particular question in a while. He’d thought about, back at the beginning of this thing—because Gwen was stubborn as hell, and had not been about to give up on one of her boys, and that had had certain implications which he had at least tried to fully consider. But he had also, at the time, known that Bucky was just way too fucked up to be in a relationship.
That wasn’t the case, anymore. Bucky was his own person, these days, and while relapse could and did happen at any time and so Sam was gonna be extra vigilant about making sure Bucky was always acting of his own free will, there was also the pressing knowledge that Bucky might in fact actually want this. It was even likely, given the factors of proximity and sexuality and...

...and Bucky was getting up from the sofa, pulling himself out of Gwen’s arms.

Sam had thought about this, was the thing. He had carefully considered his options, considered whether he would be willing to attempt a polyamorous muddle with these two lost traumababies, had considered whether he wanted to be the third point in their time-travel triangle. He had thought about it and thought some more, but he still hadn’t come to any particular conclusions.

Now, though, it seemed like time was up; apparently, the conclusions would be coming to him, because Bucky was crossing the room, putting his knee on the edge of the recliner and pushing off with the other foot, and suddenly he was in Sam’s lap and leaning in, the metal hand surprisingly warm as it cupped Sam’s jaw.

Sam gave up on thinking about it, and went for instinct, instead: he pushed upward, and met the kiss head-on.

Bucky’s mouth was exactly as soft as it looked, and exactly as muscular, too, moving gently but cleverly against his. The first press was soft, almost tentative, which Sam could kind of understand, but, hell, if they were doing this thing, then they were doing it, so Sam did exactly what Gwen had been doing ten minutes ago: he wound his hands into Bucky’s hair and pulled.

Bucky moaned.

The sound went through Sam like a taser strike, all his insides curling up at the edges like newspaper burning. He tightened his grip and watched Bucky’s eyelids flutter, ridiculous long lashes looking damn good all blissed out like that. He leaned in again, licking across the seam of Bucky’s lips, and Bucky just opened the hell up for him, pliant and needy, sucking hungrily at everything Sam had to give him.

Bucky moaned.

Sam growled, his free hand coming up automatically to take Bucky by the arm, hauling him in and holding him there, holding him still for Sam to delve into. Bucky answered with a small sound from his throat, just a little one, a needy, helpless sort of thing, and it was like fireworks going off in the back of Sam’s mind. He took over, moving in and unpacking into Bucky’s mouth for long, slow, aching seconds, before shoving Bucky back a couple inches and sagging back into the chair.

“Well,” Sam said, panting, staring up at Bucky’s wide, dark pupils, “I guess that answers that.”

He raised his right hand, the one he had had pulling Bucky’s hair a second ago, and brushed his thumb over Bucky’s reddened and swollen lower lip. Bucky immediately nipped it before sucking on the tip, and Sam caught his breath. It was hard as hell to look away from that, away from the sight of his own damn digit disappearing into that hot, pink mouth, but Sam did it anyway, tearing his eyes away over Bucky’s shoulder, to where Gwen sat on the edge of the couch, arms crossed over her stomach, watching them.

She was staring.

She looked fascinated. She also looked like she was gonna be sick. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out what her misconception was.

Sam patted Bucky’s cheek with his fingers, pulling gently on the thumb Bucky still had in his
mouth. “Get up,” he instructed, and thank God, Bucky did it, scrambling off his lap to stand almost at attention beside the chair. Sam crossed to where Gwen sat, all huddled up like she couldn’t decide whether she was holding herself together or holding herself back, and tried to take the decision away from her.

“Hey,” he said gently, kneeling in front of her. “You okay?”

She blinked, and nodded, but it was her lying nod, the one that was full of shit. “I’m fine, Sam.” She pasted on a smile that somehow looked less real than goddamn cabbage patch kid. “You guys should have fun—”

Her voice cracked on the last word, and Sam gave in to the urge to roll his eyes. “Yeah, how about no,” he said. Very carefully, he cupped her cheek in his hand, only realizing at the last second that the thumb he was about to stroke across her cheekbone was still wet with Bucky’s spit. He did it anyway, and her eyes widened, focusing on him as she actually thought about what he was saying, what he had been saying this whole time about who exactly he was here for.

“Yes,” he snorted, “about that.” He leaned in, very gently, and kissed her. She kissed back, recklessly and honestly, giving her whole heart the same way she always did, the way Sam had fallen in love with far too quickly.

He drew back and got to his feet, looking at both of them, wondering how the hell his life turned out this way but not particularly upset that it had. “You know what?” he announced to the room. “I have had a long-ass day. I am going to go lie down, maybe take off my pants, definitely take a nap. Gwen... you are welcome to join me. Bucky... you and Gwen need to have a talk. Depending on how that talk goes, you may also be welcome to join me. It’s something Gwen and I haven’t really discussed yet, so I’m not really willing to bend the boundaries of our relationship without her approval.”

But he gave Gwen a look as he said it, one he hoped conveyed where he stood: that he was more than willing to bend this boundary all the way out and around Bucky’s pastures, as long as it was okay with her. From the avid expression and the vibrant flush she broke out in, the message was received all clear.

“Right,” he nodded. “I am going to go lie down. I’ll see... whoever I see... if I’m not asleep first, ’cause I was serious about taking that nap.”

As empty threats went, that one was pretty much the dark void of space; there was literally no chance that he was going to be asleep when they got there. And it was going to be them, too, he was pretty sure. He supposed he could always be reading it wrong, but he didn’t think he was. Gwen was the one who shoved Bucky at Sam; Gwen had also wanted more of Bucky since forever, and she wasn’t going to turn down the opportunity when Sam handed it to her with a bow on the top.

He had known what he was doing when he issued the invitation; the only stumbling block was whether she believed that or not.

Gwen paused at the entrance to their bedroom, studying the scene within.

The main lights were off; if Sam were serious about needing a nap—which she didn’t believe—then that made sense, making it dim so he could catch some winks. The smaller, low-wattage bulbs wired into the headboard were on, casting a faint but useful glow over Sam, who was
gloriously, completely naked on top of the coverlet. His arms were crossed with his hands tucked behind his head; one knee was folded up, the other stretched out long along the blanket. His eyes were closed, but Gwen was completely certain that he was not actually asleep.

She reached up and began working at the buttons of her blouse. Her hands were trembling, she noticed; how odd. She passed the last button through the hole and dropped the shirt on the ground, watched the lightweight satin flutter as it fell. Her slacks came off next, dropping off her hips like they were weighted as soon as she pulled the zip. Her feet were already bare, her shoes and jewelry both discarded earlier that afternoon when she had first come back to the apartment. That left her in brassier and panties, her hair tossing loose around her shoulders, and that was what she was still wearing when she climbed into the bed.

Sam’s eyes flicked, but didn’t open. His lips curled into the familiar smile, and really the gap between his teeth should not make her heart beat so fast. “Hey,” he said.

“She’s you might take a nap.”

“I might,” he said. “Could be persuaded to do some other things, too. If you wanted.” His eyes were crinkling at the corners, now, but they still weren’t open.

“I guess it depends,” Gwen said, picking up his hands and placing them on her breasts. His smile sharpened as he felt the shape of them through her bra, and he moved his hands easily to cup them, thumbs brushing over the nipples, fingers tracing gentle designs down the sides before cupping them again.

“Yeah? What’s it depend on?”

His right hand tightened gently, fingers pinching the nipple through the silk enough to make Gwen’s breath catch. Somehow it always felt better like this, with the delicate roughness of the fabric giving extra friction between her and his touch...

He’d asked her a question. What had it been? There was an answer she needed to give, something she needed to say... “On you,” she managed. “On whether you wanted it, too.”

Hiss left fingers curled, bringing the short, well-maintained nails in to scratch lightly over the curve of her breast. Once, twice, three times around the edge, always skirting the hot point at the center where she wanted it the most. “Mmmm...” he said. “I always want you.” He tweaked the right nipple again, then rubbed over it with his thumb. She gasped, her knees tightening involuntarily around his chest.

“Do you want him, too?”

His chest shook lightly under her with the hint of a laugh. “Sure,” Sam said easily. He scraped his nails around the outside of her breast again, then down to her stomach, circling her navel with his thumb. She raised her own nails, scratching down the outside of his bicep, and he hummed happily and finally, finally opened his eyes. “I like him a lot,” he said. His words seemed to come with difficulty; his breath was rushing over his lips, and his eyes kept darting to the hand he was working inside the silk of her bra. “He’s very charming.”

“Oh,” she said, tracing over the broad, flat muscle of his pec with her nails. “Oh, I’m glad you think so.”
Behind her, the mattress dented as Bucky climbed on from the other side. She reached out, grasping, and found his bicep, pulling him down to lie beside Sam. Like Gwen, Bucky had taken off most of his clothes, but chosen to remain in his underwear; unlike Gwen, Bucky’s underwear was just a pair of blue cotton boxer-briefs.

They clung, outlining the swell and dips of his ass perfectly. Gwen moaned, and she didn’t even feel self-conscious about it because Sam had moaned, too, right at the same time.

“Hey,” Sam said, his voice warm and welcoming. His head turned to the side, the hand closer to Bucky—the one at Gwen’s navel—coming off of her and winding with Bucky’s hand, like two kids about to jump off a ledge together. Which they almost were, except that this was one Hell of a ledge. “Hey, Bucky; good to see you here.”

Bucky’s hand tightened sharply, his eyes widening and lightening at the welcome. “Thanks,” he said, smiling sweetly. “Good to be here.”

Gwen snorted, leaning in to kiss Bucky on the mouth. The memories almost swamped her for a second when she did it, coming up strong like an undertow, taking her back to their earliest attempts at sleeping together, to the love and desperation and failure of it. She pulled back, breaking away, but then Sam was there, Sam, who would allow no such thing in his bed. He took over the kiss, nibbling at the corners of her mouth until she was giggling, then collapsing back onto his elbows and grinning up at her before turning to kiss Bucky, too.

The kiss he shared with Bucky was different from the ones either man had given her; it was dirtier, somehow, more direct. No-nonsense, she thought, as Bucky broke away, panting and whimpering and clinging to Sam’s arm like it was an anchor.

“Oh,” Bucky said, eyes wide. “Oh, please...?” He turned pleading eyes up to Gwen.

“Yes,” she said immediately, because she wasn’t going to refuse Bucky anything he asked for. “Yes? Wait, Bucky, what are you asking for?”

He whined wordlessly, huffing out in exasperation. “I don’t know. Sam?”

Sam pursed his lips. “Hmmm?”

Bucky whined again, and Gwen couldn’t help laughing at him. She felt a little ridiculous, sitting perched on top of Sam, half-falling out of her bra, but she couldn’t feel too silly. Not with Sam’s eyes all heavy-lidded like that when he looked at her, not when that smile kept tucking into his cheek like it was stowing away there. “Was that a request for assistance?” Gwen teased, “or a theory about what you need?”

“Could be both,” Sam said. He gave a sort of roll, raising up just enough to jostle Gwen where she kneeled. “Come on down here; let’s rearrange.”

There was a lot of shoving and shifting as Sam basically arranged them like giant dolls. When he was done, Gwen was on her back on the right side of the bed, Bucky beside her, also on his back, on her left. Sam knelt between them, around the level of their hips, and was watching the two of them with a pleased expression like a cat who has just realized that there is an entire lake of the cream.

“Good,” Sam said, “Now kiss.”

Gwen had her hand out, reaching for Bucky, almost as soon as Sam finished speaking, rolling onto her side to reach more easily. Bucky mirrored her posture again, rolling over and bracing on his
left hand as he reached for her with the right, and then they were kissing again.

It was always going to be special, kissing Bucky. Her first love, and it showed, in the sweetness that crept into it, the grasping way her hand threaded into his hair. The length of it was still new, but she found she liked it, liked the silkiness of it as it slipped between her fingers. She imagined brushing it over her skin, and blushed.

Above her, Sam chuckled. “Whatever you’re thinking,” he told her, “keep thinking it.” He ran his hand up her back, pushing her gently forward to kiss Bucky again while he reached behind her and unclasped her bra. She gasped into the kiss as he pulled it off, the silk whispering against her skin and her nipples hardening into little nubs at the wash of cool air.

He didn’t try to wrestle it down over the arm she was resting on, just let it drop between them as he reached over Bucky, instead. She couldn’t see what he did, and for a moment was resigned to trying to guess before she remembered she was allowed to look. So she raised herself up by extending her arm, watching as Sam ran his hand up and down Bucky’s spine, Bucky shivering at every pass.

It was mesmerizing; beautiful, she thought. She wanted to taste those shivers as Sam passed his fingers over the points of Bucky’s neck, then down smooth muscles to swirl near the tailbone again. Mint and ginger, that’s what they looked like: cool and exciting, both at the same time. Impulsively, she leaned in and touched Bucky with her tongue, right at the top of his neck where it was shaded by the bony corner of his jaw. No mint, no ginger, but it still tasted wonderful, salty and sweet and musky. She licked once, twice, and then bit very gently at the skin, her teeth just barely scraping it.

Bucky thrashed, moaning out loud, and Gwen jerked back in startled response. Sam did, too—she could see it out of the corner of her eye—but then he came right back in again, running his hand straight up Bucky’s spine again to the hair and grasping tight. Bucky moaned again, but went pliant and boneless in his grip.

“Yeah,” Sam breathed, “that’s what I thought. You liked this a lot, earlier; that your thing? Being grabbed, being shoved around, maybe?”

Bucky’s breath was coming short and fast, panting out of an open mouth under eyes half-lidded in pleasure. “Please,” he breathed, lashes flickering. Gwen glanced up at Sam just in time to see the genuinely sweet, pleased expression break out on his face in response, and she felt something curl up in her stomach, warm and delighted, at the sight.

“Oh,” she breathed, feeling an answering smile steal across her face. “Oh, this is going to be good!”

Sam laughed. “Hey, Gwen,” he said, “watch.” He pulled Bucky’s head back by his grip on his hair, and then, as Bucky keened out a high-pitched noise, lowered his mouth and began to suck a hickey on over Bucky’s collar. Bucky sobbed in his grasp, feet making small kicking motions at the end of the bed, but didn’t fight, panting and pleading until Sam raised his head again, revealing the inch-wide, wine-dark mark he had left behind.

Gwen gasped, something blooming inside her chest. She leaned forward and kissed Sam, impulsively, hovering over Bucky to do it. Sam’s mouth was warm and happy, tasting of metal and skin, and she lost long moments there as they went back and forth, back and forth, Bucky still whimpering in Sam’s grasp.

Finally, Sam disengaged from the kiss, touching her lightly on the shoulder to get her to drop to the
mattress again. “Here,” he said, using his grip on Bucky to firmly guide him over her. “Here.” Under Sam’s hands, Bucky nosed along Gwen’s collarbone, licking and kissing, then spending long minutes lovingly placing dark, sucking love-bites on her arms which would be gone before midnight. At that point, Sam pulled him back and kissed him deeply—Bucky melted under the onslaught, damn near purring—then tossed him back into Gwen’s arms.

“Here,” he said again, this time to Gwen, “hold him for me. Put one hand—yeah, that’s good.” Gwen had the same grip on Bucky that Sam had held—the hair was too convenient, too satisfying, to ignore—while her other arm locked around Bucky’s chest. She couldn’t help but notice that both she and Sam had, seemingly instinctively, left the metal arm free—as if they wanted to leave Bucky an option to get out if he needed to.

Bucky moaned in her hold, and she moaned right back in his ear; Sam was dropping kisses down Bucky’s chest, skirting the scar tissue from the arm and scraping his teeth over seemingly-random patches of skin. He paused in from of Bucky’s right nipple, watching both of them with a gleam in his eye, then just blew a cold stream of air over it before moving onward. Bucky and Gwen both groaned in unison when he passed it.

He continued down, placing random bites over Bucky’s stomach, pausing bare inches from the erection straining the boxer-briefs Bucky still wore. For a second, Sam froze, watching them watch him, then buried his face in Bucky’s abs, shoulders shaking.

“What?” Gwen asked, almost desperate. Bucky whined in agreement, and that set Sam off further, gasping in laughter and reeling away from them to sit back on his heels. “What?!?” Gwen demanded.

“Nothing! Nothing. I just... There’s two of you,” Sam huffed, leaning in again.

Surprisingly, Bucky snorted in her ear. “How does he think I feel?” he whispered. It was too quiet for Sam to hear it, but Gwen found herself lighting up at the comment, almost dissolving into smiles.

Sam shook his head, watching them. “I don’t wanna know,” he said firmly. “Barnes!”

Bucky spasmed as he tried to come to attention, only to realize that Gwen still held him securely. “Yes, sir?”

Sam paused. “I like that,” he said, “but not tonight. Not the first time, okay?”

Bucky panted in Gwen’s ear for a second, then nodded. “Okay,” he said. “Uh. Yes.... Sam?”

Sam snorted. “Right,” he said. “Two questions. One, are you game to take these off?” He snapped the elastic of Bucky’s underwear, and Bucky shuddered.

“Yes,” he said immediately. “Please.”

“Uh-huh. And two. How flexible are you?”

Bucky groaned as Sam pulled his shorts off. “How flexible d’you need?” he asked, sounding dazed, and Gwen groaned, too.

“Hey,” Sam said, tapping Gwen’s hip, “you, too.” He slid his fingers under the elastic of her panties, tugging them down her legs. She helpfully pulled first one, then the other, foot through them, only somewhat hampered by Bucky’s body weighing her down. “Yeah,” Sam breathed, “Good.”
He was staring at the picture they made, and Gwen felt herself flush in response.

Sam closed his eyes and gave a little groan, then leaned in, casually shoving at Bucky’s thigh until he pulled it back, up to his chest. “Yeah,” Sam said, pushing at Gwen this time, arranging them on first one side, then the other, until both of them were held open in front of him, two pairs of legs spread apart. Gwen pictured it, and turned red; she felt Sam’s fingers dance over her inner thigh, and turned more red.

“Oh, God,” she moaned. “Oh, no. Oh, Sam, this is going to be—” He slid one finger inside her, easy in her loose wetness and, at the same time, not enough. “Sam, Sam! More, Sam!”

He laughed again, low and satisfied, and pulled out, reaching for Bucky again.

“‘Cause there’s two of us,” Gwen panted.

“‘Cause there’s two of you,” he confirmed, hand leaving her—she groaned—to wrap around Bucky’s length, instead. He stroked him once, twice, and then pulled away again— “No!” Bucky begged, fruitlessly—and dropped back to Gwen.

“Here’s what I want,” Sam said as he turned his face to Gwen again, kissing along her collarbone while she made open-throated noises beneath him.

“What, you were planning?” she gasped.

Sam bit her shoulder in reproof, and she shrieked. He licked the bite and then answered the actual question, saying, “I was thinking about it while I hung out down there. It’s a very inspiring place to be.” She felt his nails run all the way down her back, scratching crosshatches across her ass, and impulsively grabbed him closer.

Gwen felt her blood boil in sheer arousal. She gasped, but she couldn’t get any air in; she moaned, but no sound came out. She nodded, frantically, and was rewarded with Sam’s slow, golden, gap-
Simultaneously, they both looked at Bucky.

Bucky’s eyes were wide, his mouth slack. He visibly gulped and said, “It’s not gonna take much; I’m pretty stupid already.”

Sam smiled even wider. “Well, if you tap out early, I’ll just do it to Gwen, instead.”

**Gwen felt her brain explode.**

Sam put them back how he had had them before, with Gwen and Bucky sprawled on top of each other, both of their knees pulled back. He slipped the condom on without lube—it wouldn’t need any; Gwen was *dripping*—and slid his hands under her bottom, lifting her and dragging her a couple inches towards him. She went to wrap her legs around his waist, but he shoved at the right one, swinging it up towards her chest, instead. “Hold it,” he told her shortly, and then pushed inside of her, a long, slow, stretching fullness that kept going and *going*, so much deeper here than their more usual positions. By the time he came to a stop, fully seated inside of her, she was aching, feeling the length and depth of it like thunder in her bones, like a fever, turning all her muscles watery and limp.

Sam pressed a kiss to her mouth before pulling back and out. She moaned at the emptiness, thrashing her head, mutely begging for him to thrust again. He stopped with the head of his cock just barely inside her, stinging and stretching at the tightest part of her. His head turned to the side, catching Bucky’s eyes. “Watch,” he ordered.

Bucky went boneless, propping loosely on one arm, his eyes roving up and down Gwen. He looked back up at Sam, nodding agreement.

Sam thrust. He went fast and hard, and it was *perfect*. “Good girl,” he said, and she flushed at the praise, pushing back as much as she was able, which was *not much*: she was pinned and trapped into place by Sam on top of her and Bucky beside her. “Yeah babygirl, that’s right; you can just take it and take it, just like that; perfect, perfect, perfect... Bucky.” His voice sharpened. “Look at her.”

Bucky shifted beside her, looking from Sam’s powerful shoulders, his glowing face, down to where they joined, and then up, eyes dancing over Gwen’s body until they got to her face. Something shifted in his expression, then, as he watched her gasping, something softening, going tender under the surface. He leaned in and kissed her, both of them laughing as he had to navigate around her leg, only for her to break out into groans as Sam thrust deep once again.

“Shit, *look* at you,” Sam groaned. “Both of you two, just—so—*fucking*—*perfect*—!”

She was close, she was close, she was *so close*—

“Look who’s talkin’,” Bucky murmured in her ear. Her eyes flew open in shock and her head jerked to the side. “He calls *us* perfect, but he ain’t half shabby himself.”

“N—No—He’s won—won—”

“—wonderful, yeah... You both are, wonderful people, you’re great—” Bucky’s hand closed around hers, his head so close his lips were brushing her temple. “You’re where I’m safe,” he said, voice rough. “You’re the only home I’ve got.” He laced their fingers together and his grip tightened, tightened, as he looked down their bodies at the magnificent sight of Sam fucking her deep and hard.
“I love you,” he whispered, barely breathing, in her ear.

It was everything she wanted, overwhelming her and swamping her in the push and pull of it, tidal and huge, aching deep inside and, at the same time, filling in all her empty place with love, and love, and more love.

She came, spectacularly, the ache pulling tighter and tighter inside of her before exploding, her muscles tensing and releasing, tensing and releasing, trying to thrust, trying to lift, trying to move anywhere but she couldn’t, she was pinned, held and surrounded.

Sam followed her over not long after that, only giving a handful of thrusts before burying himself deep and sagging, crushing her deliciously with his weight. Bucky wriggled when he did it, a sort of full-body expression of delight, and leaned up in a wordless request for a kiss. Sam granted it, nuzzling him softly, taking his mouth gently, pulling one arm free to wrap around him and bring him more into the pile.

“Mmm,” Gwen said. She stretched her toes and rolled her shoulders, although she wasn’t totally ready to move yet. “Mmmmm, yes.”

Sam chuckled, not moving yet, either. “Yeah?” he asked.

This was ritual. Sam always asked that, after. And Gwen always answered the same way.

“Yes,” she said fervently, but for once, she had to add, “Sort of. Wasn’t that...?”

“Part one,” Sam agreed. “Oh, yeah. We’re not done here.” He raised his head up, spearing Bucky with his eyes. “We got a whole nother part to go.”

Bucky gave another happy wiggle and smiled like he hadn’t done in seventy years.

Gwen’s heart squeezed in her chest.

Sam stretched and wriggled his arms, then sat up again, folding his legs under him on the bed. He watched the two of them, Gwen and Bucky, as they looked at each other and poked each other playfully, two kids with a love older than they were. He could feel the indulgent smile lighting him up, spreading out from his center in a way that was probably at least partially due to absolutely fucking spectacular orgasm he’d just had.

He rearranged them again, propping Gwen up against the headboard in a sitting position. (“Why?” she asked, blinking from under a veil of disheveled blond hair. Sam just smiled evilly.) Bucky, he prodded onto his hands and knees, steering him until he was facing Gwen, his head between her knees, and oh, look, now she was getting the picture.

“Oh, God.”

“Oh, yeah,” Sam told her. “What do you think, Bucky—that sound like something you wanna do? Eat my girl out for me until she’s seeing stars again?”

Bucky made a noise. It was a very affirmative noise.

Sam pushed on the back of Bucky’s head, then changed his mind at the last second and wrapped an arm around Bucky’s chest, the other around Bucky’s throat, and hauled him back. “Wait,” he said. “Before we do that. I want her to see.”
Bucky gasped at the sudden movement. “See?” he asked, sounding confused, and below them Gwen had a similarly puzzled look on her face.

“Oh, yeah.” Sam dropped the hand from Bucky’s neck, down the length of his spine the lower back, pushing there and pulling with the other arm, until Bucky knelt in front of him on both knees.

Bucky Barnes was damned pretty, both in the face—obviously—and in the body, even with his shoulder burned away and the scarring stretching across his chest. He had the same werewolf-like pattern of hair Gwen had—thick on his arms and legs, practically nothing on his chest and genitals—and a classically-handsome, v-taper shape. He was also thick through the thigh, long, strong muscles that he honed in the gym every day, partially for lack of anything better to do.

And he had an honestly great cock.

Not the first time Sam had seen his dick: there had been that first night, for one thing, stripping the guy to check him for wounds, and it turned out that Hydra had definitely not spent any money on Winter Soldier underwear. And there had been a couple times since then, too, the sorts of incidental sightings that happened when you lived with a guy and there were five million bathrooms in the floor you shared, but only one washer and dryer. But Sam had never gotten to see him erect before, and it was honestly one hell of a sight. He had a straight cock, no curve to it, reddened but not too purple, and it was swollen just enough for the head to seem like it was straining to escape the foreskin.

Sam dug his teeth into Bucky’s shoulder possessively, then reached around and grasped him firmly, jacking him once inside the sheath of his own skin before letting him go. Bucky wailed, pleading with him, and Sam watched Gwen’s face with a sort of bottomless smugness as a single white drop beaded at the top of Bucky’s slit. “Yeah,” Sam told her, “yeah. Your husband is gorgeous, Mrs. Barnes.”

“Hrrrnngh!” said Gwen, which was about the level of discourse Sam had been hoping for from her. He pushed on Bucky again, lightly.

“Eat her good, Bucky,” he ordered, shoving his head down and forward. Sam’s own dick twitched at how quickly Bucky complied. Gwen’s fingers scabbed at the headboard, searching for purchase, as Bucky basically dived into her, searching her out and putting his mouth on her, just as quickly, just as hard, as if he were sucking a cock.

“Jesus Christ, Bucky—Bucky, Bucky, please—ah, God! Bucky, pull off a little, okay, just—yeah, just like—oh, Jesus, you—”

“Put your arm into, Barnes,” Sam ordered cheerfully, grinning at Gwen over Bucky’s back.

“Sam Wilson, you sadistic son of a—oh Jesus fucking Christ!”

Sam had failed to specify which arm.

“I think he likes it,” Sam mused out loud, stroking down over Bucky’s back, digging his thumbs into the goddamn perfect globes of his ass. “He’s a real obliging gentleman, your husband.”

They shuddered in unison at that one, which was great. Sam rubbed Bucky’s ass some more, harder, just to watch him shudder again, then pulled the cheeks apart and breathed over his hole.

Bucky said... something, something very loud but too muffled in Gwen to be distinguishable. “Sorry,” Sam said, pursing his lips. “Couldn’t quite make that one out.” He bit the left cheek,
hard, before Bucky could answer, and got another incoherent yell out of him for it.

Sam grinned, since neither of them could see him do it. “Gonna do you right up,” he promised Bucky, rubbing a thumb over his hole, pushing not-quite-enough to slide in. “Gonna get you good and wet, here. You’ve been so patient for us, it’s only fair to reward you…”

Sam couldn’t put words into this noise, either, but it sounded like pleading.

Bucky jumped right before Sam managed to get his mouth on him—the feel of the beard, Sam realized after a second. He rubbed his hand over Bucky’s ass cheek, flat, to warn him before he tried again, and this time Bucky accepted his mouth with a moan.

Sam had reasoned it out before he decided on rimming: he wanted something intimate, but also not penetrative; he wasn’t sure what kind of sexual traumas Bucky had, but rimming was unlikely to be the worst of them. It was one of those things you knew pretty quick whether it was gonna do it for your partner or not—it was a pretty in-or-out kind of deal. If Bucky wasn’t into it, Sam would be able to tell, and pretty damn fast, too: people usually tensed up, got quiet... Some would even push you away. Sam could always pull back and try something else.

He needn’t have worried, though: Bucky fucking melted.

It wasn’t the quiet kind of melting, either. Boy got loud, shouting and hollering into Gwen’s snatch, clinging to her hips like those and Sam’s tongue were the only things keeping him on the damn bed. He was begging, pleading, then just crying out, practically writhing—or he would’ve been, except he couldn’t really go anywhere, pinned between the two of them. Gwen’s face—Sam could see it over the curve of Bucky’s back, and he was keeping a real close eye on it, because he still wasn’t willing for this to go south—Gwen’s face was beatific, watching them both with a kind of aroused awe which was just damned satisfying to see.

Bucky had already been close when Sam started this; Sam kinda thought maybe Bucky hadn’t realized how close even his own self, like maybe he hadn’t had sex in so long that the orgasm was gonna sneak up and take him by storm. And whether that was the reason or not, it did: Gwen went first—Gwen actually went first, then after Sam she went third, fourth, and fifth by the time Bucky was ready; when it came to multiple orgasms, Gwen was exceedingly satisfying to work with—and right after she’d had her fourth orgasm, Bucky stiffened and started shaking under Sam’s hands.

Sam figured that was his cue, and he gave Bucky the reach around at that point; it took all of about two strokes for Bucky to begin shooting onto Sam’s coverlet and collapsing under Sam’s hands.

Sam paused, for a moment, enjoying the knowledge of a job very well done. He looked from at his sweaty, serum-enhanced, brain-melted girlfriend, down to her equally-sweaty, serum-enhanced, spine-melted husband, and grinned, grinned so wide his cheeks hurt.

Yeah. It was gonna be alright, after all.

Sam had gone for the warm washcloths, earlier—Bucky watched his retreating form appreciatively—but other than that, they had all just sprawled in Sam’s enormous bed and fallen straight asleep, after. Nevermind it had only been eight o’clock, and not a one of them had had dinner; they were exhausted and, well, relaxed, so it wasn’t a wonder that none of them had felt like getting up.

Still, it left Bucky to wake up hungry at one in the morning, staring around an unfamiliar room with no clue where he was or how he had gotten here for a solid minute. It was only the presence of twin lumps in the thick coverlet—Gwen on one side, Sam on the other—that clued him in.
With a sigh, he let himself sink back beneath the blankets.

He was awake now, though, damn it. He lasted all of two minutes before the heat and closeness, the claustrophobic presence of people, started to wear at him, and he tossed the covers away from his face again, glaring at the ceiling.

Time to get up.

He managed to get out of bed by the simple expedient of not moving stealthily; quiet movements would be more disturbing to a trained soldier like Gwen—and, he supposed, like Sam—so he just sat up, somersaulted to the end of the bed, and slid off, walking to the door as “normally” as he could. It must have worked, because no one followed him to the kitchens. Once there, he moved on automatic, pouring milk into the pain. It took him a minute before he even understood what he was making, but once he did, he laughed and kept doing it.

Hot chocolate. Well, it was comforting...

He figured it was only a matter of time before his absence woke one of the other two, and he proved to be right about that one, too: Sam ambled into the kitchen less than a minute before the chocolate was ready. Bucky went ahead and got down three mugs for it, only then realizing that he had made enough for all of them to have some.

“Gwen’ll be in soon, too,” Sam said. He was wearing a robe, a royal purple terrycloth thing that Bucky thought might have been associated with some sports team, and he looked comfy and cozy. Bucky, on the other hand, was wearing a towel snagged from a bathroom on the way, wrapped around his waist like a sarong; he felt distinctly underdressed. “She’s using the restroom, and I think she said something about her hair.... She’ll be along.”

Bucky nodded, giving the chocolate one last stir. He hadn’t burned it, this time. That was nice.

He’d burned a lot of things in the months since he left Hydra. It was always nice when something came out okay.

Speaking of... He cleared his throat. “How are you?” he asked, pouring the chocolate into the mugs so he wouldn’t have to look at Sam. “Are you... okay, with this? I know I wasn’t exactly asking, earlier...”

“Am I okay? Bucky, I am fantastic. I was gonna ask if you were okay.”

Bucky smiled, involuntarily. “Yes,” he said, “I’m okay. I’m...” He scraped the last drips of the chocolate from the pan with the edge of the wooden spoon, then set it back down on the stove and turned off the burner. “I’m good, actually.” He picked up a mug and pivoted, offering it to Sam with a smile which, hopefully, did not look as shy as it felt. “I feel like I—”

His breath caught as Sam, eyes intent, stepped forward and took the mug from his hand.

“—like I belong, like I have a purpose here—”

Sam set the mug on the counter behind Bucky, crowding in close.

“Sam?”

Sam’s hands were warm from the mug as they wrapped around Bucky’s cheeks, his mouth hot when it pressed against him. Bucky leaned into the kiss, opening and smiling, both at once, stepping into Sam’s space, making himself available.
It felt *right*, kissing Sam in the kitchen at midnight; felt right in some way that Bucky couldn’t define. It felt *familiar*, and after a moment, he realized that he used to do this with Gwen, long ago when both of them were smaller and younger and infinitely stupider. It was different, now, with Sam, but it was also the same, and something warm curled and turned over in Bucky’s stomach at the idea of doing this again, with both of them, again and again and _again_. For years. _Forever_, maybe.

He was gasping by the time the kiss ended, and in a good way.

Sam’s forehead cool and broad when he pressed it against Bucky’s. “You do,” Sam said, staring into Bucky’s eyes. “You have a purpose here, and you _would_ anyway, never doubt it—”

“I know.” Bucky felt his hands flex, and, deliberately, set them at Sam’s waist. An exploration; a proposal. “I don’t. But...”

“I’m like you,” he said, searching for words, leaning his forehead against Sam’s shoulder even though they were basically the same height, “and I’m like Gwen. I don’t... I don’t _settle_. For being adequate.”

He pulled back and smiled, and even if it was mostly the new smile, the one that came from a monster learning to be a person, there was still a little bit of it, just a tad, of the Old Bucky to it: Old Bucky, who had been a person discovering he could be a monster. “Someday,” he said calmly, “there’s gonna be something, some threat that needs the Winter Soldier. And you’re gonna come for me, and I’m gonna be there, and I’m gonna fit with you two like destiny herself ordained it. But I like the idea...”

He broke away, picking up hot chocolate mugs again.

“...I like the idea of fitting in _before_ that, too. Of being part of a whole. And like I said...” Bucky passed Sam’s mug back over, then, turning, extended the other towards Gwen, who was leaning against the wall in the entry of the kitchen. “I’m like you: I’m not willing to settle.”

Gwen came forward—flower-patterned satin robe, floor-length and gorgeous, he _knew_ she would have something fancy—and took the mug of chocolate from his hand. Sam kissed her—she kissed him back—and Bucky smiled. He pulled out bread and deli meats for sandwiches, considered starting a pot of soup but rejected it.

After all, they would surely be going back to bed, soon, anyway.
AUTHOR'S NOTES

Holy shit, y’all! This was… a lot.

This Bang has been an amazing experience, first of all. I really enjoyed it, and I definitely recommend Bangs in the future, even if you’re not sure whether you want to participate. The **Stucky Big Bang Slack Channel** was super-supportive, and I owe them a HUGE debt for all their
There are a couple shout-outs that go here to particular folks in the channel. Bear in mind as I make these that I couldn’t possibly thank everyone who helped me out, so I’m erring on the side of only pulling a few names, but seriously, everyone was so wonderful!

Drowningbydegrees, whose SBB completely murders me, went above and beyond the call of duty even if duty were a concept which applies here, which it does not. She helped me work through my wibbles about the triangle forming up patiently and with very good sense. Go read her fic, it’s amazing.

TetrodetoxinB, Newsby, and SoftObsidian were probably the ones who gave me the most handholding and help? There was a lot of it, but I think those were the most consistently there. There were many, many others, too many to name, but Jude (my porn buddy!), BrideOfQuiet, the fabulous ICouldDoThisAllDay who wrote not one but TWO SBB fics, Scooty (I swear I’m gonna watch that movie because of you), Bab5Mom, TheSheDevil, ObsessiveReader, Cee, Assemblingmemories, 743ish, Queenoftherandomword... The SBB folks were amazing. Also, you should go read all of their fics.

And then there’s TJ. TJ, who probably read through that list and thought I forgot him, because he doesn’t understand just how much difference he’s made in my life. TJ, who drastically improved my ability to write Gwen going way too fast with Sam. TJ, who would alone be worth the effort of writing this fic.

I’ll see you soon, baby. *blows a kiss*

I also have to thank my artists! Esael and Mamadonovan both created absolutely beautifu work for me. I was completely blown away that Esael picked my summary (because I had already been drooling over her work), I was blown away again when Mamadonovan did (because holy crap, really?!), and I am so, so grateful both for the opportunity to work with them and for the beautiful things they made me.

My next big credit goes to Betas! Buhfly was the primary beta, with Cluegirl raising insightful questions like the one about why the heck Gwen totally forgot all about Bucky during basic (um... oops?). This fic is absolutely better because of them, and I’m deeply grateful for tall of the help they have given me. *hugs like crazy*

Inspiration also came from Cluegirl, whose fic Drunk a Lot of Drink Me, along with Manibear’s remix of the same fic, got me started on a two-day genderbender spree which left my mind spinning. I’m also going to credit SilverInk’s beautiful Femme!Bucky art which she drew me last year, which gave my spin another push.

And, lastly, the generalized friends and family support. Thank you to Mom, who has graciously responded to my writing with enthusiasm and a desire to read more, rather than being appalled (I love you, Mom!!!) To Gryphye, Florianna, Foolishquestions, Sabremom, Boogiewoogiebuglegal, FeelingsinWinter, Valmasy, and others who have liked my writing posts, talked headcanons with me, or just sent me pretty pictures of shirtless Steve along the way. And to Subversive cynic, who is, as always, in a class by herself.
Tony Stark was the kind of guy who had about fifteen different projects going at once. Minimum. Probably more like fifty than fifteen.

It was easier than holding still.

It was a lot easier than being alone with his thoughts.

So he had the car in his hands—blown engine gasket; tricky; could’ve dumped the whole thing, of course, but more fun to repair it, even if the classic value of the car would tank because he had to machine the parts they didn’t make anymore—and he had the code on his lips—“If clause, if program ‘ninjaseeker’ returns value greater than zero...”—and he had the third problem, then one in his brain, turning over in the background.

The third problem was Bucky.

Tony would say this for him, Barnes was a lot easier to deal with than that sanctimonious bitch he was married to. He had a sense of humor, for one thing, although it was buried under a quiet exterior Tony found disconcerting when he looked at it too long. Which he avoided doing, because why upset the apple cart? He also had a sort of pragmatic, solve-the-problem-with-things-not-ideas approach which frankly came as a relief. He should have been just as lost and old-timey as the Angel, but he wasn’t.

He even liked Tony’s music.

And, okay, so Tony had noticed the rear view as the guy walked away more often than he hadn’t; looking wasn’t cheating, and it wasn’t like he was ever going to say anything to him.

But lately, the rear view had been pissing Tony off, because lately Tony hadn’t been able to focus on the admittedly-delicious-looking ass. Instead, he found himself looking at the shoulders, the left shoulder, which Bucky had, more and more often, been rubbing in pain.

Tony pulled out the offending gaskethead on the engine with a satisfied sigh as JARVIS compiled the code.

It wasn’t like he hadn’t thought about it; the guy had a mechanical arm, and Tony wasn’t dead, of course he had thought about it. It was just that there were only two sources of information on the Arm, and Tony had never been willing to delve too deeply into either one. The first source was Barnes himself, who would most likely be laconic at best and defensive at worst if Tony asked about it. The second source was the info-dump Black Widow had uploaded onto the net, and it wasn’t like Tony wasn’t going through it. He was; in fact, he had a whole team of people whose jobs it was to do just that. But they were all focused on whatever projects were current at the time of the upload—because now was more important than fifty years ago, thanks—and Barnes was not, by any definition of the word, a current project. So it was pretty clear that team was never going to get to the Arm.

Tony tapped his fingers against the top of the gasket and thought. *Barnes hasn’t asked you to look into it,* he reminded himself, *people rarely are grateful when you meddle in their business...*

But on the other hand, what if Barnes just didn’t want to complain?

Tony twitched his mouth back and forth, and decided. “JARVIS,” he ordered, “Search the
Hyradump for me. Pull any files containing Barnes’ name or aliases, particularly if they’re older than, oh…” The Arm probably took a lot of damage, they’d repair and replace it more often than you’d think, newer date was better but best to limit them dataset— “Older than fifteen years,” he decided.

That should do it.

And even if they didn’t find the blueprints for the Arm, they might find some interesting stuff about the Soldier’s former missions.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!