The Truth May Vary

by mugwort_and_myrrh

Summary

“What is the music?” Steve asks.

“That? Oh, just the warp and weft of Creation as it births itself, moment by moment,” the pale man says, cocks his head at Steve and smiles a crooked little half-smile, and—

“Teach me,” Steve says, and the man grins.

An urban historical fantasy AU in which Steve Rogers’ Da is an immortal sorcerer from another world. This changes some things some things a Hell of a lot, and some things not at all.

Or: sorcery, sex, soldiering, spy craft and shapeshifting.

Notes
This is a complete work, and I'm roughly 85% of the way through the editing process. My plan is to update once a week, Wednesday-Thursday-ish (depending on my work roster and your timezone).

Much love and waves of adulation to my alpha and beta readers, who have dealt with me dropping stream-of-consciousness lunacy on them at all hours of the day and night, corrected my grammar, and reminded me how magical and intelligent I am when I started to freak out about posting this. Liz, Chantelle, Jacqui and Julie: Actual Goddesses.

Without any further ado...
On the day the Army form letter finally comes in the post and Sarah Rogers learns she's a widow, she takes off her wedding band, digs out the last of the family silver and all of her carefully hoarded wages from her housekeeping jobs, the very end of the cash bonus laid aside from Joe’s last job at the shipyard, and slips it all into a pillowcase. Then she goes down to a shipping agent at the harbour and pays for her passage to America. Single berth, one way.

And then she takes what's left of the cash, goes to the Stag and Finch—the barkeep was friends with her father, God rest him, and he'll look the other way where most places wouldn't, not from a single woman drinking unattended in the middle of the day—and proceeds to drink as much gin as her tiny frame can hold. It's a lot.

He didn't rate a telegram, not her Joseph. He'd only been a private. She'd been a widow for a month and not known it. Well, she'd known it—she'd had that ugly feeling in her gut for a long time, that feeling her fae grandmother would have called the Sight—but now she officially knew it. Her Joe is gone, blood and bone poured out into some Godforsaken muddy trench in fecking France, and so much for that.

They've been married for four years but only together for one before he marched off to the War, so her grief is a tangled thing, full of frustration and disappointment and confusion and guilt that she's not hurting more, because it was starting to feel like she scarcely knew him anymore.

When the cash runs out midafternoon she pushes back from her table in the back of the pub. Jams the heels of her palms into her eye sockets to shove back the tears that are weighing there but not falling, then pulls the pins out from her hair in the front where she's been tugging at it and briskly pins it back again, as neat as she can with trembling hands. She's about to rise, make her way home, try to eat some of the bread left in the cupboard and see if she can get some sleep, when the chair next to hers is pulled out and a man sits.

He's a tall dark stranger: six feet high and lean, pitch black hair cut neat and smoothed back framing a pale face. Elegant features. Uniform looks—very official; military certainly but not any unit she's seen hide nor hair of before, green and black with little gold trimmings, neat as a pin. His eyes are as green as grass that hasn't seen sunlight in a few days, and he's studying her like she's done something fascinating.

They stare at each other openly for a few moments. Then Sarah says, "Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon," he answers, and his voice is soft, just the lightest trace of an accent but nothing strong enough to pin down anywhere—he could be English, could be from further afield, could be a local lad who's been away for too long. "What are you drinking, and can I buy you one?"

Sarah stares at him again, answers slow: "Have we met?"

"Do we need to have met before? We're meeting now, aren't we?" he asks, head cocked like it's a genuine question.

She studies him a little longer. He's bold as brass, but then, so is she. "Gin," she says. "And I'm Sarah."

"All right here, Mrs Rogers?" comes from behind, and Sarah half-turns: it's Henry, the barkeep, one big hand gripping the back of a chair like he's thinking about swinging it. Ready to defend her
honour. He's a good man, and even past the dour fecking veil of widowhood and gin she loves him for it, so when she answers it's gentle.

"I'm Widow Rogers now, Henry," she says, and his face falls—he must have known, when she'd come in white with misery and started drinking him dry, but he'd not asked and hearing her say it aloud makes it real. Real for the both of them, and even as his face falls she can feel her spine straighten and a spark of warmth flicker deep in her gut where only the dull weight of knowledge has rested for the last month. "Thank you, but all's well. This is my Joseph's cousin."

"Laurie," the man says, standing and putting his hand out to shake, and suddenly there's a lilt in his voice that's as much a part of this landscape as the hills, like he's grown up two streets over from where they are now. And isn't that interesting.

They shake. Henry says, "I'm so sorry, Mrs—Sarah. About your Joe. He was a good man."

"He was," Sarah agrees, and then Laurie—if that's his name, if it's not as much a lie as the accent—is pushing a bank note into Henry's hands and asking him to keep the drinks coming.

By the time the sun sets she is out the other side of drunk and into some altered state where everything seems very clear and real and vivid, all the colours crisp and edges defined. Laurie the cousin, Laurie the tall dark stranger, has kept her glass full but also got a hot meal into her—sausage and mash, the first sausages she's seen in a while, and only God knows what meat's in them but Sarah is just fine not knowing, thank you kindly—and asked her a hundred questions about her life and her family and her work, told her stories from his own work.

From the sounds of it, he's been away in the War, on the front lines or close to them—his weariness and cynicism is thick enough to cut in the air—but reading between the lines she's quite sure he's not so much a soldier as a spy. Which would explain why she doesn't recognise any of the insignia on his uniform—certainly the Crown has eyes all over Ireland, but none of them dress in uniform—but when she asks what he's doing here he is opaque, smiling, tells her, "At the present, I'm drinking terrible gin with a beautiful woman," and he'll say no more.

He thinks she's beautiful.

He watches her like she's done something remarkable. She's no idea what that remarkable thing might be.

She lets him walk her home, lets him walk her up to the front door of her tenement building, lets him walk her up the stairs inside until they reach the door of her room, tucked away from the watching eyes of the neighbourhood gossips. Then she pulls him down by the collar of his coat and kisses him thoroughly and lets him come inside.

They are naked on her bed, slick with sweat and kissing, when he stops, his hand on her belly to keep her from shifting that last inch back and taking his cock into her. "Wait," he says, and she's smug as a cat with cream at the ragged edges of his voice, how hunger and pleasure have stripped his cultivated smoothness away. She rolls her hips so the dripping head of his prick rubs against the soft wet folds of her centre, and he hisses and then grabs her by the hip to still her. "Wait," he says again, laughing. "Do we need to use some... prophylactic?"

He'd struggled with the word for a moment, and she wonders for a heartbeat if English maybe wasn't his first language after all, but then his other hand comes up to press his thumb gently just above the hood of her pearl and she gasps and ruts into his hand. "No," she moans, forces herself to still so she can look him in the eyes: "No, I don't... I had the mumps, when I was a child. I've never kindled, and not for want of trying."
He studies her for a moment, and then he says, simply, "Well then," and nudges her hips back even as he's rolling his up, and she reaches down and presses with her fingertips until—yes, just so—sliding heat and the sweet stretch and—and pleasure spilling like honey from the bowl of her pelvis until—

When she wakes midway through the next morning he is gone. Breakfast is sitting on her counter, still hot—toast and butter, a boiled egg, nettle tea steeped just how she likes it and sweetened with honey. Next to the plate is the little notebook where she jots down her household accounts, open to a fresh page. On top sits a metal brooch, bronze, a stylised falcon with knot work in its wings. She picks up the pin, turns the book so she can read what he's written:

*Flags, flax, fodder, and Frigga. My thanks for the company.*

Beneath that, a scribble that might be a signature or a bind rune.

She rests her fingertips against that mark, feels the spark of her Sight pulsing warm and liquid low in her belly, and wonders.

*******

Six weeks later she is throwing up off the starboard railing of the *Western Hope*, a week out from Belfast and a week out from New York—suspended between the worlds, between past and present, and between up and down if her wretched stomach is to be believed. She heaves, gasps, spits until the worst of the bile is out of her mouth, straightens up and swabs at her lips with her handkerchief. Turns to the woman at her elbow—she's come to stand just there while Sarah ejects her breakfast into the sea, has waited there patiently and without flinching. Iron grey hair in a bun, laugh lines carved as deep as the grief lines around her mouth. Perhaps in her forties.

"Can I help you, mother?" Sarah asks, her voice a little ragged with retching. She's met most of the other passengers at this point in the voyage, the quarters as close as they are, but she hasn't met this woman, neat in her dress and old shoes.

"Better to ask if I can help you," she answers, and then: "I'm a midwife. Hedge and surgeon trained. Rosemary O'Neil. How far along are you?"

And Sarah stares at her, and then puts her hand to her belly, to the place where her Sight has been pulsing warm and steady since that night six weeks earlier. Performs the mathematics in her head, how long it's been since she's bled. Closes her other hand tight around her handkerchief, wringing it a little.

Says faintly, "Ahh, Christ."
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Gaelic!

a stór: my treasure
a leanbh: my child

Steve first learns there's something wrong with him when he is four years old.

He knows he was born too early and small and sickly, that his heart isn't right and his lungs aren't right. He knows some days his mother has to carry him up the stairs to their apartment, and sometimes his chest closes up like a vice and he can only breathe in tiny gasps, in sips, and on some days even if he's doing everything right, breathing up like the doctors tell him, he still gets light-headed and tight and fluttery in his chest. He knows he's smaller than other boys, the neighbours, any of the other kids in their neighbourhood.

So he's known since forever that he wasn't right, but to find out that you're really wrong—

How it happens is:

His Mam has her day off work—she's a nurse at the hospital, and she works most days and some evenings, makes sick people better and helps girls who are in trouble, though Steve isn't supposed to tell people about that last part—but it's her day off, and a sunny day, and beyond the smut of the factories they can see bright blue sky. And so she packs them a lunch—some sandwiches and an apple—and they get on the bus and then the train and go to the park, throw an old blanket on the ground and lie around finding shapes in the clouds and slowly eating the bag of sweets she's bought for them.

After lunch his Mam pulls the dime novel she's been reading out of the lunch pail and rolls onto her belly, kicks her feet in the air and starts reading. She looks as pretty and relaxed as she ever does, without the grey that blooms under her skin when she's been at work all day—and of course she's always pretty, she's his Mam, she's the prettiest lady in the world, but the sunlight and the soft way she's wearing her hair today are extra nice, so he pulls out his sheaf of paper stubs and pencil and draws her, and then after he's done that he starts drawing the trees dotted around them in the park.

Steve’s a city boy, and he's always drawn his trees like rough stems with puffy clouds mounted on the top, so now he's drawing these ones, real ones, he's needing to study real close to get 'em right. Some are tall and straight, and some are curvy and soft, and some have branches that split in sharp lines and others look messier, wilder, and they all have leaves that are different shapes. And he can't see them so good from where he is—his eyes don't work right either, ain't that a kick in the pants—so he gets up and moves from tree to tree and watches and learns ‘em: the patterns in their bark and the dances of their leaves.

He's standing at the base of a huge old tree, all dark and twisty bark and softly in-out curving leaves, when he realises that the quiet background hum of music that he hears in the streets of Brooklyn has changed, is different: that the tune’s the same, but there's notes in there now like—bells? Chimes? And a rippling sound that makes him think of sunlight moving over water, and a very deep tone that
he feels in his belly more than hears, that rumbles up and down slow as molasses, and he listens closer and figures that the deep tone is coming from the tree.

So he listens to the tree-song, learns its slow and stately ups and downs, and when he goes on to the next tree—it's different again, tall and skinny, and even a city boy like him can see the needles and figure it must be a pine—but as he stands under this tree and listens, he can still hear the tree-song. But it's different, lighter and more fluid and—does each tree have a different song? He stops, head cocked, one hand pressed against the pine tree's bark, closes his eyes and listens close.

And he must have been there for a while listening because the next thing he knows his Mam's crouching down next to him asking, "Stevie?"

And he opens his eyes and turns to her, and she's looking at him all soft and puzzled and just the tiniest bit frightened, so he smiles and puts his hand on her face and says, "I'm just listening to the music, Mam."

"What music is that, a stór?"

"The world music. And the tree-song. I didn't know different trees have different songs—or, the same song? But not just the same: more bouncy," he explains, or tries to explain, but she's just looking more and more lost and unhappy. When they have to go to the hospital she gets the same look on her face, pinched and helpless but like she's trying to be brave for him. She shakes her head.

"I don't hear any music, Stevie," she says. "Do you mean the sounds the trees make? The rustle and hum of the wind in the branches?"

"No, I mean the song," he says, and starts to hum along. His voice doesn't go deep enough, so he's an octave or two up from the pitch of the tree-song but he does his best to match it. But his mother just shakes her head again.

"I can't hear it, a leanbh," she says. Reaches out to take his hand where it's resting against the tree and hold it cupped between her palms. "Do you think—are you telling me a story?"

Sometimes they tell each other stories before Steve goes to bed—she might read to him, from her book of fairy tales or Bible stories or poetry, but often they just make up a story between them, telling it piece by piece to one another. But—"No, Mam. I hear it. It's beautiful," Steve tells her, and she looks crushed.

He learns real quick not to try and talk to people about the music—

—Now that he knows to listen for it, he hears it everywhere. Brooklyn has its song, traffic and mechanics and the moan of the ocean and flickering traces of tunes from all over the world, Italian and Irish and Jewish, and it sounds like home. People have their own songs, and special buildings. Dogs have a song, and it's similar with all the dogs he meets, only little differences. And their song is different from the music of cats, which is spiky and silky by turns—

—All the time world is singing to him now, loud enough that sometimes he can’t even hear when folks are talking to him. But he can’t talk to people about it, because no one knows what he's talking about, no one else can hear it, and the looks that they give him—

They look at him like when he gets real sick—not his Mam, but the some of the doctors, or the neighbours if they've come to help—like they're awful sad for him, but also a little frightened of him, as if his wrongness might be catching. Like he might be something nasty they found on the bottom of their shoe. So there's something wrong with him, and he keeps his mouth shut about it, but he can't
unhear the music: it creeps into him body and soul, waking and sleeping, even if he tries to plug up
his ears. The wrong is inside of him.

*******

When he's five, he gets strep throat that turns into scarlet fever and he almost dies, is in the hospital
for over a month. For a week there when he's brushing elbows with Death, his mother just doesn't go
home: works and eats at the hospital, prays and sleeps at his bedside, gives herself a bird-bath at a
sink and puts on a fresh uniform that one of her friends has washed for her and repeats day after day,
getting paler and thinner like sheets that have been washed too many times. Like you can see right
through them.

And on one of those nights, his temperature soars into the 100s and stays there, and he runs with
sweat and then shudders with cold and then burns so hot he's scalding, again and again in waves. His
Mam is fast asleep in her chair, her forehead against Steve's hip on the bed and the damp washcloth
still in her hand, and she’s beautiful even grey with grief and the grinding terror of sickness, day after
day. So she's asleep when the doctor who isn't a doctor comes to him.

He's tall and lean and angular, pitch black hair and half-moon glasses over eyes as green as the ocean
on a clear day, and his suit is black and tailored under his coat. A stethoscope juts from one pocket.
His feet make no sound as he steps up to Steve's bedside, and Steve's been here long enough that
he's met all the doctors by now—but he's never seen this one before.

The doctor who isn't a doctor stands at his bedside for a long time, silent, looking at him and at his
mother, and his face is studiously neutral—the kind of face doctors only make when they have bad
news. “Sir?” Steve asks, breaks the silence, and his voice comes out stuttery and thin as a length of
spider silk.

The doctor’s gaze snaps to his. He studies Steve, then says, “You’re not planning to die, are you?”

“I’m trying not to,” Steve says, and his teeth are chattering: another wave of shaking is coming, he
can feel the cold crawling across his skin and aching down into his bones.

“Try harder,” the doctor says. “Or just die, but either way get on with it.”

“Only God knows when we have to die,” Steve says, grits out through his clattering teeth, and looks
to his mother, his first teacher in all things about God and Jesus, Mary and the Saints and the fairies
in the hills—but she's still fast asleep, hasn't stirred at all, and Steve frowns, reaches out to touch her
hair—but the doctor is talking again:

“How does your kind get anything done?” he asks, with a little head tilt. “Who would begin any
great work, knowing you'll die and leave it half undone? You are all so brittle, undone by the
slightest ill favour, and I'll never understand why you’d choose a mortal life.” Then he brings his
hands up, holds them cupped, stares into them, and—“Nevertheless,” he says, and brings his hands
down, presses one to Steve's forehead and one over his heart, and the lance of cold that arcs through
him from head to chest is like a spear of ice. Steve gasps, writhes, freezes rigid, unable to move or
speak.

“I've no gift for healing,” the doctor says, and what the Hell kind of doctor says something like that,
does something like—“But I can work with ice and cold, and if all that's needed is this, then... Then
you'll not die tonight."

He's speaking from the bottom of a well, he's speaking through a splintering white mist, and then the mist rises into a howling wind, all shards of ice and broken glass cutting and cutting until Steve lets go.

When he wakes—

When he wakes it is halfway through the next day, and his fever has broken. He's hollowed out and thick with sleep, can only keep his eyes open for a few mouthfuls of water and broth. He's kissed Death on the fingertips but come away, and his fever never spikes again.

When he asks the next day about the doctor who'd come to him in the night, they tell him—they tell him he was dreaming. They tell him he was feverish, that he was hallucinating. Steve learns to stop asking.

That is the first time he meets the tall man, the pale man. It's not the last time he almost dies: that happens twice more before he turns eight, which is when he meets Bucky Barnes.

*******

The first time Steve meets Bucky Barnes, Steve's curled up on the packed dirt in the alley behind O'Brien's butcher shop, and the Anderson brothers are kicking the Christ out of him.

He'll be the first to admit that he started it. Dennis Anderson has a face made for punching, and if the Lord's made it so then who is Steve to argue with that? But at some point after that first punch and the shoving and yelling that followed his brothers join the fight and the whole mess starts getting messier and messier.

His vision is blinking red and white and black with bright shards of pain—Mo Anderson is driving his toes into his left kidney, again and again, thank God they're all in bare feet—when he hears a war cry ringing above the brothers' shouting, and then there's scuffling and shoving, the dull thud of punches landing, and one fierce voice chanting: "Clear out, go on! Push off, ya mooks!" And then Steve shoves his way back up to his feet in time to see the brothers disappearing around the corner, and the new boy turns back to face him.

His dark hair is sticking up in all directions. His collar is torn and his nose is bleeding. His song is bright and clear, an Irish ballad if it were being played by a brassy big band. He looks wildly cheerful.

"You okay, kid?" he asks.

Steve—works at it. Doesn't grit his teeth. *Kid.* God Almighty. He's small for his age, still hasn't hit a growth spurt, but *kid*?

"I'm fine," he snarls. "I had him on the ropes, until his jerk brothers jumped in. And I'm eight."

The boy's grin slips a bit. "Okay," he says, after a heartbeat pause. "I'm nine. Guess I figured... You're little, anyway." He sticks his hand out to shake. "I'm Bucky."

Steve shakes his hand. His hand's trembling hard but Bucky doesn't blink—everything's starting to
hurt. He can still feel toes in his kidneys. "Steve Rogers. Thanks, anyway."

The grin returns, lopsided. "What were you doing anyway, scrapping with that pack of twerps?"

Steve’s hands ache—they've curled into fists at his sides. "Dennis Anderson put a rock through old Mrs Leary's window," he says. "I was letting him know what I thought about it."

"But who goes and hits a fella—" and then Bucky breaks off, hesitates a moment, brings a hand up to sketch a height on an imaginary growth chart in the air. Lets his hand sit at about collarbone height on himself.

The Hell with that. "I hit him," Steve snaps. And Bucky blinks at him, rocks on his heels, shakes his head and starts grinning again.

"You... Christ. I guess it all made sense at the time. Come on," and he steps forward and goes to take his arm, like he’s planning to carry Steve home like broken luggage. Steve shrugs him off and then staggers sideways. Bucky puts his fists on his hips. "You really wanna walk it off by yourself? Come on, pal, lemme help you. I can see you swallowing blood over there. You know you'll get sick if you keep that up?"

Damn. Steve spits the next mouthful of blood and bares his red-stained teeth at Bucky. He doesn't flinch. "Bite your tongue?" Bucky asks brightly.

"Yeah." Steve lets him take his arm and sling it over his shoulder so Bucky's taking some of his weight. They make it out to the mouth of the alley and onto the street. The sun is cutting in hard from the west, low in the sky, so everything is made up of long shadows with splashes of dappling and red tones. It's the closest this street has come to looking pretty in a long time and Steve wonders how to catch it on paper, the long lines and deep cut angles of shadow shifting perspective. Bucky stops and looks both ways.

"You're gonna have to tell me where to from here, okay? I'll be the gas, but you've gotta steer."

"Left," Steve says, and then: "We're going to Mrs Leary's first."

"What?" His voice arcs up. "Come on, kid—Rogers—you look like what the cat dragged in."

"And Mrs Leary is sixty-two years old and some jerk just put a rock through her window. If you don't wanna go there it's fine, I'll be fine—"

"Jesus, are you always like this?" Bucky asks, but there's laughter in his voice and they're walking again, lockstep and easy like they've done this before.

"Only on days when the sun’s come up from the east," Steve answers, and Bucky laughs out loud, and Stevie's a bit lightheaded and everything hurts like Hell but somehow this feels easy, feels good.

And then Bucky crawls around on Mrs Leary's floor with a brush and shovel cleaning up glass, and Mrs Leary—who’s mad as a sack of cats but was a nurse matron in the Great War, has lots of time for Steve and his Mam—swabs the blood off Steve's face and gives them both hard candies. And then they find out Steve lives only two streets over from the apartment where the Barnes family have just moved in.

And by the time the sun has set and Steve’s staggered in his front door—and thank God his Mam's pulling the late shift at the hospital, so he's got time to clean himself up, doesn't have to explain the dirty footprints on his white shirt—by the time they part ways Bucky's already making plans for when they meet up tomorrow. And Steve doesn't really understand how it's happened, but—he's got
When he's nine he meets the pale man again. This time, he's not dying.

He's playing hide and seek.

Making friends with Bucky opened doors in places he wasn't expecting. He's always been the weird kid, the sickly kid, the mouthy little shit who gets in fights over stuff that’s none of his business.

Old ladies like him just fine, try and fatten him up. The nurses at the hospital like him, for his mother's sake and because he always draws for them, makes 'em bunches of flowers out of scrap paper when he’s stuck there with his chest or his heart playing up. Father Michael at Queen of All Saints likes him, talks him through the pronunciation and meaning of the Latin words of the prayers after he's done in confession—bless me, Father, wrath again.

But he's not really had friends his own age before now, can't keep up in games of chase or kickball or baseball, gets lost in group conversations—he loses the thread of the words, starts hearing everyone's music instead, the way their different tunes overlap and synchronise or jar and fall into discord.

He's a weird kid. The weird kid in hand-me-down clothes that are too big for him, the weird kid who goes grey and falls into wheezing whenever the game starts getting good. So he hasn't had friends before: and now, by the grace of God and one JB Barnes, he does.

He still can't keep up in every game. He still can't play chase. He's got his notebook and stub of pencil for those times—sketches the shapes of the city, buildings and passers-by and pigeons while he waits for the others to burn out whatever demons they've gotta exorcise with running and shrieking. But when he can play—he referees and score keeps in baseball games, comes up with strategy in Cowboys and Indians. And he's the reigning world champion at hide and seek.

Which is how he's ended up in a musty wooden netherworld under the steps leading up to the apartments on Pacific Street. It's dark and hot and mouldy enough that it's probably a bad idea, starting to make his chest feel a little tight and stifled, but it's the best hiding spot he's found since that time he convinced a quintet of nuns to let him hide under their bunched skirts, so he's not moving until it's situation critical or until he wins this round.

So he's sitting on his heels with his face close to the weathered gap between wooden boards watching the street, trying to follow the progress of the game—but he hasn't seen anyone in a while, he's close to out-of-bounds and this is a really good hiding place, so maybe they can't find him, maybe they've forgotten he's here—when there's footsteps right next to him and a man stops in the street, turns and puts his back to the wood and sits, very casual, legs crossed and stretched out like he's at a picnic, leaning back against the boards. He's close enough Steve could fix his collar, if he sticks a finger out between the wooden boards.

It's a Hell of a weird place to sit.

Steve's frozen, heart skittering unevenly and his skin feeling tight. He's got a love-hate relationship with this part of hide-and-seek, the bitter tang that fills your mouth when you're a hair's breadth from being caught—and he's watching, wondering, because that's a Hell of a weird place to sit, with his
feet sticking out across the width of the sidewalk and wearing—well, Steve can't exactly see what the fella’s wearing, can only catch narrow glimpses but it looks like nice duds, black and clean and crisp. Not like he's homeless or something. And the people walking by: Steve watches, waits for someone to trip or say something but it doesn't happen. They step over his crossed calves without breaking stride and keep moving, don't look down or glance this way at all.

So, it's weird. So, Steve lets his eyes lull to half-closed—he can't trust 'em anyway, not even to see colours right—and listens, close and intent. And what he hears is—

He hears a quicksilver song, flowing and dappling and light and scattered with hissing spits, like a match catching. It’s a lie: he listens closer, hears the percussion under that, and it’s echoing and slow, the groaning crack of ice shifting in a glacier, deliberate as a tiger padding after prey. And the whole thing—he’s never heard anything like it before—the whole song is swaddled somehow, dampened and dimmed under a veil of white noise like when the wireless is tuned between stations, and he’s trying to work out what that means, how that could be, when—

When the man speaks: “It’s a good hiding place.”

Steve jumps, looks around like some kind of idiot. Obviously he’s talking to him. There’s no one else close to hand. It’s just it's a violation of the hide-and-seek code, and also—also, it is a really good hiding place. How's this guy made him?

“Not so good, I think, as mine,” the guy says, and Steve blinks, looks around again, looks closer. This guy, he’s not... not hidden at all; he’s in the middle of a city sidewalk, he’s in plain sight, but no one’s cursing at him or asking if he needs help or acknowledging him in any way. Steve watches the next handful of pedestrians very closely: they aren’t seeing him. They aren’t seeing the tall pale man sitting in the guts of Brooklyn’s foot traffic, as self-assured as a king on a throne.

They can't see him.

“How are you doing that?” Steve blurts out, demands: he’s listening fiercely, trying to understand the dynamics of this guy’s song and the way it’s being muffled, hidden away—it’s gotta be the white noise layer, like icing sugar dusted over a cake. His head is starting fuzz and ache, listening to it so closely. He rubs at his hairline, concentrates.

“How do you think I’m doing it?” the pale man asks, and Steve lets his head loll forward against the wood siding, feels like his whole upper body now is fuzzing and aching and humming with that white noise hiss.

“I… You’re making it, somehow. That white noise,” Steve says. Sounds like he’s talking from the bottom of a well, hollow and far-off. “It’s muffling your song, making it so people can’t hear you, see you. It—how are you doing that?”

“Talent,” the man says, and through the gap in the wood Steve can see him examining his fingernails. “And several centuries of practice. Here,” and he turns a little, grabs the wooden slat next to Steve’s head and pulls, tears the whole board out from its fixing with about as much effort as pulling a sticky curtain across a window. He drops the board, stands up and pulls another out with about as much effort, and Steve’s suddenly in daylight again, blinking into the gap where solid wooden construction oughta be. And still absolutely no one is looking: the passers-by just keep passing by, don’t even look up from their commutes home.

“Here,” the man says, beckoning, “I'll show you.”

Steve’s hands shake as he grabs the edge of the gap, the hole in the side of the steps that wasn’t there
a few heartbeats ago. It’s not a big gap, but it’s bigger than the one he crammed himself through to get in here in the first place and he’s only gotta duck a little to climb back out. Gotta be some advantage to being tiny. He stands in daylight, in middle of the sidewalk next to a couple chunks of discarded lumber. He looks at the world, at the street and passers-by, at the tall pale man standing in their midst, and not a single soul looks back.

The pale man is wearing a long black coat with gold trimmings, and his boots look like leather, dark green and well-made. He’s got pitch black hair, pulled back in a low tail like girls wear it, and when he turns and looks at Steve his eyes are green, light and clear as sunshine through the side of a glass bottle. He looks—

—and Steve’s remembering the smell of sweat and hospital linen, the weight of his Mam’s head resting against his hip, the waves of hot and cold that smashed through him like summer and winter storms warring inside him, shaking until his teeth ached, half-moon glasses and hands like ice—

“You’re the doctor,” he says.

“You remember? I wasn’t sure—your kind seem to recall in only brief snatches, here and gone, all the more when you are small,” the man says.

“I remember,” Steve says, and the words come through lips that are numbed, feel like they’re coming from a million miles out—because he’s asked a dozen times about that night, and everyone’s always insisted it was a fever dream. So one of two things is happening. Either this is real, and the doctor is real and the music is real, and everyone else is dead wrong. Or he’s snapped, gone nutty as a fruitcake for real, bound for Bedlam, and he’s talking to himself in the middle of a sidewalk.

“Here,” the man says, as if they’ve exhausted that topic and need to move on already, and then he throws his arms out and pivots gently across the sidewalk like he’s dancing, a slow and elegant solitary waltz. Pedestrians weave around him without slowing, veering to avoid him but still not blinking or frowning or looking his way. “Do you see?” he asks Steve.

“They’re moving so they don’t run into you, but they can’t see you. How does it work?” Steve asks.

“It’s a trick, of course,” the man says. “This veil dulls some senses, but not others. So their eyes are blind, their ears stopped up—but their proprioception I’ve left intact.”

“Proprioception?”

“The sense of where your body is in a space, and in relationship with your surroundings.”

“Oh, of course,” Steve says, tries for cheeky but just manages baffled. Every question answered just raises more questions—it’s like Sunday school. “But how are you doing it?”

“Can you create a Mona Lisa if you’ve never even seen a lick of paint?” the man asks, and what the Hell kind of—he’s answered a question with a question. This is worse than Sunday school.

“I—no?” Steve says. “It wouldn't be the same, wouldn't be right—”

“Can you build a bridge if you've never learned to count?”

What the—“No,” Steve says. “Not safely, anyway, you need a lot of arithmetic to be an engineer, and—oh.” He stops, stares, claws his hands into his hair. “You mean,” he begins saying, breaks off again, choking. The man watches him, neutral and patient in the way of a cat watching a mouse that it doesn’t plan to eat today.
“You're talking about the music,” Steve breathes.

“You're talking about the music. Which makes sense, given the limits of the human sensory array—but yes.”

“You're working with it. Making art with it? You can hear it, so you can shape it, and from there you can...” Steve trails off. His heart is pattering, rhythm shot to shit, hands numb, breathless—he’s on a ledge looking out over an alien landscape, and it's still good odds that he's crazy but what if he's not, what if he's not—

“What is the music?” Steve asks.

“That? Oh, just the warp and weft of Creation as it births itself, moment by moment,” the pale man says, cocks his head at Steve and smiles a crooked little half-smile, and—

“Teach me,” Steve says, and the man grins.

********

Bucky finds him at sundown, slowly making his way home to his apartment, hungry and sore and dizzy like he's had his bell rung—even though he hasn't been fighting. Even though he's just been sitting quiet, waiting to be found, for—oh, it must have been hours and hours. He's won that round, surely.

“Christ on a bike,” comes from behind him, and then Bucky's grabbing Steve by the elbow and pulling him around, saying, “Rogers, Stevie, where the—heck were you?”

Steve gives him a grin. “Hiding, Buck. Ain't that the point of the exercise?”

“Yeah, but where? We really couldn't find you, and we were all lookin', and calling out for you. It's been hours and hours. You weren't out-of-bounds?”

“Never, Buck.” Steve is a little offended: “I ain't a cheater.” Which, well, is mostly true. He's bent the rules to games before, his Mam's explained to him how sometimes the rules don't really reflect what's kind and fair and right, which is how come she helps young ladies when they get in trouble, even though the rules say she shouldn't. Rules might be set in stone, but people are not. Still and all, he ain't a cheater, especially not today. He's just a better hider than any of them can seek.

“Je—gee, Steve.” Bucky looks around quick; just last week he cussed a good six blocks from home, still came home to his mother standing ready with his toothbrush and a cake of laundry soap. Mrs Barnes has ears everywhere. “You could've come out. I thought you must've had an attack, or got stuck or got hurt or—and it was hours and we still couldn't find you. I even checked back home.”

“Does that mean I won this round?”

Bucky slings an arm round his shoulder and gives him one good shake. “You're a punk,” he says, dropping his voice low at the end of the sentence—punk isn't technically a cuss but it's a slur and Winifred Barnes cannot be appealed to on technicalities.

Steve grins. He can't seem to stop smiling—like he's got a wonderful secret, like when his Mam made Bucky a pie for his birthday but she wanted it to be a surprise. But he doesn't have a secret.
He's just been hiding all afternoon. Didn't talk to anybody interesting, or—he wobbles, feels dizzier for a second. Covers it up and reaches around to poke Bucky in the ribs.

“I think you're saying I won this round,” he says, and Bucky’s growl shifts into a bark of laughter.
Chapter 3

The pale man tells him his name is Ulfadhir. He passes through Steve's life like a hurricane, leaving no trace of himself behind when he goes: just the trail of wreckage where he's been. He can't be predicted, reappearing sometimes after a week, sometimes a month, sometimes three months or more. At times he'll be there for just an hour, and other days they'll while away most of a day, sitting on the roof of Steve's apartment building or winding through back alleyways. He's clever and cold, abrupt to the point of being rude and then mercurial and smiling, alien and amoral, almost certainly crazy. And a sorcerer, and Steve's teacher.

Sorcery is a trick, sleight-of-hand with the matter and bones of Creation, and he teaches it like a game. The first trick he teaches Steve is to veil, the white noise thing he'd done to make himself invisible. Only it's easier by far to make yourself unremarkable, to be so boring that the eye skips right over you.

It's a don't-notice-me veil Steve's using the day he walks into the bakery on Fulton Street and lifts a currant bun from the display behind the counter. They split it between them as they walk away—it's his first real test since he first met Ulfadhir six months earlier, and it's proof. This is real. The glaze is sticky on his fingers, the currants sweet and plump.

It takes him three weeks to scratch together enough change to go back to the store and pay for it properly.

The equal and opposite of a veil is a seeming: making something appear to be what it's not. And they are a Hell of a lot of fun. He draws shadows that writhe and dance against the walls in alleys, conjures an illusion of a calico cat to walk into stores and then vanish whenever the shop owner tries to evict it, only to reappear behind them.

It all comes to him so easy he kind of wonders how he hadn't figured it out before now—the music is the sound of the world taking shape around them, constantly being born, so if he changes the music then the world is born just a little different for it. And yes, his head hurts after a few minutes of it, and he can't hold a veil for more than a few steps, but it's—

It's real. It's real and he's doing it, and he's never felt as solid and squared away in himself as he does when he's humming along with the music and then he just tweaks the tune ever so slightly. Watches the world jump like a record jostling on a gramophone, and then slip into the new melody he's set for it. It's as much of a rush as jumping off a pier or landing a good hit on a bully's face, and leaves the same honest ache in his muscles and bones.

When he's not learning to weave veils or throw seemings, there are other lessons—how to read someone's face, and the language of the body, to recognise lies and truths. At the guts of that is learning to lie himself: words, inflection, face, body. At first that really bugs him, because he knows it's wicked to tell falsehoods, but—

“There's an injunction against killing in this holy text of yours, isn't there?” Ulfadhir asks, digging his fingernails into the skin of an orange. It's summer, the middle of the day, and they're sitting on the fire escape of an apartment building six streets from home—they'd had to use veils to get up here, and Steve's pleasantly sore and tired, dewing with sweat from the sunshine.

“Yes,” he says. “It's in the Commandments. Thou shalt not kill.”

“And yet your kind is forever at war,” Ulfadhir says, gesturing with the orange. Steve can smell the
citrus from here. “It's understood that there is an exception to that commandment: that it is well and
good to kill in defence of your life, or home, or beloveds. Truth?”

“Yes,” Steve says again, slower this time, because they are crossing into grey territory here. Ulfadhir
rips the orange in half, passes a piece to Steve. He can't remember the last time he ate oranges—
they're pricey and hard to find—and there's no point asking Ulfadhir where he got this from. The
man enjoys his secrets. “It’s still—not good, to kill. If it's like that. But it's not wicked either. God can
see into our hearts and understand why we did it.”

“And the same is true of truth and lies,” Ulfadhir says. “You can wound with a truth, ill-timed or ill-
thought; or a lie told sweetly can be a balm. No one accuses the actor or the story-teller of
wickedness, and is what they do not lying in its highest form?”

Steve thinks about this as he gnaws at his half of the orange. It's like eating cool sunlight, sweet and
clean and lush, and there's juice on both his hands and down his chin but he can't bring himself to
care.

He thinks of his mother, the work she does outside of work, her other job. The job that means that
sometimes young ladies appear in their home, sleep on the couch for a few days. The job she does
with Mrs O’Neil the midwife and Dr Sampson from the hospital. The job his Mam doesn't talk about
—just that the girls are in trouble, and they're helping.

He's not silly, and he's not a baby anymore: he knows that as far as young ladies go, in trouble
means pregnant. And he doesn't know how exactly they help—heck, he doesn't need to know—but
he knows they're not in trouble anymore afterwards, and he knows what his Mam and the others are
doing is against the law. And he knows that if she were asked about any of this, his Mam would lie
’til she was blue in the face to keep everyone safe.

So. Maybe some lies aren't so bad.

“But why do I need to learn how?” Steve asks at last.

“Because the tricks I've taught you—seemings and veils—they are the smallest and meanest
expression of the art of deception. A clever lie, well-crafted, is an illusion spun inside a man’s mind.
Master this skill and every door will open for you.”

There are types of lie: white and black, grey and silver, lies by omission and by assumption, lies told
with no words, just quirks of the face and body. He spends a lot of time staring into a mirror making
faces and feeling like a giant twerp.

There's more besides—lessons about history and politics, about how people think and feel and act,
about how to fight. God knows he's been getting in scrapes for years now, so it's not like he doesn't
know how to throw a punch, but—but everything he's been taught in the past came from bigger
people. Mostly Bucky, who's starting to shoot up like a weed and who's learnt some boxing from his
Da and from his uncles—but he fights like a big person, straightforward and blunt and honest, faces
the other guy head on and answers fists with fists.

He still wades into fights when Steve gets in ‘em, all jeering and flying dark hair. He's lost the last of
his baby teeth like that. And God help him but there's something wrong with Steve, because he
thinks Bucky's pretty great all the time but he's flat-out wonderful fighting: bloody-nosed and scuffed
and swearing. Steve could watch Bucky Barnes throw punches all damn day. He's tried getting it
down on paper—the sneering curl to his mouth, the long lines of his arms and chest and thighs—but
his hand and skill just aren't up to the task. And much as he wishes otherwise, they're not up to the
task of fighting like Bucky does either. No amount of wishing is gonna give him another few inches
of reach in his arms.

The kind of fighting Ulfadhir’s teaching him is sneaky and explosive and nasty, gutter fighting that comes in under the guard. There's biting and hair-pulling and groin jabs, eye gouges. Speed, not strength. Leverage, not reach. “This is dirty fighting,” Steve complains, panting and shaking out his hands. They're on the roof of his apartment building, practicing strikes against the throat, and his voice is raw, thirst and a dozen strikes to the soft tissue working against him.

“Yes,” Ulfadhir says blandly, easing out of his half-turned ready stance. “Should I be wasting both our days teaching you to fail? You can always tell a dirty fighter, because he will be the one still standing at the end.”

“But it's cheating,” Steve says. “If you fought like this in a ring you’d be disqualified.”

Ulfadhir cocks his head to the side. “Is there any virtue in agreeing to be confined by the rule of law if that law will only get you killed?” he asks, and then comes in low and fast, the kind of tackle big jerks always want to use, and Steve falls into the rhythm he's learnt: weaves to the side—drops an elbow on the back of his neck—kicks up as they go down—drives his bony ankle up and into Ulfadhir’s groin—

Ulfadhir catches it with his thigh, grins like a feral cat snarling, and then drops and headbutts Steve square in the nose.

It's not hard enough to break cartilage but it's hard enough to sting like Hell and Steve drops and clutches at his nose and hisses, “Shhh—*sugar*.”

“Sugar?” Ulfadhir repeats, baffled, and then his face clears and he dissolves into manic laughter, rolling off of Steve to sit on the tar and gravel rooftop and howl at the sky.

“Son of a bitch,” Steve mutters, holding his nose cupped tenderly. No blood. Still hurts though.

“Does your mother know the breadth and depth of your vocabulary?” Ulfadhir asks brightly, and Steve cringes at the thought of his Mam finding out, and then—

“Here,” Ulfadhir says, reaches over and grabs Steve's nose firmly in a hand that is suddenly colder than a steel post on a winter’s morning, and Steve hisses again for a second at the biting frozen ache of it before half his face goes blessedly numb.

Ulfadhir grabs him by the jaw—his hand skin-warm again, the magic come and gone—tugs so he's looking him in the eye, holds him still. There's a trace of laughter on him but otherwise he's returned to neutral, a still lake in a mountain pass, deep and cool and unaffected by the tides. “In war, the cheaters win,” he tells Steve, and lets that sit for a moment, then taps him on the cheek and says, “Come now, you need to wash down the taste of defeat. What is your fancy today?”

“Lafayette Avenue diner, vanilla milkshakes,” Steve says immediately, because he may not know much but he knows where the best milkshakes in Brooklyn are, and Ulfadhir makes a deep noise of utter disgust but obliges him anyway.

And that night when Bucky comes over so they can do homework and read comics—or Bucky reads ‘em and Steve draws, copies the art and expands on it, illustrates the stories Bucky goes on telling after he's tossed the comic to one side—and Buck asks him where he got his two black eyes, Steve can't tell him. Lets his mouth fall open, takes a half-breath to answer but—but he can't remember.

When Ulfadhir goes, the memories go with him. He's a ghost between hauntings.
So Bucky presses an ink-stained thumb to the black smudge under Steve's left eye and asks, and Steve goes blank, stares for a heartbeat, and then half-smiles and turns away, shrugs, says, “Just some kid. No one we know, I was doing groceries for Mam and I bumped into him and then—” He waves at his face, lets the rest of the lie fill in itself, and Bucky cusses softly.

“You know you're not supposed to get into fights when I'm not there to back you up,” Bucky says, dumping his math textbook and papers onto the scuffed up dining table.

“It's not like I go around seeking out jerks to brawl with,” Steve says, grinning. And honestly it's not like his face even hurts. If anything it feels kind of cold and numb.

And every time Ulfadhir reappears—wanders past him casually on the street, stands waiting on the fire escape across the road, cocks an eyebrow at him from outside the schoolhouse—it's like a box opens inside Steve's head, and all their past encounters pop out whole and intact, and they take up where they left off like the conversation was just paused while Steve walked into another room. And every time Ulfadhir leaves, that box closes up again, and Steve—well, he's always been absent-minded. He gets caught up sometimes, drawing or reading a book, listening to the radio or to the world-music. It's no big deal that he loses an hour or so here and there.

And when he's eleven he finally gets together the chance and the gumption and the cunning to ask, “Why don't I remember you when you aren't here?”

They're sitting in Prospect Park, cross-legged in the grass and facing each other directly—Ulfadhir's got him practicing seemings, making them move in more sophisticated ways, so they've both got other people's faces on—the trick is to line up the movements of the illusion’s mouth with the movements of your own mouth when you talk, and it is tricky, and maybe it's because he's concentrating so hard on getting that mouth right that the question finally slips out of him, or maybe it's because they're talking but it isn't really Ulfadhir's face he's looking at. He's wearing the face of the bus driver who'd brought them here. Steve looks like Danny Francis from school. At any rate: “Is it magic? It's some kind of working, right? Like in the fairy tales from the old country.”

Ulfadhir watches him for a long moment, head lightly cocked. It's strange, a little alien, seeing his expressions and body language dancing over a stranger’s face. At last he says, “Your mother's people would call it a geas.”

“That's—” Steve remembers the fat old book of fairy stories his mother used to read to him, before bed. The cover faded and a little water damaged, pages soft at the edges with wear and love. It had come with her from Ireland, been hers as a girl. “That's like a curse? It forces you to—do certain things, or not do other things?”

“It's a compulsion. In this case, a binding.”

“Why?” Steve asks, and Ulfadhir reaches over and pokes him in the forehead. His Danny-face illusion melts away, and Steve realises his mouth hasn't been working right for at least the last minute.

“Concentrate,” Ulfadhir chides, and Steve grits his teeth and closes his eyes, pulls the illusion together again, hums a few bars of the song and pushes until he feels it snap into place around his face again. Ulfadhir sits back, a look of quiet satisfaction crossing his blunt-featured stranger’s face. “As to why: because you can't cut yourself on a knife that you can't reach.”

“I don't understand.” Steve says, slowly, working on making sure his mouth and eyebrows and jaw are all moving like they should be, holding the image steady in his mind’s eye.
“What more is forgotten? Beyond the delight of my company,” Ulfadhir says, and Steve frowns, almost rubs at his forehead but stops himself just shy: touch breaks illusions, is one of the only sure fires to keep from being tricked by ‘em. Ulfadhir has also been teaching him logic, the basics of logical thought, and this piecing together of the answers is—

Oh. Of course.

“I forget sorcery,” Steve says. “How to do workings, and veils, and everything.” He stops, takes a breath, lets the illusion catch up with his mouth, his racing thoughts. “Because if I can’t remember then I can’t do anything, when you're not here to keep me from doing—anything stupid.”

Ulfadhir smiles his glittering feline smile and cocks his head. “Well reasoned,” he says, and drops the illusion over his features; is himself again, pale and aquiline, dark brows and luminous green eyes. “And in so reasoning, the spell is broken.”

Steve blinks, loses his grip on the working and lets it drop in pieces; is himself again, pasty and startled. “Broken? Just like that?”

“Just so.”

“But… Does that mean I'll remember you? And the magic, how to work with it?”

“And what will you do with this newfound knowledge and power?” Ulfadhir asks, and Steve sits back, rubs at his forehead.

“I—” Steve starts, stops. Thinks. “I don't know. Sneak into the movies?”

Ulfadhir grins, one of his crooked feral smiles that is almost a baring of teeth. “What a grand and sweeping vision you have,” he says.

“I don't know, okay? Ask me again in a week,” Steve says, short, but there's no real heat in it—he's distracted, dreaming, furiously turning over scenarios—

“Of course, that was only ever half of why I placed a geas upon you,” Ulfadhir says, and then he uncoils and stands, walks off across the grass very casual, and Steve gapes at his back for a heartbeat before scrambling up to follow.

“What was the other half?” he asks, low and urgent. “What—why else?”

“To keep you safe,” Ulfadhir says, turning to look him in the eye. “Only ever to keep you safe. Do you believe me?”

“Of course I believe you,” Steve says.

“You should know better,” Ulfadhir says, eyebrow cocked.

“Can you not be smug for twelve seconds?”

“What would have happened if you'd told someone?” Ulfadhir asks. “About the strange man who was teaching you sorcery, about having lessons in shaping the dance and flow of magic?”

Steve closes his eyes, takes a breath. “They'd think I was crazy,” he says, slow, voice coming thin: it's a little too close to when he'd been a baby, tried to tell people about the music only to see their looks of pity. “They'd think we were both nuts, or that I was nuts and you were some kind of creep.”

“And then?”
“No more lessons,” Steve says. “Go directly to jail, for you,” and Ulfadhir flicks an eyebrow like he's daring someone to try it. “Bedlam for me. Or Bellevue,” Steve finishes. His mother has told him ghost stories about Bedlam, sings a song about it—still I'll sing bonny boys, bonny mad boys—while she does the washing, and on those days he comes home with blood in his teeth and torn up knuckles.

“Then you've wit enough to see it now, but could I have trusted in your discretion as a child?” Ulfadhir asks.

“No,” Steve says. He can't even be offended—he'd had no secrets, as a child. His Mam's other job is the only thing. Everything else flowed out of him like water from a split cup, to his Mam or to Bucky, in the haze of a fever dream or in the confessional. “No. You'd be silly to trust a baby with something like this.” He scrubs his nails through his hair, turns to look at Ulfadhir, meet his eyes. “I understand. I ain't mad.”

“I'm glad,” Ulfadhir says, and smiles by rote, cold and narrow and not reaching his eyes. “Then you'll understand why I must do this,” and then he steps in and puts a hand on Steve's head, palm curving just above his ear, and it's like bolt punching through the bone, cold and metallic lancing through him so he staggers, clutches his head, goes to one knee, jaw falling open like he can release some of the awful pressure in his skull—

And then the pain is gone, totally, with not even a trace of its presence, and he blinks, closes his mouth, looks up. Ulfadhir is standing over him, calm and unblinking.

“What the Hell was—” Steve starts, stops. Thinks. Narrows his eyes. “You just geas-ed me again, didn't you.”

“Yes, I did.”

“You son of a bitch.”

And now when Ulfadhir leaves, Steve remembers. He remembers every detail of their interactions, his lessons and the workings, but now—now he can't speak of it.

He tries. He practices in front of the bathroom mirror. He can say, “I'm having lessons in—” and then his throat closes and he wheezes slow and high and helpless. It's—look. He understands the importance of secrecy. He gets it, he's not stupid. And it's still frustrating as Hell. And he feels like punching Ulfadhir for a good month, which is probably why the man stays away until almost three have passed.

It just means he can practice now, when Ulfadhir isn't here, keep working at his workings in between their lessons. And it means that Ulfadhir can set him homework. Which he does, takes a diabolical delight in. It ain't enough he's gotta learn to heart poetry for school. Now he also has seemings and veils to refine, perfect, tattoo inside his eyes. Hell: it's still more fun than geography.

*******

When he's twelve he catches whooping cough and fractures two ribs with the sheer animal violence of his coughing, which has got to be an all new personal low. Three months later his ribs have only just stopped aching when he gets into a fight after school—James Cooper and Frankie Lewinski are running what amounts to a protection racket, extracting change from a bunch of the really little kids,
which ain't right and ain't fair. He takes an elbow square in the side, breaks one of the same ribs again, bad enough he can scarce breathe past it and Bucky's gotta scrape him up off the pavement, blue around the lips and heaving, and he ends up in the hospital again.

He spends his thirteenth birthday in the hospital—his Mam brings him cake, a new book and shirt, Bucky brings him an enormous stack of homework and a bag of candy, the nurses make streamers out of old papers and hang them up around his bed—gets discharged home four days later. And then Ulfadhir crops up a week after that, and he—well, he's got Steve a birthday present too.

*****

“I—” Steve starts, stops. Wets his lips. Tries again. “I don't understand.”

He's got an armful of soft blue fabric—it's a pale clear blue, like the sky under a layer of fine cloud, with tiny white polka dots. The buttons on the sleeves and bodice are silver, and the skirt falls pleated with a thin layer of petticoat built in. It's a very nice dress, but—well, shit. It's a dress.

“It seems straightforward enough,” Ulfadhir says. They're in the living room, Steve's Mam is at work, and there's cardboard box and ribbons strewn on the couch.

“But I'm not a girl,” Steve says. “And I ain't a sissy.” He puts the dress back—gentle, it's obviously expensive, but firm—in the box he'd pulled it out from.

Ulfadhir stares at him for a moment, fingertips pressed to his mouth, and then he uncoils, leans in. “Understand this,” he says. “All of the workings of sorcery that I've taught you so far, everything we've done—you've been a child, and I've taught you childish trifles. If you wish to continue to learn these arts, then you will need to learn seidhr, and seidhr is a woman's art.” He stands, walks over to the window and turns back, standing framed by the gold light spilling in.

“My first teacher in seidhr was my mother,” Ulfadhir says, “and before she would take me as a student, she required that I live as a woman,” and as he speaks the rippling hum of a spell being shaped quivers in the air, and he slowly changes: shoulders narrowing and hips turning out, hair growing and twisting serpentine into a braid, hard lines of his face softening, chest—oh. Steve blinks hard, closes his eyes for a long moment, takes a breath. Opens up and focuses again.

Ulfadhir is even taller as a woman: his—her boots have a lot more heel to them, tunic has taken a more supple and flowing line. She looks a lot like an illustration of one of the faery queens from the book of tales his Mam brought from Ireland—beautiful and cold and alien.

“Oh,” Steve says, nonsensically.

“And so I spent the best part of three hundred years as a woman, with all of the attendant satisfactions and miseries, in order to learn at her feet,” Ulfadhir says, and her voice is clear and musical, low for a woman's. “And I was grateful. I learned as much from the fact of having skirts and a sheath as I did in the arts of sorcery. But you are mortal, and your life flares brighter and quicker than most, and so I don't ask that of you.” She crosses the room, grabs Steve by the chin and turns his face up so he can't look away from her. “All I ask is that when I do come to teach, you come to learn in the proper spirit.”

Steve stares up at her, chewing at his lip. Her eyes are just the same: mannerisms and body language and quirks of facial expression. She is just the same, in herself: the same person he's always known,
and this—this just is a new facet, makes her more, not less. But then she's an immortal sorcerer and Steve is—"I can't," he croaks.

She smiles crooked, pats him on the cheek and steps back, letting the seeming fall away—Ulfadhir again, fingers dancing in a dispelling gesture as his hand comes back to his side. "No matter," he says. "When you are ready to learn, we can begin the work in earnest."

He leaves the dress behind him when he goes. Steve shoves it back in the box and hides it under his bed, shamed and fearful by the mere fact of its existence, and he wonders if maybe that's going to be the end of it, only—

—only Ulfadhir stops teaching him sorcery.

He still comes and visits, still sits with Steve in his living room or on fire escapes or on the roofs of buildings or on a pier down at the docks, and they talk—about life, about logic and philosophy—

"Do you despise your mother?" Ulfadhir asks, throwing a peach to Steve, and he's so astonished by the question that he fumbles the catch completely and the peach hits the ground, rolls along the dock picking up smut and splinters.

"What? No," Steve says, scrambling after the rolling fruit and scooping it up. Still okay to eat, he's not so proud he'll waste food. "Why—"

"Or the Barnes women? Your James' mother and sisters?" Ulfadhir continues, and Steve takes a second to wonder at that phrasing—your James—but more importantly:

"No! No, of course not," he says.

"Then why do you imagine it would diminish you to dress as they do?" Ulfadhir asks, and—

—and he still teaches Steve other things, how to pick locks and pick pockets and drop a big guy on
his ass—that's all about leverage, not size and weight, which is perfect for Steve who is still showing no signs of puberty kicking in, at least in the height and build department. He's started getting acne though, which is typical—

"It ain't right, is all," Steve's saying, as he puts a foot forward and rocks his weight back and pulls, and Ulfadhir obligingly falls slowly into it and then twists at the last moment to take Steve down with him. They land in a tangle of limbs on the tar of the roof, Ulfadhir atop the pile and catching most of his weight on his knees.

"Be aware of this counter," Ulfadhir says, and grinds an elbow into Steve's gut. "Did you see how I —"

"Yeah," Steve gasps, "I saw, no need to repeat that one, thanks." They both sit up, Steve hugging his stomach and Ulfadhir brushing imagined grime from his tunic.

"I mean, my Mam is the strongest person I know," Steve continues, and she is: works every hour
God's sent, helps anyone who asks, pickets about women's rights and socialism, gets Steve clean and
pressed and into Queen of All Saints every Sunday. Put up Daffyd Wend from church on their couch
for a month when he lost his job and was sleeping rough. Accidentally-on-purpose makes too much
stew and delivers the big pot to Widow Hamish who lives two doors down.

She just helps, wherever she's able, and the economy—well. Steve's never had much of a head for
figures but he knows things are bad. That a lot of folk are out of work all of the sudden, that
groceries seem to cost more each week. He heard about brokers putting themselves out their office
windows over in Manhattan. The market is *belly up like a sick dog*, according to George Barnes. It's Godawful, and—

“All the more reason to be kind,” his Mam says, hands firm as she puts big looping stitches into his torn shirt sleeve—he's fallen trying to climb a fence. “All the more reason. If Christ only asks us to practice charity when it's easy then how will we care for one another when times are hard? Here—” and she hauls the shirt back down over his head, grins and pushes his mussed hair out of his face.

So things—the market, the world—are as black as they've ever been, and a lot of folk need charity, need kindness, and his Mam just shoves a few extra pins into her hair where she's been worrying at it and gets on with it. “And she raised me and fed me and clothed me, taught me right from wrong, so,” Steve says, watching Ulfadhir rise and stretch, elegant as a cat. “I don't have any ideas about women being inferior to men. It's not about that.” He rubs at his forehead, shoving at his thoughts so they'll get into orderly lines. “It's just—there's a natural order, isn't there?”

Ulfadhir stares at him, silent, a little wild around the eyes. Then he says, “I have been teaching you *sorcery*.”

“Yes?” Steve says.

“I have been teaching you to take the natural order of things and to make art with it, to play with it. To fuck it,” Ulfadhir says. “The very first act of sorcery is to take what is, what is real and solid and *natural*, and to bend it over backwards.”

“Oh,” Steve says.

“You've played at reshaping the very matter of the world, but now you balk at the idea of transgressing against some tedious social construct? The very *nature* of sorcery is transgression.”

—and his visits are getting shorter, and further and further apart, weeks stretching out to months with no sign of him, and maybe it's just because they've got less and less to say to each other—

“Look, they'll kick the Hell out of me,” Steve says, jamming his pencil in the binding of his history text and slamming it closed, shoving it across the dining table. “Okay? I don't know what it's like where you're from, but here if anyone finds out I dress up like a dame, they'll kick the Hell out of me.” He's… Look. He's naïve, and he knows it, ain't even had his first kiss yet—unlike Bucky, that goofy sap, with Lizzie Tanner, out the back of the school house—but he's not stupid. He grew up in Brooklyn, he knows about fairies and queens and drag balls. He knows what happens—

Ulfadhir sets his cup of tea to one side, leans across the table, and presses his thumb into the knuckle-shaped bruise on Steve's cheekbone.

“How would that differ from your current state of affairs?” Ulfadhir asks, and he's so bland and unruffled that Steve gets angrier than he did at the bully that'd socked him in the first place. After Ulfadhir goes Steve hauls the dress—still in its box—out from under his bed and walks it over to Dean Street and the Barnes household, tells them it'd come in the post by mistake and there's no return address, so they might as well have it. Rebecca Barnes wears blue with white polka dots to church every second Sunday for the next year and change.

Until the week before Steve's fourteenth birthday. And Ulfadhir gets up, washes his mug in the sink, and makes to leave after maybe half an hour of crippled conversation. And Steve snaps, ducks into his bedroom—okay, into his curtained-off area of the living room, but his Mam wants him to have his own space, and it fits a single bed and a trunk for his clothes, and it's his alone. He digs into the trunk, pulls out the length of soft faux-velvet green ribbon he's got buried under his small clothes.
When he emerges he's got the ribbon fixed around his head, scooped under the nape of his neck in the back and tied in a neat bow on the top. He's aware he looks like a fucking idiot, but—but this is what he's got. Ulfadhir is standing at the front door, studying him.

Steve waves a hand at the bow, helpless. “Please,” he says.

Ulfadhir is still and silent for a long moment, and then he smiles, charming and bright, teeth bared like a feral cat. “Shall we begin?”
In the summer Steve turns fifteen, Bucky gets a part time job sweeping and carrying at the Krevanek’s garage and stacks on half a foot in height and suddenly when he’s got his shirt off—on the beach at Coney Island, or on the roof of Steve's apartment building complaining about the heat—there are lines of muscle standing out on his chest and arms. The girls all take notice, and so, God help him, does Steve.

He tries not to. He really tries, but when he and Bucky play fight on the couch or the living room floor now he's got to make an excuse to get away, to fake shortness of breath or palpitations, because if he's tangled between Bucky's long legs or pinned under the hard sweaty weight of him for more than a couple minutes, he starts to swell up in his shorts. So he taps out and gets away and puts his head down between his knees until his dick has gotten its act together, and he prays on it, talks to Father Sampson at the church, tries not to—to think about it too much. Jesus, if Bucky finds out—

And it ain’t like he's a nelly because he likes girls just fine, and when he wakes gasping with his shorts wet in the front it’s from jumbled dreams of red lips and breasts, of curving his hands around the smooth soft skin of a girl’s round hips and belly. There’re girls in his class he's goofy for: Rosie and her plump bitten-pink lips, Mary and her curls—they're a very deep copper, and she pins them every morning and by afternoon they’re coming loose, tangling and spilling to sit coiled on her shoulders and breast, and Steve watches their slow unraveling with helpless fascination. Louise, who is nineteen and lives in the apartment to the right of Steve's, who is tall and lean and has the most startling green-brown eyes, and she always gives Steve a smile and a wink when she sees him, and he'll probably die on the spot if she ever actually speaks to him.

He likes girls—Lord, he's sentence-fragmenting, tripping over his own feet, walking into power poles stupid over girls, and he's just getting his wires crossed or something, and once he meets a girl who'll give him the time of day he'll be squared away.

When Ulfadhir first started teaching him seidhr he spent six Goddamn months learning how to sit and get his mind clear, and six months of being incandescently angry and bored witless in turn because if he's going to put a skirt on for this it could at least not be tedious as Hell. But he gets it now: that practice getting clear in himself was a building block and now—

Now he's leaving his body behind and floating up, rootless and lighter than thought, to hover incorporeal up at ceiling height. He can't really control it yet, not how long he stays out for or how high he floats or where he goes once he's out, but Ulfadhir says he'll learn, given practice and time. And until then he's put spells in the walls and ceiling to keep Steve from drifting off, which means Steve's spent a Hell of a lot longer than he'd like studying the ceiling of his living room from a quarter-inch out. There's a water stain about the shape of an elephant that he always finds himself hovering just next to, and he's intimately familiar with the gradations of beige and grey in its shape. And then—

What if he just kind of… rolled over? He's tried and tried brow-furrowing concentration to steer himself around, but what if it's simple, if he just—

He imagines rolling over in bed, the dull ache in his crooked spine and then arching and shifting to get off his back, the electric zing of sharp pain with the movement and then relief—

—and then he's looking down, at his living room floor, at the couch with its pile of blankets and the sagging bookshelves and himself, sprawled limp on the rug like he's sleeping. Ulfadhir sitting cross-legged next to him with one hand held up steady in a conjuring gesture and the other resting on a
knee. He's looking up, watching Steve wobbling around up at the roof, and smirking. And hey, that was easy, why didn't he try that before—

He looks again, really looks at himself now, because they're not the sort of money to have a full length mirror lying around so he doesn't actually see himself head-to-toe all that often, and never when he's... like this. In his girl clothes. It's nothing fancy, just one of the button-down shirts he wears to church and a fawn brown skirt that stops just below his knees. Ulfadhir's trying to talk him into stockings but Steve's holding the line, wants bare legs until the worst of the summer heat has passed.

He looks... not as silly as he thought he would. The skirt could almost be shorts, with the way he's lying. He could maybe stand to—what about a shirt in a more feminine sort of cut? It might not work right, with his lack of—of anything in the chest department, but—

And he's—closer. Closer and drifting down and down all the time, close enough to see the constellation of zits on his chin, drifting faster and faster as he gets closer and closer until it feels like he's falling, hurtling down and—

—back into his body so hard and fast it's like being hit by a car, so fast he bounces off the rug and arches his spine and sucks in a huge gasping breath, hands scrabbling for purchase. “What the Hell?” he wheezes, blinking hard and fast and trying to calibrate: back in a body, back on the floor looking up at the roof, Ulfadhir sitting over him with an eyebrow cocked.

“Very dignified,” Ulfadhir says, shaking out a cramp in his conjuring hand.

“Why am I—what happened?” Steve asks, eyes darting as he looks around.

“What happened seems unspeakably obvious, but as to why—” Ulfadhir says, cocks his head to the side. “Because your conscious awareness and your physical vessel are accustomed to being together, and will resist being apart. Most mortals only experience such a separation in dreaming or in death. And so, if you allow the chariot of your awareness to drift too close to where your form lies...” He trails off.

“Okay,” Steve says, lifts shaking hands to scrub at his hair. “Stay away from my body, got it. But then...” He stops, plots it out in his head: when he faces up, he drifts up. When he faces down, he drifts down. Is it that simple, and he'll just gravitate toward wherever his attention is pointing? He was focusing on his body, on how he looked in girl clothes, so that's where he drifted. Was chewing over the idea of a new outfit for himself—oh, Hell.

“Is this—” Steve says, and sits up and waves at himself, his shape, his clothes, drops his hands into his lap to tug at the brown fabric of his skirt. “I just—I gotta ask, okay? Is doing this turning me into a fairy?”

Ulfadhir blinks, and sometimes Steve forgets that Ulfadhir isn't from around here until he uses some bit of slang and it takes Ulfadhir a moment of staring and blinking to get his meaning. So Ulfadhir blinks, and then he goes very still and stares at Steve, flat and expressionless as a lizard. Steve stares back at first, and then the moment stretches out and out, and Ulfadhir is so still he ain't even breathing or blinking, like he's turned into a statue carved of ice and total disdain.

Jesus, Steve could shrivel up and blow away like ashes on the wind under the force of that gaze.

Steve drops his eyes, fidgets with the fabric between his hands.

“If you wore a feather in your hair, would it turn you into a pigeon?” Ulfadhir asks, at last, crisp and
pointed as a scalpel.

“No,” Steve says, feeling like a fucking idiot.

“If you were to smear the excrement of a dog on your face, would that make you in yourself a piece of dog shit—?”

“No! Okay, it was a stupid question, Jesus. I'm sorry.” Steve says. Looks up to meet Ulfadhir's eyes again; he's sitting up straight as an arrow, mouth a flat line.

“Your core and essential nature cannot be changed by the cut of the cloth on your back,” Ulfadhir says. “Cannot be changed. If you are wrestling with longings, natural or unnatural, then those longings have always been within you. If anything, the practice of sitting with yourself will have drawn back the veil hiding those parts of yourself you might not have chosen to see.” He smiles, flat, lizard-like. “Self-knowledge is a hateful bitch.”

Steve sits with that for a moment, and then he puts his head forward and onto his knees. “Shit.”

Ulfadhir lets him brood for all of ten seconds before he chimes in: “Well then. Enough truth-telling for one day. Shall we resume the work?” And Steve bites his lip, jams a fist against his sternum to centre himself there, takes a deep breath and sits up straight again, and they get back into the lesson.

It's six months later when they're playing Two Truths and a Lie that all the rest of it falls out—because Steve is taking his turn and:

“Second story,” he says. “Bucky won a boxing match at Goulding’s Gym last weekend. His da saw the poster for the contest and signed him up, and he's had no proper coaching but he still won. And the fella he beat was at least two years older too, this big ugly jerk.” And he's still a little giddy over it—he fucking hates crowds, all the noise and jumbled songs and close-packed bodies and cigarette smoke, but he goes just the same because it's Bucky fighting. And Lord, he was something to behold, all streaked with sweat and blood down his chin and jaw from his split lip, grinning fierce and wild—and because Steve's still giddy over it he's not watching himself as he speaks, not paying attention to his body language and facial expressions and tells.

Ulfadhir sits forward—they're in a booth at the diner on Atlantic Ave, tattered remains of a meal spread out on the table between them—and says, “Truth. Which means your next story was to be the lie. Also, if you wish to keep your deviance a secret, you might choose to tone down the passion in your tale-telling.” He grabs a last French fry up off the plate, inspects it, pokes it into his mouth, all very casual.

Steve puts his head down in his hands on the table. “Jesus,” he says, helplessly, because—Lord, he's trying. He's trying so hard, praying on it every night. He's gone and got a job at the grocers down the road from his home, doing inventory and updating all the signs and pricing, so he's got cash in hand after he helps his Mam out with the rent: and he's been asking girls out, and they mostly turn him down cold because he still hasn't had much of a growth spurt to speak of so he's shorter than any of them—anyway, point is, he's trying. Trying to take his sweaty palms and feckless dick and point them someplace other than his best friend.

“Is it that obvious?” Steve mumbles into his hands.
“Painfully. You light up as though the clouds have parted and a beam of sunlight has fallen just on you,” Ulfadhir says.

“I can't,” Steve says. “I can't—it's illegal, and perverse, and a sin.”

“I find myself baffled by this idea your people have, of a Creator vast enough to manifest the universe and everything in it, and yet petty enough to care what each tiny soul does with their genitals.”

Steve makes a choking noise that is somewhere between a laugh and a cough, and then immediately feels even more like a piece of shit for laughing. “I'm going to Hell,” he moans into his hands.

“I doubt that,” Ulfadhir says.

“I'm going to Hell,” Steve repeats, more firmly.

“Well, if you do, I know the Lady of that realm. I can put in a good word for you,” Ulfadhir says. There is a pause, more quiet chewing as he eats another fry. “If it's any comfort, it comes as no surprise that you're perverse. Ergi, as my father would say. All the best sorcerers are.”

“Can you stop talking for twenty seconds?” Steve snarls, and Ulfadhir throws a fry at his head.

******

When he's sixteen Steve gets into a fight that ends when he goes ass over teakettle down a half-flight of wooden stairs and blacks out cold. When he wakes he's in the hospital and his Mam is roaring at a doctor at the foot of the bed—and she usually speaks without much of an accent but she's so worked up she's gone almost full Irish—and once the yelling stops they tell him he's got a broken femur. It's Godawful, is what it is. He's forbidden to walk on it, so he can't go to school, can't go to work, can't go to the pictures, can't even get himself to the can. His Mam finds him a pot to piss in and empties it for him when she gets home from work. There's not a damn thing he can do for himself, except read and draw, plough away at his piled up schoolwork, stare out the window and daydream.

Bucky comes by when he can—and that's most days, if he's not at school or working or looking after his sisters—even though Steve's waspish with frustration and sheer fucking boredom. Brings him his notes from school, magazines, bags of candy, and—most important, ambrosia, Goddamn lifeblood—gossip and stories from the outside world:

“Oh, did I tell you? Patience Winslow and Sam Francis are stepping out, now. Hold hands everywhere they go, it's sickening.” Bucky's bent over, brows notched with concentration, poking one of Steve's Mam's knitting needles up the inside of Steve's plaster cast. The itch in there has been driving him slowly insane for almost five hours now.

“Thought she was seeing Mark what's-his-name, that guy—oh, almost. Left a bit,” Steve says, and Bucky twitches the needle to the left and Steve yelps like a kicked dog.

Bucky jumps, wild-eyed. “Christ.”

“It's okay, just—there, just right there. Like you mean it, Barnes,” Steve says, and Bucky rolls his eyes and jiggles the knitting needle around. It hurts like a sunburn eating down through the layers of
skin, and is so satisfying Steve's gotta bite his lip to keep from moaning like a whore.

“And yeah, or Mark thought they were going together, anyway, so he's been trying to catch Sammy alone for a week now,” and later Bucky brews them both a pot of coffee and helps Steve read through the chapter in his history text about Ancient Greece and the origins of democracy.

And his Mam and Bucky and Bucky's sisters are all sitting with him when they can, trying to make it not totally fucking Godawful for him, but he's still trapped in bed for twenty-three hours outta the day and by the end of the second week he's so anxious and frustrated he's starting to pull out chunks of hair, and that's when Ulfadhir shows up.

“Please tell me you've got a way to get me outta here,” Steve says. Ulfadhir has pulled the armchair over next to Steve's bed and is sitting in it sideways, his legs slung casually over the arm, and he's playing with a gold clockwork-looking sphere between his palms as Steve talks.

“Perhaps,” he says, contemplative. “I do have a way, of course—a dozen ways—it's more a matter of what you are capable of learning, how skilfully and how swiftly.”

“I'll learn it,” Steve says. “You got no idea. I am gonna climb these walls. I'll lose the plot, start turning folk into pies for the fairies, I swear. Teach me, show me.”

Ulfadhir smiles, one of his small crooked numbers. “Well then. The most elegant answer is often the simplest: you could come and go as you pleased if you had the use of your legs.”

Steve blinks. One hand goes to the heavy cast on his leg, rests over the place where the bone is broken, splintered ends crowded together under bruised skin and healing closed, slowly, so damn slowly. “I thought you couldn't do healing magic,” he says.

“I cannot,” Ulfadhir says. “I've no skill with it whatsoever, so we go to the second most elegant solution: borrow someone else's legs.”

When Ulfadhir leaves five hours later, Steve's got a too-much-magic sick headache and a bag of birdseed.

It takes him four days of practice and patience, carefully doling out seed onto the windowsill next to his bed and waiting for someone to come for it—a pigeon or a sparrow, a couple of times a big fuck-off rat—and then he sits still and quiet, presses a fist to his sternum and breathes and pushes and—

The first time it actually works he's so startled he almost falls off the windowsill, clawed feet scrambling for purchase, flares his wings to regain his balance—and then the pigeon pushes back at him. It's not aggressive, or violent; more like shrugging to shift someone's hand off your shoulder. The pigeon shrugs, and he slips away, slingshots back into his own body, and he flops back in the bed and thrusts his arms above his head and whoops at the ceiling, nauseous and headachy and exultant because he did it, he did it, and the second he manages to do it again he's gonna leave these four fucking walls behind.

The fifth day is his Mam’s day off, and she sits with him all morning, helps him get into one of the dining chairs and gives his hair a wash, and they take turns reading to each other from The Hobbit until her voice gives out at lunchtime. She's coughing the whole while she's making lunch—cheese and pickle sandwiches—and only has a few bites of hers before she's gotta go lie down. This ugly cough she's got is wearing her down something fierce: he hears her up at night sometimes with it, fits of coughing, trying to be quiet so she doesn't wake everyone in the building. Been sitting on her chest for over a month now.
It'll be easier once he finishes school, can work more—then she can take more days off, rest up and get better. He'd have dropped out already if she weren't so insistent that he stick with it: wants him to be the first in the family to go to college. Wants him to have every opportunity his father and uncles never got, dead of war and disease and the dreary grind of poverty back in the old country, and—And he's not sure how to tell her he's not sure he's worth it.

So it's not until the sixth day of trying that he manages it again, finds himself lurching sideways on the windowsill, astonished, tiny heart racing about a million beats per minute—he's borrowing from a sparrow this time, and it's—

Colours are different. Sounds are—it's all so fucking noisy—and he's so light, lighter than thought, and after being trapped in a bed and trapped by his body, his dicky heart and gummed up lungs, it's so effortless to just flit, wings and feet, the birdseed rolling under his clawed feet as he hops around on the windowsill, feeling it out. Looks over at his body and sees himself sitting slumped against the wall, forehead resting on the edge of the sill. That's going to be uncomfortable to come back to, and also: he doesn't actually give a rat's ass right now. He's out. He's free.

Turns into the wind and opens his wings a little, feeling how the flight feathers catch the tiny movements of the air, and he's—dropping his weight, tucking some feathers and fluffing others, and it's happening without him thinking about it, same as closing his eyes when he sneezes. This body already knows how to fly. Sparrows are born knowing how to be sparrows. If he just—

He lifts back, just a little—like he was squeezing some fella’s shoulder and now he's just resting his hand there, lightly, enough to steer by suggestion. Feels the sparrow’s mind surge up to fill the gap, bright and quick and fluid. Feels him recognise Steve’s presence in there and then blithely elect to ignore him: not food, not a predator, not a problem. And then he's angling wings into the wind and hopping forward and—

Flight is fucking wonderful: like falling but without the sudden stop, like when he's abusing himself and just before he peaks and spills there's an endless moment where it's like his skin falls off and his eyes roll up and the world flies apart into ribbons of light and noise. That's what flying feels like: effortless, buoyed up by thin air. He's flying the length of the street, three and four floors up from the ground, from the sealed road and cars, pedestrians milling and moving with purpose, and from up here all of it looks likes discarded toys, like a backdrop hastily painted without much love. It's better than riding the Cyclone, better than landing a clean punch, better than kissing, and if he were human-shaped he'd be laughing like a loon. The sparrow picks up his excitement and starts to sing, wild and stuttering and shrill.

He loses hours just being a sparrow, darting around the neighbourhood from perch to perch to nest and utterly immersed in this bird’s life: his searches for food and water, for safe places to rest, lightning fast communication with other birds in—it's not quite a language but they sure as Hell ain’t stupid, using tunes and notes and dart-quick body language to pass warnings and threats and hot tips. Always watching for predators or thoughtless stomping human feet.

He's so swift and bright Steve can scarcely keep up with him, and after a while the sparrow starts gently feeding him snippets of thought—the best places to find tossed baked goods, which buildings have cats to watch for. Like Steve’s a baby bird that the sparrow’s gotta watch out for.

When the sun starts getting low, the sparrow sticks closer and closer to his home perch and Steve gently nudges him to go back over to his building, find his way back to the windowsill again—and there's Steve's body, right where he left it, small and twisted and broken, sagging against the wall like a drunk.

He's got the worst pins and needles. The worst carpet mouth—because he's forgotten that eating and
drinking when he's borrowing a bird’s beak and oesophagus and stomach isn't going to do shit for
the meat-suit he leaves behind, and he's had nil by mouth for seven hours and counting. And he's got
the stupidest sunburn—on half his face, angle-on from where he was mushed cock-eyed against the
windowsill. Which is nothing to the magic hangover—Holy Mary, Mother of God, it feels like his
head is going to fucking implode.

He regrets nothing. Does it all again the next day.

Pigeon, seagull, rat, cat, dog: on wings and claws and paws, furry and feathery and mangy, flying
and climbing and creeping, slinking and limping.

He is the one-eyed cat that lives behind the butchers shop on Cumberland St.

He is the seagull circling over the men at the docks, hoping for scraps of fallen food, dodging kicks
and thrown rubbish.

He is the dog running up and down with the pack of kids playing kickball in the street.

He is light as a feather, floating gently between borrowings—and he's hungry and frightened, sore
and sick, fighting for control of territory or food to eat, but he's also alive and awake and anything’s
better than lying in bed smelling his own stink and waiting for his femur to patch itself together.

*******

It takes another month for his leg to heal. When the cast comes off, Bucky half-carries him to the
diner four blocks down the road and buys them both ice cream to celebrate, and Ulfadhir shows up
that night while his Mam’s at work and gives him a book of fresh creamy drawing paper and a pair
of ladies shoes. They're white leather with smooth blue laces and a little heel, and he only makes a
token protest before he wears ‘em: because lying to everyone else is one thing, but lying to yourself
is just stupid, and they are fucking nice shoes.

*******

He graduates—it's a close thing with all the school he misses waiting on his leg to fix itself up, but he
does graduate. His Mam is working nights so she's there for the ceremony on the last day of school,
all the class—what's left of them anyway, the ones who stuck it out 'til the end—futzing around in
the moth-eaten academic robes they've dragged out of storage.

“A stór,” she says to him, after all the speech-making is over with, holding his face cupped in her
palms and beaming at him. There're tears in her clear blue eyes, and she’s—she's shorter than him.
Not by much—he's shrimpy, he's always gonna be—but at some point in the last year or so he's
grown just enough to inch up past her. He's blinking hard, wondering when it happened, how he
missed it.

“A stór, a leanbh. I'm so proud,” she says, and then a few minutes later when he's talking to Buck
and Sammy Francis he hears her start to cough, and by the time he finds her through the crowd she's
half doubled-over with it, handkerchief clapped to her mouth, and Bucky helps him clear a way to
get her outside so she can get some fresh air. She waves them off after a moment, stands against the wall of the school hall and breathes slow and deliberate, handkerchief crumpled in one fist.

There are red stains bleeding through the kerchief. Buck frowns, goes to shove his hands in his pockets and gets tangled in the robe. “Stevie,” he says, pitching it low.

“I know,” Steve says, “I know. It'll be okay, though. I can work more, now school’s done. I can work, so she can rest more. She'll be fine, Buck.”

Bucky plasters on a half-smile, claps a hand to Steve's shoulder. “Sure thing, pal.”

*******

Everything reeks of phosphorous and smoke and his head hurts—hurts so Goddamn much, like the front of his skull is in a vice being squeezed slowly—but he’s done it: he’s really done it. The strip of paper is on fire.

He’s sitting on the living room floor, Ulfadhir crouched opposite, and they’ve moved all the furniture over to the walls and placed all of his Mam’s cooking pots around the room, full of water. The first time he tried this working he couldn't get it to do a damn thing for the first hour, and then it kicked a little too hard and he set the kitchen on fire, but this time—

This time the strip of paper between his fingers is burning blue and bright and clean at the very tip, the paper curling and turning black as the flame works its way along the length. “Ha,” Steve breathes out, grinning.

“You’re a hard man to please,” Steve says. The flames are starting to lick at his fingertips, and he reaches down and drops the paper stub into the pot.

Ulfadhir is just watching him, eyebrows cocked and waiting—what’s Steve got wrong this—oh.

“A hard lady to please,” Steve course-corrects, because they’re having a lesson and Ulfadhir is wearing the slinkier lady version of his usual jacket and robes. Steve’s got his charcoal skirt on and the soft teal knit sweater with the wide neckline that does flattering things for his wiry collarbones.

“You’re a hard man to please,” Steve says again, and then he picks up another strip of paper from the stack next to him. “Again.”

After the lesson is over Ulfadhir saunters off and leaves Steve with an apartment full of smoke and half the furniture they own to rearrange, and he's thrown open all the windows to try and shift the phosphorus stink before his Mam gets back from work. He's halfway through shoving the couch back into position when the knock comes at the door, and—shit. He's still wearing his girl clothes.

“I—Christ—I'm coming, gimme a second,” Steve hollers at the door, tears over to his clothes chest and starts ripping clothes out—T-shirt, trou, undershorts. Hauls his sweater off overhead and throws it into the chest, jams his skirt and panties down off his hips and kicks them under the bed, and he's just pulled his undershorts up when the knock comes again, heavier and quicker.
“I'm coming, I just—oh shit,” Steve says, trips on his trou as he's hauling them up, grabs his shirt and pulls it overhead as he's striding back over to the door, whips the door open with his fly unbuttoned and hair hopelessly askew—

It's a young guy, maybe only Steve's age, hat jammed under one arm and holding a crisply folded sheet of telegraph paper in his other hand. He's got the start of a moustache and he looks—like he's licked something sour. Like he wants to apologise.

“You Mr Steve Rogers? Look, I wanted to put it in your hand direct, okay?” he says, shifting his weight. Thrusts the telegram forward. “I figured—when they come from there it's almost never good news.”

Steve blinks. When he reaches out to take the paper his hand moves sluggish, like he's moving underwater. “Okay,” Steve says, and somewhere he's aware that he sounds like he's been hit in the head. “Okay, thanks.”

He closes the door, looks down at the folded sheet of paper. Puts it carefully on the end table just inside the door, buttons his fly and brushes out some imaginary creases over his hips, and then goes and moves the dining table and chairs back into their usual spots. Carefully squares his sketchbook and pencils on the table—he's got an assignment he needs to get going with, a still life study for school—he's taking a couple of college classes from the Fine Arts program, can't afford a full study load but something's better than nothing, so he'll sit down and get some work done just as soon—

As soon as—

Coffee, time to make coffee—he marches into the kitchen and grabs the pot off the drying rack, measures in the spoonfuls of their carefully rationed coffee supply and adds water at the sink, squares the pot on the stove and flips the gas on. If he gets it warming up now, it'll be perfect drinking temperature by the time his Mam gets home—

Combs his fingers into his hair, looks around the kitchen for anything else out of place—anything—no. No. It's time to… He's got to.

He returns to the front table, to the telegram. Picks it up. His hand is only shaking a little. Takes a deep breath, unfolds the paper, begins to read.

*******

It's dark when Bucky lets himself in, and there's enough spilled light from the street outside that Steve can see the engine grease on his knuckles and forearms—he's come straight from the garage, swinging in the door and singing out, “Hey, Stevie, you'll never fu—never guess what happened at —” And then he stops, blinks owlish, scans the darkened room until he finds Steve sitting curled up on the couch. “Steve. Hi. There a reason we're sitting with all the lights off? Is your Mom not home yet?”

He's striding in and pushing the door closed behind him. The clump of his work boots on the wooden floor is louder than drums, louder than fists meeting flesh. Flips on the lamp that sits next to his Mam’s chair, the spot she sits to read. Looks around and blinks.

Steve is holding out the telegram. There's a tremor running down his arm that he can't stop, and the paper's creased with sweat from where he's been holding it crushed between his hands. He opens his
mouth, tries to form words, and the only noise that comes past the weight in his chest is a whine like a kicked dog so he closes up again, chokes it back. Closes his eyes.

“Steve? What's happened?” Bucky asks, and Steve just waves with the telegram. The room is quiet enough he can hear the soft papery crack as it catches in the air on the end of his upswing. Bucky comes over, takes the paper, starts to read, and Steve can hear his breath catch. He's read it through enough times to know where all the high notes are: positive diagnosis and treatment plan and Tuberculosis Sanatorium Infirmary, signed off at the bottom by Dr Wexton, one of the respiratory docs down at the hospital, and on behalf of Mrs. Sarah Rogers.

“Christ.” Bucky says, soft like it's been punched out of him, and then louder, more emphatic: “Christ. Steve, this is—fuck. What are you—she'll get better, right?”

“People don't come back from that place, Buck,” Steve croaks, and Bucky makes an injured noise and sits down heavily on the couch.

“Jesus H. Christ,” Bucky says, rasping like something's grabbed onto his throat and squeezed, staring fixed at the telegram like the words might change if he watches them long enough. “Fuck. Steve. What're we gonna do?” He looks up, meets Steve's gaze, blinks, hands curling into fists and going wild around the eyes. Then he drops the paper and lunges across the room to the overhead light switch. Flicks it on, gold light flooding the room. He's staring at Steve, going white, and—

Well. He must look as bad as he feels, then.

“Fuck. Steve, you're grey. Talk to me,” Bucky says, striding over and dropping to his knees next to the couch, snatching up Steve's hand and finding his pulse.

Steve wets his lips. He's staring at his wrist, where Bucky's big hand and grubby nails are dug into his pale skin. He can see it but he can't feel it, so it's—a little odd. Like it's happening to someone else. “Chest hurts pretty bad,” Steve rasps, and sees Bucky's hand tighten convulsively on his.

“Oh God,” Bucky says. “Steve, fuck,” and after that—

After half the building is roused by Bucky yelling and pounding on doors, and Miss Esposito from two doors down is sitting on the floor next to the couch holding Steve's hand and muttering her way through various prayers for intercession to St Michael and St Jude, and Pete Davies runs down the road to the house on the end to beg the use of their phone, and Bucky tosses the bathroom looking for pills, grabs the aspirin outta the top of the cupboard and his hands are shaking so bad he almost drops them passing them over—

After the ambulance comes and Bucky physically picks him up like a swooning dame and carries him down to meet the stretcher, and Steve can see all the damn neighbours peering through their curtains and hanging out the windows to watch, feels fucking sick because his Mam's been carted off to isolation to die and he's somehow managed to make it fucking all about him—

After he gets to the hospital, and Dr Williams greets him with a cheerful, “Ah, Steven!” like they're old friends and it's been too long, and the nurses give him oxygen and a huge dose of morphine straight in the thigh, enough to cut the pain in his chest to a dull ache, enough that he's floating like he's half out of his body—

After all the noise and the chaos settles it's Dr Williams again who comes to his bedside, leans on the rail at the end of the bed and polishes the bell of his stethoscope on his coat, tells Steve he's having a heart attack. “Your heart doesn't have a very good rhythm at the best of times, and—well, the stress won't have helped.” He looks up, tucks the stethoscope around his neck again, doesn't quite meet
Steve's eyes. “I did hear about your mother. I'm very sorry.”

After he goes again, and the dark-haired nurse wraps up fussing with his oxygen and drip, puts the light out and goes too, and it's all quiet and dark and still and he's alone, Steve pulls the blanket up, hides his face in the sheets, shakes and shakes and bites his lip to keep from keening because no one needs to fucking hear him cry.

*********

He's home again ten days later, with a script for new tablets that he may or may not be able to pay for and a patch of dead muscle a little smaller than a penny on his heart. Takes him a good five minutes to make it up the stairs to his apartment, find the spare key and let himself in.

Someone's cleaned up: coffee pot on the drying rack, aspirin bottle on the kitchen counter. Smells musty, dusty, still—no one's been here. His Mam hasn't been miraculously healed and come back. He looks around, at the gathered detritus of their lives—books on the shelves, his art up on the walls, basket of clothes in the corner that she's halfway through mending. Won't be coming back to mend.

Won't be coming back.

His sketchbook is on the table. He's got... he's got classes. He's got a boss he needs to go talk to, find out if he's still got a job. He's got stale food to clear out and people to visit with and some kind of fucking life to try and get back to. He throws open the kitchen window and rolls up his sleeves and gets on with it.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When he’s nineteen—

“Friends, family, we are gathered to mark and mourn the passing of Sarah Elizabeth Rogers. A mother and wife, a fierce friend, a nurse who worked tirelessly to save and to better lives, and a cornerstone of this community, she was a source of comfort to all who knew her—”

Reek of old incense. He’s light-headed, like he gets when his blood’s too thin, but he’s not gonna sit down. Even though—it hurts. His back, his feet. His eyes. His chest, Christ: his heart. Every inch of him hurts. This is worse than dying.

“—requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine; et lux perpetua luceat eis—”

He stumbles, almost trips on his way to the casket. A hand shoots out to land on his back, steady him, and Steve mouths, “Thanks,” but doesn't look up. He—his shoes. He looks at his shoes. They need a polish. He's meant to do it but he hasn't had time. He stands at his mother's casket and helps to lift it on the count of three, pretends he's taking some of the weight—these other guys are taller than him, holding it between them, these guys—doctors his Mam worked with, neighbours, Mr O’Neil. They've got it. Steve's just along for the ride. Him and his scuffed fucking shoes.

He doesn't cry—

—patter of soil onto the wood of the coffin, loud as drums in the silence at the graveside. There's a wooden fence post with her name to mark her plot—the stonecutting costs through the nose and he can't afford her headstone, not yet. Scrape and thud, more dirt. It's just family at the grave, which means it's just him. There's only him now. There's only him—

“Mam,” he says, to the empty apartment. “What do I do now?”

******

What he does is drink several fingers of the nasty fucking gin from the kitchen cupboard, and then pray. She's left him her rosary beads—they should've been buried with her but she was pretty set on him keeping them, so—so he prays, knelt on the floor next to his bed, working the beads for round after round until his voice goes thin and frail as spider’s silk, until the ache in his knees has caught fire and then burned out to numbness, until his eyes burn and hurt worse than the feeling in his chest, like someone’s kicked him in the sternum. The night marches on, light shifting against the back wall as streetlights and car headlights and moonlight rise and fall. Ave Maria, gratia plena, Dominus tecum, benedicta tu in mulieribus—

It's sometime stupid in the early watches—he remembers he was taught this is when monks get up and say their first prayers of the day, for everyone in despair watching the night pass through dully burning eyes—it's stupid o’-fucking-clock when he hiccups in the middle of a Paternoster, and then the hiccup turns out to be a sob, and then he’s watching himself cry, gasping and near silent until he folds in on himself like an injured animal and keens, long and hard, wails like a child with his head
down on his knees.

There's a wave like a black ocean tide rolling through him, and it's bigger than him, bigger than words, putting claws into his chest and tearing through and out of his body—muscle, bone, eyes, mouth—like a storm front.

He howls until the downstairs neighbour starts to pound on the ceiling and cuss at him, and then Steve pounds and cusses back, with interest, ugly shit like he's never said out loud before, and he's almost ashamed but—but *fuck it*, and then he laughs, crazed and water-logged and choking. Curls up around the rosary beads and sleeps on the floor like a dog.

*******

Bucky lets it stand for all of a week, and then the next Sunday Steve's nursing a mug of chicory coffee and a hangover when the front door opens and it's Bucky, casually letting himself in with the spare key.

“Hi,” Steve says, after a long silence, as Bucky stands in the doorway and looks around the room, brow furrowed like he's thinking.

“You're still sleeping out here? Guess that means I'm on the couch,” he says, and yes, Steve's still sleeping in the little partitioned off area of the living room, he's not ready to pack up his Mam’s stuff in the bedroom. Christ, it's only been ten days. Which—wait.

“Why are you on the couch?” Steve asks, and then Bucky turns and grabs his bags from where he'd dumped them on the front step and oh, he's moving in.

The fight is short but spectacular. Steve throws a mug. Bucky pulls at his hair to show off the greys that Steve's giving him. Steve invokes Bucky's Mam, and Bucky invokes Steve's Mam, which is dirty fucking pool considering, and then there's a long ringing silence, finally broken when Bucky says, “Listen, do you wanna end up sleeping rough down at the park? I know how much the rent on this place is, Sarah told me when she started goin’ downhill. You can't tell me your wage at the print shop’ll cover you.”

Bucky was with Steve's Mam a lot in the last weeks—because Steve couldn't be: the docs at the Sanatorium wouldn't even let him come in, with his medical history. He went with Buck to the doors every week like a pilgrimage, watched Bucky go in and then sat on his ass at the bus stop and waited, fretted, chewed his pencil, picked at loose threads on his cuff. He owes Bucky a debt he can never fucking repay for that, but there's also a small part of him, an awful selfish bastard part of him that seethes with resentment that Bucky got that time with her and he didn't. Any rate—

“Damn it, Barnes,” Steve says. “I don't wanna take charity.”

“This ain't charity. I'm living here, I pay rent,” and then, when Steve continues to stare at him, arms crossed and glaring, Bucky adds, “Fuck your pride, Rogers, you stubborn asshole. You don't gotta do everything the hard way.”

“It's not pride,” Steve says, and he's simmered down enough now to hear their songs, the places where they're discordant and the places they're starting to come into harmony. “It's just I don't want to be a burden.” And then he stops, because his Mam must've said that a thousand fucking times in that last month before she got diagnosed and shipped off, when she was getting sicker and sicker,
and he's gotta close his eyes and bite his lip and just breathe for a second.

And then Bucky's throwing an arm around his shoulders and pulling him in until his pointy chin is smooshed against the top of Steve's head. “You stubborn asshole,” he says softly, and that's the end of the argument. Bucky moves in, sleeps on the couch in the living room. Steve gets a roommate, and once he stops fuming he can see it's probably for the best. Sane people don't pass their nights drinking cheap gin and praying until they pass out wherever they happen to be, or drawing sketch after sketch, graceless and sloppy, like he's terrified to forget any facet of her face, needs to get every tiny detail onto paper. At least Bucky gets drunk along with him.

********

It's not even three months later that the ugly cough he's got—he always sick on the turn of the season, like the shift in the climate catches his lungs off guard every damn time—sits down right in the base of his chest, turns into pneumonia, and tries to kill him.

They don't have the cash for a hospital admission, so Bucky's dropped a small fortune at the pharmacy getting him cough syrups and chest rubs and snake oil and every other Goddamn thing that've never worked in the past and aren't working now. Steve got the sack a week ago—he tries to keep working through it, knows they can't afford him not bringing in cash right now, but then he coughs up a good-sized blood clot in the storeroom and swoons like a damsel and the printers have to let him go after that. So he hits the street to try and find work for the first couple of days, but now—

Jesus, he's been stuck in bed for three days now. He can't even scrape himself outta bed to have a shower—Lord knows he's tried, and just about swooned again. Like the hapless dame in a dime novel, for fuck's sakes.

Bucky's working every shift he can get at the garage, trying to keep them afloat. Mrs Barnes swings through in the morning—she's left a pot of potato soup cooling on the stove—and their neighbour Mrs Finnegan is going to look in on him this afternoon. In the gap in between… Steve's got real familiar with the cracks up the wall and into the ceiling. He's got a book and his sketchbook to hand, but it all gets a bit blurry after the first couple minutes concentrating. It's all a bit blurry, regardless. That cough he just had—thought he was gonna bring up a lung—and he's still not really caught his breath after, so everything's gone a little hazy and—and of course his shitty heart’s joining the party, starting to flutter and hiccup. Shit, shit, everything hurts. It really fucking hurts.

And—Lord, is that the door? Sounds like a knocking at the door. His bed’s still in the front room, so it's not far to get to the door. It's just across the room.

Sitting up. Head swims. Brief grey-out—passes. Okay then. Legs outta bed, feet on the floor. So far, so good. Breathe here for a second. Little grey haze around the edges, but not bad. He's actually feeling better, really. Lots better than he was yesterday, might even be on the mend. Okay, shift and stand and—

—oh Christ, not like—

Fuck, his head.
From there:

Christ, everything hurts, why can't he get a good breath, what's this—

“Oh God, Steven. Steve!” Hands fluttering, tugging, pulling at his wrist and pushing his hair back and—Jesus, they're cold, they're like ice on his skin. He hisses, shudders, and then—

Lurching, up, and the grey breaks, he's being manhandled. Fuck, he hates it so much, bullies always flinging him around like he's a dame, and never mind that he kind of is a dame sometimes. He flings out an elbow, and it's like moving through mud, connects but doesn't do much. “Fuck off,” he says, or tries to, comes out more of a mumble. But then—soft, and ugh, the sheets are cold and wet with his sweat still—

Back into the grey mud, cold and clinging and thick as porridge, and the weight on his chest is like someone's sitting on it, until—

“—sent for the doctor, and sent Mikey to fetch you home. I didn't know what else to do,” a voice is saying, soft and feminine, and some stupid fucking kid part of his brain really wants it to be his Mam’s voice. But it can’t be: she's dead, and suddenly that hurts so much it sucks the breath out of him, one more lance of pain punching through the bleeding tissue and bone of his chest—

“Thank you, ma’am. If you hadn't found him, I just…” Bucky's voice. Steve turns his head, feels the damp pillow against his cheek, tries to open his eyes but the grey mud and the dark is sucking at him again, toes feet ankles knees—

The wet suck of mud in his chest, in his throat, and it's dark again until—

Cold wet cloth at his lips. It hurts like ice pressed to a burn, but where the water is bleeding into his mouth feels like a desert blooming after rain. He tries to swallow, coughs instead, and oh Jesus that hurts, phlegm and blood rattling around in the cage of his ribs like bullets—

Grey mud. Crippling weight. Rising pain filling the cage of his ribs like water lapping up and up over the sides of a sinking boat, and it's dark for a long time until—

Quiet. It's quiet and dark. He doesn't need to cough anymore. He's so warm he might melt, so warm he feels like he might be glowing, and his lungs feel like they were poured from lead. He can hear Bucky's soft breathing, his sleep breathing, and there's—handcuff? No, talons—fingers around his wrist, cool and firm, twitching with sleep.

And then darkness for a long time, the endless bleak slog of trying to find a way through the grey and the cold and the mud, and then there's a cool hand on his forehead, slick with oil, and—Latin. Prayers. Is he that much a sinner that he needs prayer to fix him? Probably, let me count the ways: wrath, lust, pride—

Dark for even longer this time, and then—

Ice, pressed to his face, either side, colder than anything, colder than a winter night, and he sucks in a breath, chokes on it. Can hear his teeth chattering. There's… there's a perfume in the air, one that makes him want to open his mouth and pores and chest and breathe it in with all of him, but the grey blanket of mud over him weighs too much, too much to even open his eyes. Still, that fragrance—
Apples, honey, flowers, green things shooting in spring. Apples apples apples, like being buried in a pile of just too-ripe fruit, sweet and overwhelming.

“Here,” says a voice, and—Ulfadhir, it's Ulfadhir, and there’s an icicle shoving between his lips—no, it's a thumb, a thumb wedging his mouth open, and then there's a trickle, something warm and wet pressed against the dry and bleeding wasteland of his mouth. He tastes apples, and it's like the perfume but magnified, exploding across his tongue like dawn rolling over a pitch-dark landscape. He moans, cracked and broken and thin as an unloved ghost. “That's it,” Ulfadhir says, and more of the juice trickles onto his lips. “That's right. I haven't given you permission to die, you little shit. Eat up, that's it.”

The juice is sweeter than sunlight, and the grey blanket lifts just enough for him to work his tongue, purse his lips, try to chase every trace of sweetness. More juice, and then a fingertip with the lightest trace of pulped fruit dots onto his tongue and he moans again.

By the time he can open his eyes, Ulfadhir is feeding him tiny slivers of apple flesh with his fingers. “There you are,” he says, and his voice is very level, face neutral like he's bored shitless, but Steve can read the lie: the subtle tension in his hands, in the hard lines of his neck. He's got the apple in one hand, long slivers sliced out of it, and a neat little throwing blade in the other hand.

“What—” Steve starts, chokes a little, stops and clears his throat of what feels like weeks of accumulated gunk and phlegm and old blood. It only hurts like swallowing razor blades—improvement. “What's going on?” he asks.

“You tried to die,” Ulfadhir says. “Again. Twice in one year just seems attention seeking to me—open up.” Steve opens up, obedient, receives another morsel of sweet apple flesh, chews and swallows. “Some pestilence of the lungs—”

“Pneumonia?”

“As you say,” Ulfadhir agrees, cuts off a wider chunk of apple this time and jams it into Steve's mouth without waiting for him to open.

“How long?” Steve asks, around the mouthful of fruit. His eyes are clearing, and there's a whole sense of his body stirring awake again, and he's desperately aware of feeling grimy with old sweat and having been stuck in bed for too damn long, ground into him between his toes and in the crack of his ass and in his hair. Everything aches, prickling like a limb waking up after he's pinched off the blood flow lying on it overnight.

“Oh, perhaps three-fourths of a moon? Keep eating,” Ulfadhir says, shoves another slice of fruit into Steve's gaping mouth.

“Three weeks?” Steve asks, and his voices cracks and wobbles like it hasn't since he was fifteen, and then he crunches and swallows again, awake enough now that—Holy Mother, what is he eating? It's crisp as ice cubes, sweeter than honey, goes down like a ball of liquid sunshine, and he can feel warmth and light pooling in his belly. “What is that?” he asks, staring at the apple in Ulfadhir's hand. Its skin is supple and golden, flesh the white of fresh cream, and it's somehow solid, very real, like everything around it is turned to props and painted-on set backdrops by the weight of it.

Ulfadhir twists his wrist casually and the apple is gone, lifts the empty hand to his mouth to suck the traces of juice off his fingertips. “Better if you don't ask,” he says. “Better if you don't know. Suffice to say I owe an odious witch a favour now, and that no one can ever know that I even had such a thing, let alone brought it here, let alone fed it to a mortal. Oh, also: it may cure you or kill you, we weren't sure. Such things are not meant for mortal flesh.”
“What?” Steve asks, inane and wheezing a little.

“Well, you were dying regardless—it wasn't much of a gamble.”

“You didn't think you should ask me first?” Steve says, yells, voice rasping as the volume climbs until he breaks off, coughs hard again, feels more phlegm shift and lift. Jesus, it *hurts*—like he's flossing his airways with fucking piano wire.

“And how was I to ask you anything when you'd not roused to waking in almost five days?” Ulfadhir snaps, and jams the point of the knife into the frame of Steve's bed. “You lay as one *dead*. Your holy man was brought in to mutter superstition over your body. I did what only I could have, and you're alive to scorn me because of it.”

Steve gapes, swallows, lifts both hands—Christ, he's weak as a half-starved kitten—to comb his hair back from his face. “Okay,” he says at last. “I guess—okay. Thank you.”

“Don't speak of it,” Ulfadhir says. “In earnest: the less said of such things, the safer we both are.” He makes little flicking movements with his hands, dispelling gestures, and Steve can hear the subtle ripple and melting away of some type of warding, a veil like nothing he's felt before, and he wonders whose gaze Ulfadhir was deflecting.

Steve doesn't die. Not of pneumonia, and not of the mystical fucking apple-shaped substance. And when Bucky returns half an hour later, Ulfadhir throws the seeming of a doctor over himself and swans out before Bucky can ask too many questions, leaving him stood frozen and staring, Steve sitting up in the bed, worn and pale and thin as a rail but awake and breathing clearly.

They stare at each other for a long moment. Bucky doesn't look too slick himself: exhausted, unshaven, a little waxy, wild-eyed and hands shaking.

“Hey Buck,” Steve says.


“Betcha thought you were going to inherit all my fabulous wealth,” Steve says, and Bucky snaps, lunges across the room and throws his arms around Steve's shoulders, buries his face in his sweaty hair.

“You piece of shit,” Bucky growls into his hair. Up close his shirt smells of a couple of days of sweat, and also candle wax and incense smoke.

“You been at church, Buck?” Steve asks, sniffing: Bucky, hard work, prayer. Good smells.

“Getting you square with God,” Bucky says. “I just blew a night’s drinking money on candles for the Saints, they'd better fucking like ‘em.”

“James Buchanan Barnes, you haven't prayed in earnest since you were eight years old,” Steve says.

“Yeah, but it was on your behalf, wasn't it? And you believe in all sorts of weird things, like God and socialism and the inherent goodness of humanity. Of course I'm gonna say some prayers on your behalf, I—” He stops, chokes, and Steve can feel the hard shudder that runs up his chest as he strangles a sob. “I thought you were gonna die, you flaming sack of crap. You fucking punk.”

It's Bucky for *you've scared the Hell outta me*. Steve pats Bucky's back and breathes in the stink of him, breathes in the clear air into lungs that are opening and blossoming, closes his eyes and sends up his own prayer—the second oldest one in the prayer book of history: *Thank you*. 
Bucky cooks dinner—broth with chunks of bacon flung in there for luck—for the both of them and updates Steve on what he's missed in neighbourhood gossip, in the radio play and Amazing Tales serials they've both been following, in the baseball league games he slept through. Steve sits in his bed—doesn't trust his legs yet, is still feeling wobbly and ethereal although his chest and head are clear as a bell, and he's lost too much damn weight, again—and watches Bucky rattle around in the kitchen, talking too loud and gesturing too wild with the knife he's using to chop bacon. He's happy, but he's also showing a little too much teeth when he laughs. He's hiding something, and Steve's got a pretty good idea of what.

“Buck,” he says gently, when a gap presents itself. “Why aren't you at work?”

And Bucky looks up from the pot of soup on the simmer, and the look he gives Steve is a JB Barnes special, drawn and pale and a little wide around the eyes: stricken and trying to be brave. And the other half of the news comes spilling out.

How Bucky doesn't have a job at the garage anymore—he's missed too many shifts fussing over Steve, and Mr Krevanek's always been real understanding but he's still got a business to run, and he can't deliver on repair work on time if he's short staffed but he can't hire someone new on if Bucky's gonna come back wanting full time hours next week—so he's had to let Bucky go. Even though Bucky's worked there since he was fifteen, and loves the work—the grease under his nails and pulling things to bits to understand how they tick, how they purr. Even though Mrs Krevanek's been here at least a couple times a week, bringing food and medicine. Even though—well. So that was one thing.

“I got work though, so we'll be okay,” Bucky says, spooning broth into bowls. “Down at the docks—you know, it ain't glamorous but it's not hard either, if you don't mind lifting. And it's better money.” He brings the bowls and spoons over, sits perched on the bed, passes Steve his bowl and starts eating with ravenous ferocity. He looks like he's lost weight too, and Steve wonders how many meals he's skipped making ends meet. He can't ask: Bucky's as proud and stubborn as he is, won't tell him a damn thing.

“Oh, Buck,” Steve says. Sucks his spoon clean and pops it to one side and then sips his broth straight from the side of the bowl. His Mam is likely doing flips of sheer outrage in her grave at his table manners—it's bad enough they're sitting and eating on the bed—but he's got a fine tremor happening in his hands and he's not sure he's steady enough to hold the bowl stable and wield a spoon. Bucky is staring at the far wall and not meeting Steve's eyes: there's more. “What else is there?”

“Well,” Bucky says. Bites his lip, combs his fingers into his hair. “Well, we've both flunked outta classes for this half of the year. I… I had to drop out, with my new work hours. You missed your final assessment piece.”

Goddamn it. “And?”

“And I've been short on the rent for three weeks now. Pretty sure Mr Cole is gonna want us gone come Monday.”

Steve lowers the bowl and rests it on his knee, suddenly wanting to puke up what little he's had. “Son of a bitch,” he says, softly and with feeling.
“I'm sorry, Stevie—”

“Jesus Christ—Buck, don't apologise. You think I can't see you've worked yourself down to gristle and bone keeping us afloat? And I couldn't even get outta bed, let alone pay my share. I can't ever pay you back—” and Bucky puts his hands up, like he's pushing away the suggestion. “So don't apologise, because you're not to blame. It's just... It's a Hell of a thing, is all.”

Bucky half smiles, fidgets and plucks at a loose thread in the bedding. “You were... what, twelve, when you guys moved into this place?”

“Something like that,” Steve agrees—maybe a year after the crash, when it stopped making sense to try and make rent on that big old place when they could make do with something cheaper, smaller, just the two of 'em. His Mam with her hair flying loose from its pins, dual-wielding bags with all of their clothes and little precious trinkets in them. He'd insisted on taking the crate with all his books and comics up the stairs himself. The O'Neils swung by, helped out with the heavier bits of furniture, and a couple of neighbours pitched in as well. Bucky came over after school and helped unpack the plates and cutlery, loaded all the books into the little shelves set up in the main room. Christ: there are a lot of memories in the wood and brick of this place.

“We'll figure it out,” Steve says, and Bucky smiles his little half smile, puts a hand on Steve's shoulder and gives him a little shake, frowns.

“Keep eating,” he says. “We gotta get some meat back on your bones,” and Steve rolls his eyes and has another slurp of broth.

******

Their new apartment is closer to the docks, fifth floor of a tenement building, all of two rooms—a living-slash-kitchen area and a bedroom. Bathrooms are shared and at the end of the hallway. Showers are cold. It's tiny, and pokey, and moans to itself in the language of old buildings whenever the wind picks up, and there are roaches in the stairwell.

On the plus side: it's a whole lot cheaper, it's closer for Bucky to get to work, and the whole building is migrants from all over, so every dinner time the mingling smells of a half-dozen different cuisines and spices all cooking at once is fucking amazing.

After eight years of life at James Place he'd thought that packing and moving on would be hard, but somehow it's just all come together. He's sold most of his Mam’s furniture—kept her bed and sold his own, kept her mirror but sold the vanity. Keeps her tiny gold crucifix necklace and gives the rest of her jewellery—it's all cheap and cheerful, she sold most everything of real value in the bad years after the crash—to the Barnes girls, who shriek over it all like seagulls over a sandwich crust. Sells her clothes. Keeps her books. After putting off dealing with her belongings for as long as he has—weeks, months—he's built it up in his head into this monolithic task he'll have to smash himself against, bloodied and weeping, but—but it's been painless. Bittersweet, trawling through the beloved detritus of a life, but painless. He feels like she's just stepped outta sight into the next room, and for the first time since she died it doesn't hurt thinking about her.

She'd loved him so much. And she wanted for him to be happy. And sitting on her bedroom floor, surrounded by old papers, her hairbrush and old bottles cleared from her vanity, he listens to Bucky singing along to the radio in the next room as he boxes up their cups and bowls and he thinks, I'm
trying, Mam.

And then moving day, and the Barnes family and the O’Neils and the Krevaneks and several lads from the garage and a couple fellas from Steve's art classes all come and somehow it's all over in a matter of hours, and Steve's turning over the last bit of cash from the sale of the furniture to Mr Cole, squaring them up, and then he's walking away from James Place for the last time, feeling—lighter, somehow.

So this is home now: two rooms on the fifth floor, drafts and creaks, overflowing bookshelves and threadbare couch, two beds crammed into the tiny bedroom, radio on the kitchen counter humming blues guitar. Bucky leaning out the kitchen window, smoking and trying to charm the cat on the fire escape with a flake of tinned fish. Steve on the couch with his knees up and sketchbook in his lap, drawing away as the light fades. It's small, it's cheap, it's ugly, but plus side: it's theirs.

Chapter End Notes

To everyone following along--so happy to have you on board, and thank you for the comments and kudos and general lovely welcome :D I'm having a blast with this thing, and I hope you are too.

And to those fanging after the explicit sexual content I promised you in the tags: strap your asses in for next week ;D
The new apartment is also a whole lot closer to the queer bars. They've been living there for a little over a month when Steve gets itchy enough to do something about that.

Living with Bucky is easy; they've been rehearsing for this their whole friendship, sacking out at each other's homes every other day of the week. Christ, when they were real small Steve's Mam would stick them in the bathtub together. So the rhythms of living with Buck come to him natural as anything—how he takes his coffee, leaves magazines lying around and boots in the entryway, his favourite radio shows and music. What he sounds like sleeping—he's not a snorer, but he does these little keening moans and talks softly to himself now and again. What he sounds like getting off with his hand late at night, and that's where the problem is starting to crop up because yeah, that's private, but also they're sharing a bedroom and Steve tries to be decent but he ain't a saint.

So he's familiar with the rustle of Bucky's shorts against the sheets as he hikes them down, just a little, and the rasp of tongue on palm before he takes himself in hand, the soft wet sounds of—and the way his breathing hitches and stutters and stalls and then falls out in a long lazy sigh afterwards. And he's also familiar with how Bucky looks coming home from his latest date with pink lipstick smears up under his jaw, reeking of perfume and satisfaction, that loose-limbed way he walks in and slumps onto the couch, grinning to himself.

Steve spends a lot of time lying about all sorts of things but he tries not to lie to himself: he wants lipstick marks on his jaw, dates and perfume, but he also wants to hump the Goddamn mattress every time he overhears Bucky abusing himself in the small hours of the night.

He just wants, in every direction, and it's a sickness, and he can't get a girl—Lord knows he tries, manages a single date once in a blue moon, but they want marriage prospects, the tall guy with a solid job, and Steve's an unemployed art student who's likely to die under a stiff breeze. So girls are out, but—

Well, that's where the queer bars come in.

Turns out with marriage off the table with a fella, they're not so worried about Steve being a shit long-term investment. All of which is to say: it's easier to get a guy, and when the shapeless wanting, the itch under his skin gets bad enough—

He loses his virginity with a fella called Charlie. Meets him in the Black Cat and follows him back to his student housing—he's a full time college boy, studying… law? Accounting? Something Godawful dull, anyway—where they crawl onto the narrow single bed and Charlie hikes Steve's pants off, settles in between his legs and sucks all his brains out through his dick.

“Oh, God,” Steve says after, like he's just been kicked in the head, and Charlie laughs out loud, a little breathless, kneeling up on the bed to unbble his belt and shuck his own trousers. He's cinnamon brown eyes and dark copper hair, wiry build and square hands and—oh, and there's his cock, flushed dark pink against the red-brown curls at the base. “Hey,” Steve says, like some kind of idiot, and he sits up and moves over enough so Charlie can lie down in his spot.

“Did you just hey my johnson?” Charlie asks, lying back.

“Uhh,” Steve says, and drops his head to mouth at the crease where groin meets thigh. Smell of—Jesus, the smell is just male, sweat and precome, and he tastes faintly of salt, and if Steve ever had any question about whether he's really up for this or not, it's gone as soon as that scent hits his nose:
it bypasses his brain and talks directly to his dick, just flat does it for him, like he could bury his face
in here and only come up once a day or so for sunlight and a hot meal. He hums and noses his way
deeper, and then lifts his head again. “Okay, fair warning before I put my teeth anywhere near your
personals: I've got no idea what I'm doing.”

“You want me to talk you through it?” Charlie asks, propping himself up on his elbows and meeting
Steve's eyes. He's got a lopsided smile that makes Steve's chest pull tight and ache, because it's
almost—but it's not, it's not him, the right look on the wrong face.

“Yeah,” Steve rasps, and then he grabs Charlie’s cock by the base to hold it steady, leans in and
sucks the head into his mouth.

When he gets home he takes a shower and scrubs his teeth and swigs a couple fingers of gin, twitchy
about the thought Bucky might smell sex on him and know he's rooming with an invert, but when
Bucky staggers in a couple hours later he's cheerfully drunk, collapses across his bed fully clothed
and all he can talk about is Maggie, how gorgeous she looks dancing and how her legs go right up to
her armpits, the gams on her, Stevie.

He's so doll dizzy Steve could have a half-dozen fellas in bed with him and Bucky wouldn't notice,
and Steve props his head up in one hand and listens to Bucky's devotional until he drops off, still
fully clothed. And—and it doesn't hurt. And he's not itching and wanting, he's… warm. There's a
pool at the base of his spine where the fires of making and unmaking collect and roil, lazy and slow,
when he's not actively using his sorcery, and it's like that pool has been stirred up a bit, coils of fire
arcing up gently into his abdomen, warming. Like it should be glowing through his skin. He feels
like a cat in front of a fireplace. And Bucky is purely happy, had a good night with a gorgeous dame,
and… and it stings that he can't tell Buck about his own night but that's just a small lie, a lie of
omission, a white lie that hurts no one. His soul can bear the weight of it.

******

It's not a regular thing.

It's not like he has a sweetheart or anything—he can't—most fairies have secret lives, he gets that,
but he's got two secret lives and he can't risk bleed-over from one into the other, not just to get his
dick touched on the regular. So it's only when the skin hunger really puts its claws into him—only
when prayer and gin don't help and he can’t drown himself in art or a book or sorcery—only then
that he'll dab a hint of lipstick on and slip out the door on a Saturday night. He rotates between the
three different queer bars within walking distance, careful about not getting recognised anywhere.
Never gives his full name.

It's not much, but it's enough. He's got his studies and his art and his work, he's got Bucky and
Dodgers games and lazy arguments over whose turn it is to sort the laundry, he's got Ulfadhir and
sorcery and a growing number of dresses hidden in his clothes trunk, he's got his queer bars and
blurry Saturday nights, and never the twain shall meet, each part of his life hermetically sealed away
from the rest until—

It's maybe a year after they first shack up together and it's a Thursday, it's any Thursday. Ulfadhir's
showing him how to make ghostlights—he can get a few stray sparkles of light to come up out of his
cupped palms if he's really focussing, but nothing strong and steady enough to read or navigate by—
and it's only mid-afternoon, and the radio's softly spilling jazz tunes in the kitchen and Steve's coffee
is cooling on the narrow side table and all is right with the world. So when Ulfadhir looks up, and his eyes narrow, and then he grins at nothing and gets up, Steve knows immediately to suspect the worst.

"Nothing good ever comes from that look on your face," Steve says.

Ulfadhir gazes coolly at him. "How is one so young, so jaded?"

"I've had a lot of exposure to this real cynical windbag. Hey, where are you going?"

Ulfadhir is halfway into the bedroom. He looks back, eyes heavy-lidded. "I've an appointment to keep. Astonishingly I can't occupy all of my hours with teaching children's trifles to mortals." He sweeps into the bedroom and Steve follows him, bewildered, because the only way out of here from the bedroom is via—

"You're going out the window," Steve says flatly.

"How observant," Ulfadhir says, managing to look graceful perched on the windowsill.

"Because the door's not good enough for you now?"

"Don't be tedious, girl. Consistency is death. An unpredictable enemy is a dangerous one." He studies Steve for another heartbeat, and then smiles crooked. "Keep working on opening the channels into your palms. Also, another task: every room that you enter, you must find another way out of. Not a door! Surprise me and I may bring you a gift."

"Bring coffee," Steve says; Ulfadhir brought him a small bag of the stuff a few months ago, real beans, dark and rich and completely uncut with chicory or any of the other crap folks are cutting coffee with these days, trying to stretch it out. Now Steve is ruined for anything else.

Ulfadhir shakes his head. "I really shouldn't feed your tragic addiction," he says, and then gives Steve a feral grin, turns away, and lets himself fall forward out of the window.

They're on the fifth floor. Steve throws himself forward in time to see a falcon flare its wings, pull up from its dive and soar away down the street, banking behind another tenement building and disappearing from view.

"Of course you can turn into a bird. Of course," Steve mutters, pulls the window closed and goes back out into the main room to wash the extra cup and tidy up the furniture and generally hide the fact that there's been someone here. He gets as far as the kitchen, as far as washing up Ulfadhir's mug in the sink, when he—oh shit—

—hears the clunk of a work boot hitting the bottom of the front door where it sticks in the frame, the creak of hinges, Bucky's heavy boots coming off at the doorway as he's calling out, "Hey, Steve, you home?" and then a ringing silence.

Steve's frozen at the sink. He's in plain Goddamned sight and he knows Bucky has to have seen him by now, standing there in a pretty little dress and kitten heels, and if he'd heard Bucky coming he could have thrown up a veil or something but his shitty fucking hearing has betrayed him and he's caught, stone cold caught. He puts the mug on the edge of the sink to dry with shaking hands and turns to face the music.

Bucky's standing there, hanging onto the doorframe with one hand and his lunch pail with the other like they're the only things connecting him to the world, and he's gone pale and his eyes are wild and his jaw is a little unhinged like someone's just sucker punched him in the gut. He's not blinking or
breathing. Steve dries his hands on the tea towel and faces him square on, because he might as well get this over with. "Hey, Buck."

It's one of his favourite dresses, pale sage green with a white lacy collar. His shoes are white with lace cutouts in the leather. His lipstick is a very soft pink, and he's got his mother's gold chain with her crucifix and the pearl-drop pendant Ulfadhir gave him for his twentieth birthday around his neck. He looks sweet as a button and unmistakably queer as Hell.

Bucky drops his lunch pail, staggers like he's drunk, turns and walks back out the door. Steve sucks in a breath, leans back against the counter, bony fingers biting into the edge, and stares at the door, stuck half-open in its frame.

“Christ, Buck,” Steve says, and the words come out like he's choking on them, and then he's gotta close his eyes and bite his lip and work on not curling up like a kicked dog, like he's been gutted, because he can't—oh God, not like this, please—

And then there's a thunk, the door jammed closed again, and Steve looks up, finds Bucky marching across the room at him, hands up and eyes wild and Steve flinches and braces himself—because he knows Bucky's capable of terrible violence and he never thought he'd be on the business end of it but this is obviously the thing that'll do it, finding out like this that the fella you've shared a bedroom with for the last year and change is a fucking invert. And Bucky's grabbing him by the hips and shoving him back against the sink—

—and kissing him, hard and devouring, tongue surging in as Steve gasps and opens and then Bucky's frenching the Hell out of him, and it's all tongue and sloppy and clacking teeth until Bucky finally breaks off for a proper breath, pressing his forehead to Steve's, pawing at his hair.

"What the Hell, Buck," Steve pants, and he's sweating and his heart is lurching in his chest like it's trying to win a fight with all the other soft stuff in there, and—

"Christ, Stevie, fuck," Bucky says. "You're so Goddamn pretty. How come you've never dressed like this before?" and then he slants his mouth down over Steve's again, holding his head cupped like something precious and licking deep into Steve's mouth again and Steve's—

God Almighty, Lord help him: he's had guilty drunk jack-off sessions imagining Bucky's mouth on his, imagining his big hands biting into the meat of Steve's hips, and this is—he wouldn't have fucking dared to imagine this. The kitchen, the dress, the lick-taste of coffee in his own mouth and cigarettes in Bucky's. It's worse than he coulda imagined, it's better, and it's insane and he might die tomorrow, if his heart quits or that thunderclap stroke the docs have threatened him with knocks him on his ass as he crosses the street, so—so he lets go of the bench and brings his hands up, tangles his fists in the front of Bucky's work shirt, rumbles a moan into his mouth, kisses back.

Bucky sucks on his lower lip, bites down enough to make Steve gasp, presses kisses down his jaw and neck. He's pawing at Steve's chest through the cotton of his bodice, and Steve arches into it, growls and grabs for Bucky's suspenders, pulls them off his shoulders, fists the fabric of his shirt again and hauls it up 'til it snaps at his armpits. "Off," he gasps, tugging ineffectually, and Bucky stops kissing his neck just long enough to rip the shirt off and throw it to the floor before diving back in, mouthing and biting at Steve's neck hard enough to bruise.

Steve moans, tugs at Bucky's hair until he comes back up and they mash their mouths together again, kissing with zero finesse, and this time it's Steve who mouths his way down Bucky's jaw, his five o'clock shadow, the tendons and sweat-salt lines of his neck. He's short enough he's gotta snug in close to Bucky's body to reach everything, and suddenly his belly is pressed against Bucky's groin and he can feel the line of his cock in his pants, hot and swollen and hard and oh, shit, yes, please. He grabs
onto Bucky's hips to anchor himself and tries not to fuck against his thigh, dizzy and flying apart at the seams.

"Fuck, doll. That's all for you." Bucky rolls his hips to grind his cock against Steve's abdomen, snugs his thigh between Steve's and presses against his groin, and the pressure against his dick makes Steve choke off a keening moan and put his teeth into the skin of Bucky's neck. "Is that for me? Christ, what you—so good, Stevie, you're aces. You gonna let me have you?" and Steve just kind of presses his face against Bucky's collarbone and blushes red as Hell and nods yes.

Buck rumbles low, grabs Steve by the hips and turns him in place and shoves so he's leaning on the kitchen counter, a little bent over. Flips up his skirt and grabs his panties and hikes them down to his knees. He's bent over Steve, framing his body like scaffolding, one hand pressed where Steve's hands are on the counter and the other hand going down to cup Steve's cock and—slow, he's painful slow, calluses catching on his skin and Steve wiggles, gasps, caught between thrusting forward into Bucky's hand or grinding back against his cock where he can feel it, snug against his bare ass, a hard hot line straining against the fly of his trousers. He settles on rolling his hips in circles, trying to get the best of both worlds.

Bucky's licking and biting at Steve's neck just behind his ear, and he's between nips he's mumbling, feverish and low and stream-of-consciousness: "I'm gonna put it in you, Stevie. I'm gonna fuck you senseless. Won't be today—" and Steve gasps, shudders, the ratcheting tightness into his spine letting go all at once because Lord, that's—that's a bridge he ain't crossed yet, that's unexplored country, and —"Ain't got anything to open you up with and I won't hurt you," Buck's saying, words coming blurry with his lips pressed into Steve's skin, “but I—Christ, you're a fucking pinup, darlin’, look at you—" and then he drops to his knees and grabs Steve's ass, spreads his cheeks wide and licks a scalding wet line across his asshole.

Steve keens, an animal noise that falls outta him like his dick and mouth are in a circuit and his brain’s not privy to any of it. Drops his head to rest on the bony nest of his fingers and shoves his ass back at Bucky's face. He's shaking, can't stop shaking, flushing hot and cold, gasps falling outta him like sobs, just a total fucking car crash in a pretty dress, but it seems that's just what JB Barnes likes and—there's slick wet heat and that's his tongue, that's his tongue like—like Steve's a girl and—and he's circling around Steve's asshole and then and dipping in with a pointed tongue tip. It's hot and wet and too Goddamn filthy for words.

"Oh God, Buck," he moans, and it's half protest because Christ that's unhygienic but it's so—so much, so fucking good. “I can’t—I—Oh, Christ—” Steve grinds out, hips rolling, and then that slick tongue is pressing deeper inside, licking deeply into him and Steve has to lock his knees to keep from crumbling to the floor in a heap of muslin and nerve endings.

Bucky settles in, hands clawed into the meat of Steve's ass, teases with little licks and goes deep with his whole tongue and sucks and kisses and laps until Steve is panting, grease-fire heat licking up through his belly, wet with spit from sacrum to balls, until he's slick enough that Bucky's pressing two fingers up into his hole and learning the works, pressing kisses and little licks against his ring and—and Steve can't stop shaking, mouth open and helpless noises falling out like a cat in heat, hips twitching with stimulation and it's too much, too much for his body to hold.

And then those callused fingertips press—oh Christ oh God oh no—sweet spot, gotta be, prostate, like being fucking electrocuted, like the whole length of his spine lights up.

“Oh Christ, Buck,” Steve grits out, back arching and breath catching and Bucky groans deep and visceral, drives his tongue in deep, reaches around and grabs Steve's cock and tugs it, once, twice and—
—and Steve's soaring, falling, coming, choking on a gasp and shooting his load against the kitchen cabinet.

"Fuck, doll," Bucky growls, and Steve almost hits the floor, Bucky's arm around his waist the only thing holding him up. He's sagging, sinking back into Bucky's arms, and then they're both on the kitchen floor and he's half in Bucky's lap and Bucky's popping open the buttons of his fly with his spare hand to pull his dick out and jack it hard. It's a beautiful cock, flushed and dark and swollen, a mouthful and then some, and Steve hums and squirms in Bucky's lap just getting eyes on it, even wrung out like a dirty dishcloth as he is.

"Lord God Almighty—Stevie, darlin'," Bucky gasps, and—

"Yeah, Buck, come on," Steve says, slurring like he's drunk, and then—

And then Bucky bites down on Steve's shoulder and comes, shoots ropes of white on the floor and Steve's skirt, his arm convulsively tight around Steve's waist.

They slump against each other like abandoned buildings sagging into their foundations, panting and shaking. Bucky is kissing Steve's neck, his mouth lax and sloppy, and Steve is patting Bucky's thigh and concentrating on his breathing and heartbeat because his body's already betrayed him once today and he wouldn't put it past himself to fuck this up with an asthma attack right now. But everything is slowing and easing like it should, and his whole body is just limp and loose and glowing, the fires of making and unmaking roiling gently and sweetly in his lower belly like a nest of snakes.

He picks up Bucky's hand and kisses it, sucks off the traces of jizz on his thumb and forefinger. Bucky's breath catches, and then he gives a little broken groan against Steve's neck.

"You got any other dresses, Stevie?" he rumbles.

"I've got five other dresses," Steve says. "Shoes to match, too. And stockings for special occasions." Bucky goes still—and Steve can feel a little punched-out breath against his nape—because there's a bunch of real obvious questions sprouting outta this moment, like how long has this been going on or where the Hell do you wear this stuff or how are you paying for pretty little dresses when we're just making rent some weeks? His hand on Bucky’s thigh has pulled tight, fingers digging into muscle, and the moment drags out, breath held, waiting for that foot to drop—

And then Bucky sighs and kisses his neck again.

"You're gonna be the death of me," he mutters. Steve breathes out, hums agreement, kisses and mouths at Bucky's fingers a bit more, until they get the strength back to get up off the kitchen floor and Steve ducks into the bedroom, cleans himself up and changes back into pants and a T-shirt. By the time he emerges Bucky's cleaned the kitchen and started cooking dinner, like it's an ordinary Thursday night, like business as usual.

And the radio's on, and Bucky's boiling the Hell outta some vegetables at the stove, and when Steve wanders over Bucky only stares at him for a heartbeat before he launches into a dramatic retelling—one of the cranes at the docks broke mid-load and dropped a pallet of crated up tractor parts, almost landed straight on a guy's head, and the bosses sent a third of the lads home early while the repairs were happening—and it's normal, it's blessed normal, and Steve lets go of the fretful knots in his spine and starts setting the table. They're not gonna talk about it—he doesn't have to lie any more than he already has.
They don't talk about it, and then they don't talk about it some more, and Steve is—

Baffled. Relieved. Concentrating on his job and his sorcery and his art and everything that's not that one time he had queer sex with his best friend on the kitchen floor. Baffled again. Relieved again.

They both go to work; Steve goes to his classes and ploughs away at his homework for Ulfadhir. Bucky gets the groceries and Steve attempts to make colcannon, and only shames their ancestors a little. Bucky smokes on the fire escape and Steve draws furiously in his sketchbook, portraits and cartoons and comics and architectural studies. They listen to the radio in the evenings and argue about the Dodgers and absolutely don't talk about—anything messy.

Talking would make it all real, would mean discussing how Steve's a Goddamn fairy, would mean lying about the dresses and why he wears ‘em and what it all means, would fuck the balance of this friendship that matters more, a thousand times more to Steve than getting his rocks off.

He can see Bucky is—outta whack. Like an engine with some tiny part just off balance, still purring away but the sound is subtly changed. Smokes more and drinks more and gnaws at his lip like he does when he's overthinking something, and when he goes out the next Friday night with the girl he's been seeing, he's got a set to his shoulders like he's off to be executed instead of making time with a pretty girl in the back of a movie theatre. Her name's Stella, she's a seamstress, she's got a gorgeous smattering of freckles across her collarbones that Steve likes to imagine continues down into her décolletage, and seeing them together makes him want to chew his way through sheet metal.

When Steve sits that night—lamps out, he can navigate just fine in the dark when he's home alone, and the dark helps him concentrate—and works on directing the fires of making and unmaking through the different channels in his body, he finally gets still enough to recognise that metal-chewing feeling is jealousy. He wants to see how far down Stella's freckles go. He wants to see if Bucky's cock feels as good as it looks. He's an equal opportunities pervert. Alone in the dark, he puts his head in his hands, curses himself soft and vicious, and then goes and gets his rosary out and runs through a few dozen Paternosters and Ave Marias.

The Friday after that Bucky is late home from work, late enough that Steve's washed the paint and chalk from work off his hands, fixed dinner and eaten, left a plate out, curled up on the couch with his Mam’s copy of Rilke’s Letters. All quiet on the Brooklyn front, anyway. He's starting to think this might be it for the night, that Bucky might have gone straight to one of the dive bars close to the docks with the guys from work, when he hears work boots outside the door.

Bucky comes in with his lunch pail in one hand and a half-bottle of whiskey in the other, a shoe box tucked under his arm. He hesitates in the doorway for half a beat, then hooks the door closed with a spare finger and says, "Hey, Stevie."

"Hey, Buck," Steve says, marking his place in the book with a finger. "Dinner's on the bench, if you're hungry."

"Aw, you're too good to me," Bucky says cheerfully. Dumps his lunch pail and brings the plate and whiskey over to the couch with him. The box is still tucked under his arm. He stands next to the couch and eats briskly, shovelling in the beans and bacon with his fork.

"Your mother would disown you if she could see you right now," Steve tells him, mouth twisting into a grin. Bucky's been drinking, has a cigarette behind one ear, hasn't washed his hands or
anything else, is standing and eating in the living room, is generally a disgrace to the Barnes name. Bucky snorts around a mouthful of beans.

"My mother is just relieved I was born a boy, and can't get knocked up with my slatternly ways," he says, and jams some more bacon into his mouth.

"She's not giving you grief again? You're not that whorish a slattern," Steve says. "Not lately, anyway. You've been with Stella for what, three months?" but Bucky is shaking his head: no.

"Stella and me are history, Steve." He puts his plate on the end table, uncaps the whiskey and has a swig.

"Oh, Buck. Since when?"

"Since last Friday," he says, has another pull at the whiskey, and then offers the bottle to Steve. Steve takes it and has a sip, gives his hands something to do while he turns this fact over in his head and tries to make sense of it. Bucky—his best friend—had busted up with his sweetheart a week ago and he's only just hearing about it now. How did this—but. But then this whole topic is in no-man's-land right now, a natural consequence of that first silence. Can't talk about who you aren't kissing without at least thinking about... Well, anyway.

Steve takes another, bigger swig of the bottle and passes it back to Bucky. "I'm sorry, pal."

"Yeah, well." Bucky has another slug of whiskey and then sits the cap on the mouth of it and rests it on the end table. "She was a lot smarter than me. She was never going to put up with my horseshit for too long," and Steve frowns and opens his mouth, goes to protest because that's flat not true and it makes him crazy how Bucky always shits on himself, but then Bucky's continuing, "Anyway, I bought—I mean. Well, I got you something."

He takes the shoe box from under his arm and puts it on the couch. He's looking everywhere but at Steve's face, absently working the knuckles of his right hand. Grabs the whiskey up like he's missing it already and has another quick pull.

Steve stares at the box. It's not his birthday and it's not Christmas for another month yet, and they're broke enough that usually when one of them is feeling flush they spring for red meat or game tickets or some booze that wasn't made in a bathtub, not... not whatever this is.

He picks up the shoe box. Tries to give Bucky a little smile but he's still not doing eye contact, staring with great interest somewhere over Steve's shoulder. "What's the occasion?"

"I—Just open 'em, okay?"

Steve opens the box. The smell of leather hits his nose, rich and sharp. The shoes are black and glossy with a white toe and a slender ankle strap, heels a little more daring than his other pairs but still respectable. They look like the perfect size. These are beautiful shoes, are ladies shoes. He's not sure what's happening. He lifts one out of the box with a shaking hand.

"Buck?" he says, and waits until Bucky finally looks at him. Buck's jaw is set like it gets just before he wades into a fight, but there's something hallowed out around his eyes like he's hurting, like he's bleeding out, and Steve's dizzy with the sense of his power in this moment, to fuck this up or make it right for them both. "You got these for me?" he asks softly.

"If you..." Bucky starts. Looks away at the wall again. Shoves his hands in his pockets. "Yeah, Stevie. They're for you."
Steve takes a deep breath and wets his lips. "Would you like me to wear them?"

Bucky looks back at him again, searching. He answers very soft but clear: "If you want to."

Steve puts the shoe back in the box, tucks the shoe box against his hip, crosses into the bedroom and closes the door. Puts the shoes on his bed and drops to his knees next to them and rests his forehead on his closed fists. He's partly praying—the oldest and most honest prayer, help me—and partly just breathing and unpacking his—everything, his everything, the messy tangle of confusion and fear and hunger and jealousy and stupid animal panic that's been nesting in the back of his head for two weeks now. The small part of him that wonders if Bucky hates him for being queer is getting smaller by the minute.

Christ, these are really nice shoes.

He takes a deep breath and lets it out, presses his fists to his chest and uses one of the centring tricks that Ulfadhir taught him until all the flailing bits of his mind come together and cohere into a single-pointed understanding: Bucky's opened a door. Whether they go through it now is up to Steve.

His ladies clothes are in the bottom of his clothes chest, underneath a couple of his mother's old blankets. He hauls his dresses out, picks the navy frock with the fine mist of white polka dots, sweetheart neckline, puffy shoulders. He slicks on a little lipstick in a shade just a touch peachier than his natural lip colour, combs his hair back from his face, and straps on the shoes. They make him feel very tall, make the line of his calves look long and elegant. He takes one more deep breath and throws open the bedroom door, steps out into the lamp light.

Bucky is sitting on the couch with his forehead pressed against his fists. He looks up, looks—raw, astonished. Stands up slow like he's approaching a stray animal and doesn't want it to startle.

Steve breaks the silence: "What do you think?"

Bucky's voice comes out as a rasp. "They look good."

They stand at either side of the living room and study each other openly. Steve can feel the silence pulsing in time with his heartbeat. It's not uncomfortable—if anything it feels like some kind of binding is falling away from him. He feels lighter than he has in a long time when he steps forward. His heels strike percussion on the floorboards.

Bucky meets him in the middle of the room, cups his jaw in big callused hands and kisses him. The last time this happened it came from left field for them both and they made out like feral dogs fighting; this is softer and slower and so fucking thorough, Bucky's thumbs running over his cheekbones as he licks Steve's mouth open and explores it deeply. Steve runs his hands deep into Bucky's hair, runs his fingernails over his scalp and down the back of his neck, feels goosebumps rise on wakened skin where his nails have been.

Bucky huffs out a laugh, breaks the kiss, pulls Steve in closer and holds him, pressing kisses to the top of his head, open hands running real slow up and down Steve's back, from the nape of his neck to the top of his ass. Steve breathes in the smell of Bucky—tobacco and whiskey and work sweat and salt water and mechanical grease—and fists his hands into the front of Bucky's work shirt, mouths at his neck and the top of his shoulder, licking and biting and sucking softly. They're swaying slow in place together like some ocean current that's bigger than either of them is stirring them together. He can feel Bucky's dick against his lower belly—less of a height difference, with these heels on—and he's not hard, not yet, but there's weight and heat there just the same.

"Buck," he whispers, and stops, and Bucky finishes for him:
"Can I take you to bed, Stevie?"

Something catches fire in Steve's lower belly, and he grabs Bucky by the hair on his nape and pulls his head down and kisses him with lots of tongue, with every nasty trick he's learned in anonymous beds and the back rooms of bars—and he might not get much chance to practice but he can learn real quick with the right incentive—and when they break for a breath Bucky's mouth is kiss-bruised red, eyes heavy-lidded and hazy. "Yes," Steve breathes against Bucky's mouth, "Yes, Buck, let's—" and then Bucky picks him up, grabs him under his ass so his legs kick around Bucky's hips, and physically carries him into the bedroom.

He's popped down seated on the edge of Bucky's bed, and Bucky cups his jaw and kisses him again, long and slow, brings his hands to the line of buttons running down Steve's sternum and opens up the front of his dress almost down to his navel. Steve's got his hands up and under Bucky's shirt, smoothing his palms over lean muscle and the soft curl of chest hair and nipples and—

And Bucky plants a kiss on his forehead and darts over to Steve's bed, rips off the blankets and pillows and mounds them all in his arms and brings them back over to Bucky's bed and drops the pile in the middle. Steve gives him a look, and Bucky grins crookedly, says, "You don't need any of that over there." He grabs the front of Steve's dress and hauls it down over his shoulders, enough to bare his chest. "I'm keeping you right here," he says, wild-eyed and grinning, and then he hauls his own shirt off overhead and throws it to one side, pushes Steve back into the pile of bedding and crawls over him, starts to mouth and lick and bite at his chest, his collarbones, his nipples.

Steve hums and arches into it, licks his lips, grabs around for something to anchor himself to—at the bedding, at Bucky's shoulders. He looks down—messy dark hair, the long naked line of Bucky's back and the dark fabric of his pants stretched tight over the curve of his ass, and the wet hot mouth around his left tit and—and the fire in his gut stirs and coils up like a punch. He's gotta grit his teeth around a hungry animal sound. His cock is a throbbing weight in his panties. "Buck," he gasps, low and urgent, "Sweetheart. I want you in my mouth."

Bucky pulls back, affects a scandalised look that'd be a lot more convincing if he wasn't such a whore himself. "Stevie!" he says, "Where'd a nice girl like you get a filthy idea like that?"

"God, come on," Steve says, sitting forward and grabbing for him, and Bucky inches back just enough to stay out of grabbing range, unbuttons his fly and pulls out his cock and strokes it, slow and firm. He's hard and flushed and long, and Steve rumbles a moan, legs falling open without any guidance from his upstairs brain.

"This what you want, doll?" Bucky asks, and Steve blushes like a fucking tomato, wets his lips, nods. "Christ, look at you. I'd tease you, I'd make you wait, but—God help me, I'm not a saint." He shucks his pants and undershorts, kisses Steve again on his mouth, neck, collarbone, crawls naked onto the bed and leans into the pile of bedding like a lazy cat. His cock juts up from his lap, jumping and slick at the tip, curling hair dark at the base.

It's definitely within grabbing range now and Steve's dizzy with how bad he wants—everything, everything he can get his hands on, gets his mouth on, for as long as this lasts. He wets his lips, palms at his own dick through the skirt and panties to get just a little pressure, and leans in to lap up that salt-slick from the slit of Bucky's cock.

Bucky gasps, drops his head back against the pillows, shifts a little like he wants to thrust. "Fuck, doll," he breathes. "That's—perfect, you're..." Brings one hand up to cup Steve's cheek and rubs the pad of his thumb against his wet lower lip. Steve strangles a moan, sucks Bucky's thumb into his mouth and rubs his tongue against it, gasps and lets it go and sucks on the head of his cock instead, tonguing and working his mouth to get it deeper, greedy. Bucky's breath hitches and catches and he's
trembling silent and still for a heartbeat, before—

"Oh, Mother of God. Darlin'," he groans, and one hand's petting Steve's hair, real light, no pressure, and the other hand comes down to Steve's lap, pushes his skirt up and rubs his cock through the panties. Steve jolts and moans and drools, grabs the base of Bucky's cock to hold it steady and sucks as much as he can into his mouth, works it with his tongue and lips. He can feel it jumping and throbbing against his tongue, can feel the muscles in Bucky's thigh tense and relax under his hand, and he feels so fucking powerful and heated up he might catch fire.

Suddenly the muscles in Bucky's thighs tense up all at once, and then the hand in Steve's hair fists and then he's sitting up, tugging at Steve's shoulder to bring him up so their mouths can crash together. Bucky's licking deep into his mouth and Steve realises he's licking up the taste of his own pre-come, and somehow he gets even hotter, rutting up against the press of Bucky's hand on his cock. "What you do to me, Stevie, shit. I don't wanna—I got plans for you."

Steve hums into the next kiss, crawls half into Bucky's lap, trying for a lithely muscled thigh or hip to rub his dick against, but Bucky picks him up and plants him on his back in the pile of bedding again, hauls Steve's panties down his legs and off. The shoes have stayed on, and Steve's glad—they started this, it feels right that they see it through.

"I wanna fuck you," Bucky rasps. Steve stills, looks him in the eye. Bucky's hair-mussed and kiss-bruised, his mouth red and wet, eyes pools of black with the finest rim of grey. He's looking back at Steve, studying him just as close, waiting for an answer before he touches him again, and that makes the answer real clear for Steve: and he wonders how he could have thought for a second that Bucky would ever, ever hurt him.

"I want that too," Steve says, and Bucky pushes the hair back from Steve's forehead and kisses him there, dives off the bed for his tiny chest of drawers in the corner and pulls a jar of Vaseline out of the bottom. He crawls back onto the bed between Steve's legs, kisses him on his knee and thigh and on the tip of his cock.

"I'll make it good for you, I swear to God, doll. I'll make it so good," he breathes, slicking up his fingers from the jar and then mouthing at Steve's dick again and as he's thrusting up at that hot mouth a slick finger presses against his ring, slides up and down and around real gentle like they've got all night and no place to be.

Steve's mouth falls open and—and he still hasn't, doesn't—he's not an all-the-way punk, and this is—is—oh, slick and warm and—so fucking sensitive, baby-skin tender—he's read pamphlets, and he's given another fella a couple of fingers, with some olive oil to ease the way. He'd talked Steve through it until the talk broke down into crying and then came like a firecracker. So Steve knows the theory, and—he fists the bedding and makes a strangled noise like he might be dying.

"Buck, Jesus," he gasps, and he can feel Bucky's mouth twisting into a feral grin where it's pressed to his hip, and then he hooks a finger inside Steve's asshole, just to the first knuckle, rubbing against the rim and the muscle, and Steve moans, low and strangled, arches his spine and squirms—into it, away from it, every which way.

It's easy and gentle and so so slow, Bucky rubbing and soothing and mumbling filthy devotionals into the skin of Steve's inner thigh. He's slicking up again every time he adds another finger or goes a little deeper, gotta have used half the fucking jar by now, and—oh—and when it stings he's—all open-mouthed kisses to Steve's dick and thighs and—

—and oh no oh God—and now he's three fingers deep in Steve and—clawing, panting, he's got a hand tangled in Bucky's hair, slippery with sweat—he's found Steve's sweet spot and he's Goddamn
merciless, stroking over those tangled nerve endings again and again and—and Steve can't stop shaking, shoves his wrist into his mouth to muffle the noises he's making. Like a cat in heat. He's going to die like this, his fucking heart will give out, and what a way to go: he hopes they engrave it on his headstone. “Please, Buck, Holy Christ, please,” he gasps, and Bucky kisses his thigh, backs off on the finger-fucking half an inch.

"You ready, darlin'? I won't hurt you, I can do this all night if I gotta," he says, and it's as much a threat as a promise, and Steve bites back a sob at the thought.

"I'm ready, m'ready, come on," he says, and Bucky pulls his fingers out, grabs him by the hips and flips him over onto his belly, and Steve writhe and grinds his cock against the bed, gasps as Buck hooks a finger back inside him—just one, just casually, like he's holding his place in a book. Then—blunt pressure, slick and hot and—oh fuck—and he's opening, opening wide, Bucky fucking into him slow but very steady, one hand planted next to Steve's shoulder and the other on his ass, bruising-hard, holding him open, anchoring them both.

Steve's mouth falls open again, silent like he's been punched in the gut and had the wind knocked out of him. This is… this is too much. It's heat and stretch and fullness and burn and sweet pressure bigger than words like pleasure or pain, bigger than Steve. He focuses on Bucky's cock in him and his hands bracketing him, on his own breath and heartbeat, on not falling apart.

Bucky's seated all the way inside him now, pelvis flush against the curve of Steve's ass, and he's panting and dropping kisses on Steve's shoulders and shoulder blades and neck, everywhere the dress doesn't cover, running his mouth low and breathless between kisses like he's praying: “Oh, doll, you're so good to me. Fuck, is this okay? You're so little and tight, fuck, Jesus—wanna make you feel so good, I wanna you ‘til you can't remember your own name. Stevie, darlin’, you're aces, you're perfect.” And Steve breathes, and shifts his hips, minute fractions of angles, trying to feel out how this should work, how they fit together. His heartbeat is loud and liquid in his ears, regularly irregular. He swallows and moans softly, brokenly, and then as he shifts again something sparks sweet inside him and he gasps and rolls his hips the same way again, chasing it.

"Stevie," Bucky whispers, the kinda tone you use walking into church. His grip on Steve's hip softens, goes from holding him steady to just supporting, and he's breathing almost as loud as Steve as he holds real still and lets Steve—squirm around, fuck himself back, find that sweet spot again and again and it's—

"Buck," he moans into the bedding under his cheek. "Sweetheart, it's—just there. It's so good—"

"Stevie, can I?" Bucky asks, mouth hot at Steve's neck just behind his ear, and Steve closes his eyes and nods. Bucky pulls back and pushes home again, and the yawning stretch hurts but he's aimed very precisely for that sweet spot that makes Steve squirm, and the pain and pleasure tangle up in him and pull, pull taut as wire in his groin and belly and chest. After that—

After that everything is edged in red, that tangle of sweetness and hurt, but the sweetness is dripping over him like honey, drowning everything else out and pooling in the bowl of his pelvis. He's sinking under the weight of it. He can feel Bucky's sweat dewing onto his back. He can feel every inch of Bucky's dick inside him, driving home again and again, stoking the fires in the heart of him, driving him higher and deeper. He can feel his own cock leaking against the pillow under his hips. He can feel the fires of making and unmaking writhing up his spine from his sit bone to his lower belly. He can feel the Goddamn earth somewhere below the brick foundations of the building, he can feel the night sky yawning open above him, he can feel—oh fuck, he's gonna—grabs for Bucky's hand and sobs, “God, please don't stop—” and then the first wave hits him and he's arching, voiceless, pulse throbbing through his whole body and spilling out from his dick and pores and
fucking eyes and then it's all white—

—and then he's back and Bucky's clutching at him bruising-hard again, hand and hip, and Steve can feel his cock pulsing deep inside him as he groans like it's being pulled out from somewhere deep in his guts, "Fuck, Steve, fuck." And then he stills, and his head drops on Steve's shoulder blade, forehead damp with sweat, breathing like he's run a foot race. He's shaking as he pulls out and sinks onto the bed, throws a leg and an arm over Steve's limp carcass, and settles in like he doesn't plan on moving ever again.

Steve is just very in his body for a long time—in the warmth and ease in his muscles and groin, in the burning ache in his ass, in the gently easing patter of his heartbeat, in the movement of air in and out of his lungs, in the feeling of sweat and spit and jizz drying on his skin, in the weight and warmth of an arm and leg slung over him, in the feel of cotton tight against his skin where the dress is pushed up and scrunched down. So when Bucky mumbles in his ear it takes a moment for him to remember what words are and how they work. "Steve? You okay?"

It must be the third or fourth time he's spoken because he's up on one elbow studying Steve's face. "I'm okay," Steve rasps.

"You sure? Was that—I didn't hurt you?"

Steve feels like he's been hit by a bus, but in a good way. It's complicated. Words are fucking hard right now, so he brings a hand up, cups Bucky's cheek, presses the pad of his thumb over his lips. "I'm good, Buck," he says, and then an aftershock hits him and his vision whites out again, the fire in his belly surging strong as the tide down through the belt channels in his hips and thighs. When he comes back again Bucky's still talking, hasn't notice he's checked out for a second.

"—guess that means you like the shoes, huh?"

And Steve's still dazed so what comes out of him is unvarnished and dopey: "The shoes are gorgeous, but you didn't have to go buy them. If you wanted me to be a girl for you, you coulda just asked." Then his brain kicks over, catches up with his mouth, and he sucks in a breath like he'd pull the words back out of the air if he could. Christ on a crutch he sounds like a needy fucking faggot and—

—and Bucky kisses him hard, square in the middle of his forehead, leans back to study his face again, working his jaw and half-smiling like he's drunk. "Come on, doll—Steve. Let's get your old bones outta this—" and then Bucky peels him out of the dress and shoes, swabs the worst of the mess off of his belly and ass and thighs with a wet washcloth, arranges the mound of bedding around them both like a birds nest. They sleep that night with their limbs tangled together like they last had when they were fourteen, all sweat and bare skin and Bucky's pointy stubbly chin digging into his scalp, and it's the best sleep Steve's had in years.
Chapter 7

When Steve wakes on Saturday morning he's alone in a tangle of sheets that reek of sex. He's sore, sore enough it takes some muttering to get out of bed, find his T-shirt and undershorts from last night. He follows the burnt smell of toast out to the main room—finds Bucky, howling along with the radio and making a pot of coffee. He's got the window over by the couch cracked open, a lit cigarette perched across the rim of a mug on the sill.

Steve regards the blackened stack of toast. “Jeez, pal, I don't know what that bread did to hurt your feelings—”

“Hey, how about you go fuck yourself,” Bucky talks over him, pointing with the spoon he's using to measure out the coffee, his face caught somewhere between a crooked grin and a fake scowl, and—

And they're off, rapid-fire exchange of insults shifting into an argument about the Dodgers’ chances in the next season, and by the time Steve's finishing up the dishes while Buck hangs out the window and smokes—

They're back. They're…normal. It's all just…

They're not gonna talk about it. And Steve... Steve's sitting on a pile of secrets taller than him, like a toy soldier at the top of a precarious stack of blocks: and if the wrong one shifts, the wrong thing falls out, he'll come tumbling down. So it's good, that they're not gonna talk about it. Thank God.

It's just—

There's a little part of him—a part with claws and ugly grasping hands that wants to—

But he can't have that, and he doesn't deserve it even if he could. He squashes the little part flat, moves some of the furniture in his head to cover it up, gets on with ironing his Sunday shirt before church tomorrow.

Come evening Bucky scrubs himself up and hauls a comb through his hair until all the waves are going in more or less the same direction, tosses a salute at Steve—curled up on the couch with his sketchbook—and heads out to find a dance hall.

And a girl, maybe, and Steve chews at his pencil just thinking about it. He can't go near the dance halls himself, not with all the smoke and crowds and loud music, his shitty hearing, his asthma and his heart and his stupid fucking anxiety about his asthma and his heart, and Bucky's long since given up on trying to get Steve to come with him, but he still goes himself, regular as clockwork. He loves the dancing, loves the music, and the—the girls and—

—and Steve swears at himself and puts his sketchbook and pencil away because he's wasting paper trying to do anything productive like this. Grabs the stale end of the loaf of bread in the kitchen, rips it into small chunks, and then sits on the floor with them and systematically hexes 'em, bit by bit, in increasingly exotic ways, until there's nothing left but ashes and crumbs and mould and his foul mood's drained out and left him hollow as a drum.

He tidies up, washes his hands and face, hauls out his Mam’s rosary and does a few rounds—one for himself, one for Bucky, one for her—and when he goes to sack out he finds the bedroom still—like they left it. Pillows mounded up, all the sheets and blankets on Bucky’s bed, Steve's mattress nude and unlovely.
The room still reeks of jizz. Goddamnit.

After he rips all the dirty sheets off and throws them out by the front door—clearly Sunday is gonna have to be washing day—he's tired and... and you know what? Go screw yourself, Barnes: he'd had just as much of a role in making this mess and done fuck all to clean it up, so—so Steve makes his own bed, leaves Bucky’s as it is, crawls into bed. Stick that in your pipe and smoke it.

It backfires five hours later when Bucky crawls into bed next to him, muttering and smelling of cigarettes and whiskey and clean sweat and ladies' perfume. Steve lies real still, not sure what—if—watching through his eyelashes, but nothing comes of it and Bucky’s out cold and sighing dreamily to himself two minutes later, sprawled on his belly like an amoeba trying to engulf the mattress.

Steve waits ‘til he's sure Bucky's dead to the world, and then he opens his eyes, studies him in the darkness: the near-black sweep of his eyelashes, arch of his cheekbones, chewed-pink of his lax mouth. Then he closes his eyes again and prays—the priests say God doesn't think much of fairies, but He's still love, so Steve thinks maybe He knows the score a lot better than the priests give Him credit for—and at some point while he's praying for enough cunning to find a way through, he falls asleep.

******

The next day they do the washing, and Bucky makes up his bed again. They sleep apart Sunday night.

They don’t talk about it.

Thank God. Goddamnit.

******

A week and change later Steve's at his Wednesday art class, smeared with charcoal up to his elbow, working on a still life. The teacher's brought in a bunch of empty boxes and crates, some empty frames and blank canvases, and stacked them haphazard against each other so everything is sharp angles and clean lines but weird pockets of shadow, so it's challenging work in charcoal and he's concentrating fierce, and it's just enough of a change in angle and focus in his head to shake something loose. He needs to try an experiment.

He flips to the next sheet of paper at his easel and starts again, drawing fast and loose, scarcely looking at what his hands are doing, fixed on what's in front of him and letting half-cocked plans tumble over in the back of his head. Close to the end of the class the instructor stops by his easel, cocks her head to the side, raises her eyebrows. It's nothing like his usual obsessive line work.

"Interesting, Steven," she says. "Anger?"

She always has them subtitle their pieces with what mood they were in while they did the work. It's a learning tool so they can see over time how different moods affect their style, and he's used it in the past with Ulfadhir, his other lessons. He's given pieces the subtitle Angry more than once. "Um. Today, more like Inspired and Determined, ma'am."
"Interesting," she says again, gives his shoulder a squeeze, moves on.

At the end of class Steve hangs about, tidying his work station and packing up real slow until he's the only one left in the room, and then he slings his bag over his shoulder, ducks into the storage room off the side of the classroom, and goes out via the small window in the back wall. Catcreeps veiled along the brickwork on the side of the building until he hits the fire escape and then climbs down that way. He hasn't forgotten the homework Ulfadhir set him, and he really fucking wants more coffee.

He gets home before Bucky, washes up and sets some spuds to boiling, then goes into the bedroom and gets out his pale pink dress, garter belt and stockings, pretty white and pale-green shoes, pendants and chain, and sets them all out on the bed ready to go.

Bucky gets home as he's throwing the potatoes into the pan. Eggs and some bits of vegetables that needed using up: add some potatoes for dignity and bulk and you could call it a hash. They're nowhere near as broke as they were a year back but they're both versed in making the groceries stretch every week.

"What's cooking?" Buck asks. Hip checks him on his way over to the sink to wash his hands. Steve pokes at his back with the wooden spoon in retaliation.

"Potato hash, ready in five," he answers. "Any excitement today?"

"Nope. Exciting usually means someone's fucked up, and we try to avoid that," Bucky says, rapping on the wood of a cupboard door absently as he gets out plates and forks, a couple of drinking glasses. "Draw anything good today?"

"Bunch of boxes and crates."

"Sounds like my day," Bucky says, grinning crooked as he sets the table.

They eat and swap gossip about their neighbours, about the characters in the radio play they're both following. The radio hums in the background—Bucky's turn to pick the station tonight, so it's blues, lots of guitar. The food's good but Steve can't eat a lot—the crazy idea has taken up residence in his gut, glowing warmly, isn't leaving room for much else. He pushes his plate away.

"Buck, I had a thought today," he says, pushing back his chair.

"Did it hurt?" Bucky answers, almost automatically, then grins.

"You're a jerk," Steve says, throws a chunk of potato at him and gets up. "Wait here a sec, I gotta show you something."

He closes the bedroom door behind him, moves fluidly in the darkness to shed his shirt and suspenders, trousers and shorts, undershirt and socks. Rolls his shoulders and then rolls the stockings on. Laid out ready like it is it only takes a couple of minutes—trickiest part is the little clips on the garter belt.

When he walks back out into the living room he's head to toe babydoll, and Bucky looks up from his plate, freezes, drops his fork.

"Oh fuck," he says. "Holy Mary, Mother of God." His eyes are wild, spilling sharply to black as his pupils dilate, and his voice comes out in a rasp that's equal parts shock and hunger.

It's a good experimental outcome. It fits with Steve's hypothesis nicely. The warm glow in his gut
floods up into his chest and down into his dick. He's smiling as he walks across the room, crawls in under the dining table, tugs Bucky's pants open and gives him the best suck job he's got.

His technique still needs work—Christ, he's not had as much practice as he'd like—but he makes up for the gaps with lots of enthusiasm and spit and his clever artist's hands until Bucky gasps out, "Oh no, oh—God, darlin'," and tugs at his hair in warning and then blows all in his mouth and down his chin. Then Bucky gets up on shaking legs, hauls him bodily out from under the table to bend him backwards and kiss him like something out of a movie, licks the spunk off his face, throws him on his back on the couch and crawls on after him to return the favour.

This is—heat, wet suction, oh Jesus God please—this is good, he can work with this: it's a call and response, no words required, just—oh fuck Bucky, oh God—and everyone's getting their rocks off and the rest of their friendship is tucked away safe and—oh shit, slick slide of tongue broken by bright nips of teeth up the highest parts of his thighs, biting at the smooth satin of the garter where it rests on his skin—yes, this is good, this is—

This is the new normal: Steve and Bucky, Bucky and Steve, real good friends and roommates and every now and then—when the invert is feeling particularly fay, goes and puts his doll face on—they fuck around like it's the last night on Earth. But otherwise just real good friends. It's more than Steve ever thought he'd get, more than he deserves. It's enough.

*******

And then it's September of '39, and Germany invades Poland, and everything changes.

There's been rumblings for a long time—China and Japan are at war, and there's been a lot of posturing and posing and back and forth over borders in Europe but—but now it's real, England and France and Canada piling on. There's debate if they oughta do something, in Washington and on street corners—everyone's an armchair general all of the sudden—but the decision from on high is to stay out of it.

A month later, George Barnes falls down the flight of stairs behind the house at Dean Street and breaks his back.

The funeral is Godawful—everyone shock-pale and hollowed out, Winnie Barnes in her widow's weeds with her hair neat and her powder sitting pouchy in the sinkholes under her eyes, fingernails bitten to the quick. The youngest of the Barnes girls, Isobel, is all of four and too young to fully understand what's going on, tugging at Becca's hand and asking when Pa's coming back, and Becca shoves a hand into her mouth to stifle the sob that comes in answer before Steve sweeps in, grabs Izzy and hauls her away so she doesn't have to see her oldest sister fall to pieces.

Buck holds it together, clean and pressed and polished in his cheap suit, nodding and shaking hands and accepting condolences like it's all happening to someone else, stays at Dean Street for three days helping Winnie with the girls and the paperwork, and then he comes home and gets out Steve's emergency gin and collapses like a house of cards.

Steve's seen Bucky cry before—he's an easy crier when it doesn't matter, weeps shamelessly in the movies at the sad scenes with the music soaring, or when they find a stray dog or cat dead and frozen in the street—but he's never seen Bucky like this: silent as the grave, streaked with tears and snot, sat at the dining table and putting away gin with the steady determination of a man facing the firing
“How did you do this?” Buck asks, sometime after two in the morning: Steve's sitting vigil with him, alternating gin with coffee and fidgeting with his rosary.

“I was a Goddamn mess, Buck. You know, you were there for half of it,” Steve says.

“I…” Bucky starts, stops. Wets his lips. “How could he do this to them?”

On the long list of things no one is talking about: George Barnes was found with a broken spine and a bottle of bourbon and the absolute reek of booze oozing off him like smoke from a fire. He'd always been a drinker but he'd promoted himself from drinker to drunk in the last month. He'd taken the news outta Europe like a kick to the chest, had been in the Merchant Marine in the Great War and come home shell-shocked. So, the drinking; so, the fall. So, the wife and daughters left alone.

Steve lets the silence string out, helpless. He can lie like a politician but none of his training covers what to say at a time like this. “Hell if I know,” he says at last, and it feels pathetic, inadequate, so after a heartbeat he adds, “I'm sorry, Buck.”

Bucky turns his glass between his hands, sighs wetly, tops it up with some more gin. The night bleeds by, bleeds out, slow and silent.

Europe collapses, slow and grinding and then quick and bloody, into a chaotic fucking mess. The Krauts sprawl across half the map, and the Soviet Russians start spilling over the other half of the map, and then France collapses and there's Nazis in the streets of Paris—

—and Washington is neutral, firmly neutral, like the whole nightmarish mess is a family feud they don't wanna take sides in, like half the world isn't sliding downhill into fucking flames—

Steve has opinions. Steve has lots of opinions. He can armchair general with the best of 'em.

And life in Brooklyn goes on, her song threaded through with anxious under-notes—because half the folk here are migrants from someplace that's now falling down or on fire, Poland or Greece or Czechoslovakia or Sokovia or Italy or Latveria. So they have grandparents or cousins or godchildren back in the old country, fleeing the fighting or being packed up and moved or right in the thick of it, the shelling and the tanks grinding countryside into mud—

Life goes on. Steve loses his job after a blazing throw-down argument with the boss's son over whether they should be taking in more refugees fleeing the war in Europe, and then it's two weeks of hard scrabble until he gets a new job. So now he's lettering signs, and it's only three days a week, but with the odd piece of commission art now and again it's enough to keep the lights on.

Life goes on, and Germany turns and invades Russia, and Ulfadhir teaches Steve how to throw knives. Almost loses a pinkie finger getting it wrong—thank Christ it's his receptive hand, not his drawing hand, so he can still write and work and use a fork. It's a Hell of a lot of blood, though.

Life goes on, and the Dodgers make the '41 World Series final, and Roosevelt signs Lend Lease into law and the American industrial machine kick starts with a roar, weapons and trucks and beans and bandages flooding east to the front. Which means Buck's job down at the docks goes to all hours, all
shifts, better pay covering the nights, and a supervisor role if he does ‘em—so Bucky’s working nights. Means Steve doesn't see him as much, but it also means Bucky can finally go back to school, and Christ: the money is good.

He uses it to buy Steve some perfume. Real nice stuff, sweet and subtle, not a trace of vinegar or alcohol. Steve wears it dotted on his collarbones and behind his ears when Bucky fucks him into the mattress that night.

And then it's just over two weeks from Christmas and it's cold enough Steve's got three layers of jumpers on inside, two of his and one of Bucky's, and he's perched on a stool in his painting class setting out paint and brushes. Buck's lounging on the stool to his right—he's just finished up his mechanical design class two doors down, swung by to hassle Steve about what the Hell they're gonna do for dinner.

Steve's half-turned to him, mouth opening to ask if he's got his colours all set out correctly—he's got a system, can work around his colour-blindness as long as he gets everything in the right place to start with—which means he's looking towards the door when the guy who teaches the class down the hall sticks his head in, and he's white, blasted white, so shock-pale he's almost grey around the eyes.

"Turn on the radio," he calls, and there's something in his voice that cuts through the whole room, through the idle chatter and gossip and scrape of easels shifting on the wooden floor, cuts it all to silence. "Turn on the radio, it's—we're under attack, it's happening." And then he's gone again, and there's a long moment of ugly still, and then Miss Edwards strides across the room to the adjacent office, throws open the door and flips on the radio.

And that's how Steve hears it: him and Bucky and the rest of the art class, crammed into that tiny office and crowded around the doorway to hear the reedy voice of the announcer.

The Japanese are bombing US naval vessels anchored at Hawaii. Someplace called Pearl Harbor. It's the end of—the storm that's ripping the rest of the world to bits has reached them, and right now men are dying in fire and water and tombs of steel, and all they can do is listen, listen and try not to recoil from it. They're at war. In the press of bodies crowded around the desk, Bucky's hand finds his wrist, fits around it like he's checking Steve's pulse, and squeezes tight enough to bruise.

*******

When he gets to the recruitment office the next morning, the door is standing open and there's fellas queuing down the steps and into the street. Steve joins the queue; Bucky stands with him, close but to the side, because he's not in the line, not enlisting. Which—it doesn't come as a surprise. They've shot the shit about this in the past—

Here's the thing about one JB Barnes of Brooklyn: he doesn't start fights, but by God, he'll finish them.

Steve starts fights, sometimes without meaning to—he's a mouthy little asshole and sometimes shit just needs saying, because if it's not right, it's not right—and sometimes deliberately, not that he’ll ever admit that to anyone, because life is furiously unfair and every now and then he needs to throw himself against an enemy he can actually hit. He can't punch systematic poverty or tuberculosis, but the guys calling out disgusting shit to the girls walking past outside the movies: them he can
absolutely punch, and by Christ he will.

Bucky ain't that guy.

Bucky flows through life smooth as fine bourbon over ice: makes friends everywhere, charms girls out of their panties and little old ladies into feeding him baked goods, drinks with the fellas from his job at the docks, gives half his pay packet every week to his mother so his baby sisters stay clothed and fed, and though he hasn't believed in dick for a long time, whenever Steve drags him into church he sings along clear and bright as an angel.

Steve's only seen Bucky throw the first punch twice, in all the fourteen years they've been friends: once when they were twelve, and the kid giving his baby sister Becca a hard time didn't want to back off, and once when they were nineteen and some drunk in a bar had called Steve a faggot. In retrospect that last was funny because he'd turned out to be one hundred percent correct.

Once that first punch gets thrown, though—

Once a guy pulled a knife in a fight—this was when they were twenty-one. Had been drinking, but weren't drunk, weaving their way home, and they'd taken a shortcut down a mean fucking alley and found some asshole with one hand up a girl's skirt and the other over her mouth to muffle her sobs.

So they hauled him off her, and then this guy pulled the knife and Steve put himself between him and the girl, all the while cursing himself for not letting Ulfadhir teach him knife work, of all the fucking things—and Bucky closed in fast and fluid, ripped his arm with the knife into a hold and then dumped his weight on it—snap, elbow's folded the wrong way, and this guy dropped the knife and howled. Bucky punched him clean in the mouth, textbook, and the guy dropped like a sack of spuds, and then Bucky kicked him, first in the teeth and then in the guts. There was nothing uncontrolled or angry about it: it was systematic. Stop him from crying out, keep him from getting back up. He paused, assessed, kicked him in the guts twice more, hard, most of his body weight into it, and then turned and grabbed Steve—the girl's long since run off, smarter than either of them—and started walking away, steady and calm like they're out for a Sunday stroll.

"Don't run, for Christ's sake," he said, very level. "We don't need anybody looking our way."

"We need to get the cops," Steve said, urgent. "He was gonna rape her."

"Yeah, and I mighta just killed him, so shut up, Rogers. Keep walking," Bucky said, and Steve looked back to check like some kind of idiot but they were out of the alley, out on the street and not far from home, and then he spotted the dark splotches on the pavement behind them.

"God, Bucky, you're bleeding," he said, pitching his voice low. And Bucky looked down at his arm, at the neat slice into the meat of his forearm.

"Fuck," he said, low and fierce. "I really like this coat."

Steve stitched up his arm, once they got home. Bucky stitched up his coat, soaked it in cold water to shift the blood. And the next time Steve saw Ulfadhir he got him to start teaching him knife work.

Point is: Bucky Barnes doesn't start fights, but he sure as Hell finishes them.

His bravery is not in question. But he never enlisted before, and he won't be enlisting now the war has come home to roost. He's got a mother and three baby sisters to feed, the man of the house regardless that he hasn't lived there in years, because someone needs to be. He's got a mouthy and obnoxious best friend who can't hold down a job to save his life—literally, to save his own fucking life—that he needs to keep in heart meds and second hand shoes.
"There's a million guys who can fire a gun and dig a ditch, Stevie," Bucky says, and it's 1940 and Steve's trying to tell him they should head north, cross the border, enlist up in Canada, and never mind that Steve's got a better chance of joining the Dodgers starting lineup than of making it past any kind of close inspection by the Army docs. Buck's half hanging out of the window, smoking and trying to coax the neighbour's cat over close enough to pet. "A million guys. But if I ain't here there's no one else who's gonna get up on Mom's roof to replace the busted tiles, or harass your dumb ass to make sure you've taken your meds today." His eyes narrow. "Have you—"

"Yes, Buck," says Steve, who's halfway out the kitchen window so they can talk. Rolls his eyes, and then quietly slips back inside to take his damn meds.

So they've both got their reasons to be where they are: Steve in the line, waiting to enlist; Bucky with him but apart, hands jammed in his pockets and chewing at his lower lip.

The line moves slow, and it takes over an hour for Steve to get as far as the doorway, and Bucky stays with him, silent and watchful and pale, and when Steve's finally standing in the door he speaks up, soft: "They won't take you, Stevie."

"You don't know that," Steve says, flat.

"I do know. They'll knock you back for your asthma. If not that, for your heart. They've got to, they got a duty, try and keep you safe."

Safe—Jesus Christ on a cracker. "I bet the sailors on the Arizona thought they were safe yesterday morning. We weren't even officially at war when they hit us, Buck, I can't—I can't sit back and do nothing."

"I know that too," Bucky says, looking away. "Christ, I know." He chews at his lip some more, then meets Steve's eyes again, and he's washed out, fever-bright. "Listen, I'm gonna go check in with my Mom."

"Sure, Buck," Steve says, and behind him—

"Hey, you ain't joining up?" The guy behind Steve in the queue is staring, rocking on his heels and looking Bucky up and down like he's trying to work out what the Hell is wrong with him, that he ain't—

"I got flat feet," Bucky snarls, hands forming fists, and then he's turned and gone, heading back off up the street, and the guy turns and looks at Steve like he doesn't know what's going on anymore.

Steve shrugs. "There's nothing wrong with my feet," he says, which is true. Everything else, sure, but not his feet.

*******

They don't take him. 4F, the little rubber stamp planted next to his name, and he leaves the card out on the dining table and falls across his bed though it's scarcely four in the afternoon because he's so fucking tired. Can't stand to listen to the radio anymore, or to the neighbours standing on the front step—Mrs Feld and Mrs Lehrer, both red-eyed with weeping and talking in a rapid hybrid of Yiddish and Brooklyn English, so fucking scared because they'd come here to escape the slow-building wave of violence that was eating Europe up chunk by chunk and it followed them anyway.
He pulls out his rosary beads and works them in his hands. It would be good to pray—he should be praying—but just for right now he's got nothing.

Bucky comes in an hour or so later, rattles around out in the main room for a couple minutes, then comes in and sits on the bed, folds over to rest his forehead against Steve's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he mumbles.

"How's your Mam?" Steve mumbles back. He's got the rosary's crucifix sandwiched between fingers and thumb, tracing the curves down the sides with a fingertip.

"Scared," Bucky says, soft. Steve hums, shifts a bit to lie more on his back and look up at the ceiling. If he was—if he had—his health, working lungs, another half-foot of height. He's tossed around the idea of making a seeming, going into the recruiting office looking like he's taller and wider, but—it ain't sustainable. The first time a doctor touched him to check his blood pressure the whole working would go to bits. So he's just him, little and sickly and there's so much fear and pain and he wants to help, he wants to fucking help and he can't—

He closes his hands around the beads, hard enough to dig them into the flesh of his palms, squirms until he's curled and facing the wall, and Bucky shifts with it, half lies on the bed with his head on Steve's ribs like he's a pillow. Steve grunts a protest and Bucky responds by lifting his head for a second and then dropping it back again harder.

"Hey," he rumbles. "Don't—look. You'll find another way to help, okay? You're the best man I know, Rogers."

Which is fucking rich, considering Steve dresses like a dame half the time. "Hell, you must keep some low company, Buck," Steve says.

"Shut up," Bucky says, and bites him on the shoulder. "Take it in the spirit it was intended, you asshole."

Steve sighs, finds Bucky's ear and gives it half a tug. Bucky growls and bites his shoulder again. They're both quiet for a long time.

********

Four months later it's a Thursday and Bucky comes upstairs with a stack of mail, and at the top of the pile is a dark yellow envelope from the Office of the Draft.

"I'll enlist," Steve says. "I'll try again." They're sitting at the table, passing a bottle of gin back and forth between them. The draft notice is poking out of its envelope on the table, and Steve almost can't bring himself to look directly at it.

They mighta knocked him back before but it's different now. Now he's gone over a year without getting real sick, hasn't seen the inside of a hospital in almost two. He's been holding down an actual job and eating three square meals a day and—look, he might not be anyone's idea of an ideal specimen but he's fitter than he's ever been, so—

"They're not gonna take you, Stevie," Bucky says. "You got a laundry list of reasons for them to keep knocking you back. I—I'll arrange for my pay to go to you and Mom, okay? It'll be alright."
Steve smacks the table with his palm. "God's sake, Barnes, I don't care about the money. You're going off to war. Can you just—just stop worrying about taking care of everyone else and let me worry about who's gonna take care of you?"

"There's... what, five million other guys over there," Bucky says, forces a half-smile, reaches over and musses Steve's hair with one hand. "I'll have ten million eyes watching my back. I'll be fine."

Steve sits back out of petting range, takes another swig of the gin. "I'm gonna enlist," he says mulishly.

********

They don't let him enlist. Not at the Brooklyn office, and not in Manhattan, and not over in Jersey either.

********

The morning Bucky goes to Basic, Steve goes with the Barnes women to see him off at the train station.

There's a lot of hugging—the girls pass Bucky around between them a half dozen times before they let him go, and then Winnie Barnes holds him for a long while too, murmuring low into his ear, maybe advice or longings or prayers or just reminders, and then Bucky's grinning and cuffing Steve upside the head and jumping on the train. They've said their proper goodbyes last night—

—Steve shoving Bucky back onto the bed and straddling him, knelt up tall, leaning over to mouth and kiss at his throat and collarbones, and Bucky slides his hands up Steve's stocking-clad legs, up the hard lines of his thighs and under the stiff fabric of his skirt until he hits curls and hot skin instead of panties. "You're not—" Bucky chokes out, and Steve just laughs and bends over to tongue Bucky's right nipple, pushing the bare curve of his ass into his hands. "Holy Christ, doll." Bucky says urgently, and his hands tighten convulsively even as his hips thrust up, seeking friction, and then —

—yeah, their goodbyes aren't fit for public consumption.

Everyone keeps a brave face on until the train is out of the station and pulling away, and then Isobel starts to tear up and chew at her lip and Georgie looks like she's thinking about following suit and Steve drops to one knee next to Izzy and gives one of her plaits a tug. "You know if you start crying, I'm gonna have to cry too."

She gives him a baffled look, says: "Boys don't cry, Stevie."

"Course they do. I've got eyes, don't I? I won't have any choice, I'll go out in sympathy. I've always been a sympathetic crier," says Steve, who has not wept a single Goddamn tear since the night of his mother's funeral but knows the power of a good story. "Have you seen us fair-headed folk, when we cry? It's an ugly scene, Izzy."
She's starting to grin, a lop-sided gap-toothed affair. It's Bucky's smile in miniature. Give this girl another decade and she'll have a trail of broken hearts behind her longer than Steve's arms. "You go all red and blotchy," she says.

"We do. Splotches of white and splotches of red and puffed up and soggy. Spare me the indignity," Steve says, catching Becca's eye and giving her a wink. And they get out of there without tears, Steve holding Izzy's hand and the older girls snuggled in under Mrs Barnes' arms.

He walks them home. Waits for the anger to well up inside him, like slough from the base of a dirty wound—it's his natural alchemy, his constitution, to turn sadness, fear, nausea, boredom, fucking loneliness or ennui, into frustration, rage, righteous indignation. So he waits, but the anger doesn't come. Nothing much comes: he feels hollowed out like an old bone, paper-thin and translucent in the sunlight, like if he turns sideways he'll disappear from sight altogether.

At home in the apartment is—worse, God, even worse. It's a small place, cramped so they're always tripping over each other, and now it echoes in its vastness, in all its empty spaces, the side of the couch that's unoccupied, the window out to the fire escape that stays closed.

He reads six paragraphs of Orwell's Propaganda about twenty times without absorbing a Goddamn word of it before he puts the Goddamn book down. Eats some bread with cheese, because he probably should. Surrenders and crawls into the bed that still smells like their fucking from last night.

He should change the sheets. He's not going to: he's a pervert, he's worse than a dog because even a dog knows better than to sleep in its own filth. Buries his face in the dirty sheets and breathes and listens to the night music, the world music, the song that is Brooklyn, until sunlight stains the streets with pink and gold again.

******

The next three days are a dribbling monotone of showing up for work, of trying to remember to eat and sleep in some kinda regular fashion, of trying not to look like a swooning dame. So his best friend's gone off where he can't follow. So life ain't fair. So what the fuck else is new.

On the forth day Ulfadhir shows up, takes one look at him, and then pulls a bottle of ruinously expensive Scotch out of a coat pocket and proceeds to get Steve so drunk he can't stand.

“You could have lied,” Ulfadhir is telling him. They're on the living room floor, backs against the couch, cradling shitty glass tumblers of booze that costs more than the rent on this dump for a month. Steve hasn't been this sloppy drunk since he was nineteen. “You should have lied. What did I just spend fourteen years teaching you if not for moments like exactly this?”

“That's dodging,” Steve tells him. “Dodging the draft. They arrest you for that.”

“They arrest you for fucking men,” Ulfadhir points out flatly. “You haven't let that stop you.”

Steve blushes like a fucking tomato, ducks his head. “Yeah, well, I didn't say I thought it was a good law. It's the law though. He got drafted, he's fit to fight, off he goes. I just—” He chokes, stops, takes another good slug of scotch. “I just wish to Christ I could go.”

“So you can die in the mud, and men safely hidden in far off citadels can claim ownership of the far side of an imaginary line. Foolishness,” Ulfadhir says. “You know better than to swallow the lies.
they spin about glory and bravery.”

“It’s not about glory, Ulfadhir,” Steve says, carefully puts his drink down before he gestures with it and slops booze everywhere. “It’s a righteous war, as much as there is such a thing—the Nazis broke treaties, there’s people being killed. Civilians, women and children. Of course we ought to fight ‘em.”

“How noble,” Ulfadhir says. “And when you die—which you will, you’ve gained some cunning with a knife but that won’t help against a tank—and when the shield brothers watching your back die too, your sacrifice will also be terribly noble, and the mud will take all of you—”

“I’m not that weak,” Steve half-yells, and—

“Yes, you are,” Ulfadhir answers, level and bored. “If stubborn, righteous stupidity made a warrior you would be at the front of the ranks, but as it stands you can neither march nor carry the weight of a weapon—”

Steve lunges at him—he’s so fucked off he can’t see straight, doesn’t really want to hurt Ulfadhir but it’d be so sweet to land just one good hit, show him how helpless he isn’t—and it might’ve worked if he wasn’t drunk, a shit-faced slow motion train wreck thinly disguised as a human being, but he’s drunk and a train wreck and—

And hitting the wooden floor jaw-first, with Ulfadhir's cold hand clamped around the back of his neck. The jolt rings through his skull like a bell, sends shards of red and white skittering through his vision, aches like ice in his teeth. He can taste blood—must've bitten his tongue. He bites his lip to choke back a yelp, plants his hands to try and push up, and Ulfadhir’s other hand grabs him by the right wrist, pinches down hard on a nerve cluster, and that arm just folds like overcooked pasta, all numb ache shocking down into his hand and up into his shoulder. He yelps, drops to the floor again. “Pete’s sake,” he snarls into the wood grain.

“So much for righteous and noble,” Ulfadhir says. “Do you yield?”

“You smug bastard,” Steve says, starting to grin, a baring of teeth, and he's gotta be crazy, crazy like his Mam was always telling him—sing bonny boys, bonny mad boys—because only a lunatic would start feeling better about life when he's being ground into the floor. He hasn't felt this alive in days. Crazy, fucking certifiable—and then Ulfadhir digs in hard with the fingers on his neck and shakes him, shakes him like a badly trained dog, twists his arm to lock it in place up against his back. Steve gasps, and it turns into a shudder of silent laughter.

“My mother’s virtue is, in fact, unimpeachable,” Ulfadhir says blandly. “Shall I ask you a second time?”

“Fine,” Steve says, keeping his tone flat, and then as soon as Ulfadhir lets go he arches up and snakes his left hand into the folds of his tunic, feeling for the knife he always carries concealed just here—

—brushes cool metal with the very tips of his fingers before Ulfadhir catches him by the wrist, pinches down and twists and rides him down into the floor again, left arm held this time and one knee driving into his shoulder blade.

Steve coughs out a grunt, gasps in a breath, and then laughs into the floorboards, bright and breathless and rasping. “Please,” Ulfadhir says. “I taught you the arts of deception. Did you honestly think that would work?”
“Wasn't the worst idea I've ever had,” Steve says, still shaking with laughter, and his voice is coming out choked because Christ, this hurts, even past the dulling numbness of alcohol: both arms, his chest and ribs and jaw. It hurts, it shouldn't be making him wanna giggle like a schoolgirl... but there you go, there you are.

Ulfadhir makes a low noise of disgust and lets him go, sits back and takes a lazy sip from his glass. Steve scrapes himself up from the floorboards, swallows the blood in his mouth and feels around with his tongue—he's split his lip and bitten his tongue on the left side, and a couple of the teeth on the bottom left feel a little loose. They'll come good, if he doesn't get hit there for a while. He sits against the couch again, fixes up his shirt where it's rumpled, has a swig of scotch. “So,” he says at last.

“If you tried to blame the drink we'd both know it was a lie. You're a pugnacious little mongrel dead sober,” Ulfadhir says. Steve barks out a laugh.

“Yeah, I—yeah,” he agrees, shakes his head and rubs his wrist where Ulfadhir pinched him. He's still abuzz, feeling lighter than he has in days. “Can you teach me that?”

Ulfadhir gives him a flat look, then rolls his eyes and scoots over, takes Steve through the pressure points in the arms that will cripple or numb, cause pain but leave no sign, open the hand to disarm. “You've not the temperament, for obeying orders,” he says at the end. “Nor the strength for carrying arms. These are our weapons, boy: cunning tricks and conjuring and deceit. It will win you neither friends nor glory, but have no doubt—we are necessary.”

Steve grits his teeth, sighs because he can't actually think of an answer for that. It's true, is the Hell of the thing, but knowing that doesn't get him any closer to Europe and doing his part in the fight there, to keeping Bucky safe. “I just wish it were different,” he says.

Ulfadhir sits back, has another stiff swig of booze and makes a face, addresses the ceiling. “I've given him the tools to rule the world from behind any throne he chooses, and instead he wants to carry a gun and march in a line.”

“I'm sorry,” Steve says, and rests his head on Ulfadhir's shoulder, drunk and companionable. Ulfadhir sighs, reaches up and gives his ear a sharp twist, but otherwise makes no protest. They finish the bottle between them, and midday the next day Steve wakes alone on the floor, with a monstrous hangover, bruises up his jaw and down both arms, and what looks like a bearskin cloak covering him from neck to toes.

*******

The cloak vanishes at sunset. The hangover and bruises remain.
Chapter 8

It's two months before Bucky finishes Basic. They write back and forth: neighbourhood gossip and the non-stop thrills of Steve's job. Mrs Barnes has him round for dinner every Sunday, and they swap letters and tidbits of news, and he plays with the girls, reads Izzy her bedtime story. He's a pretty poor Bucky substitute, but he's gotta try.

The sign writing job goes to four days a week. Steve goes to church, goes to the movies or a bar a few times with friends from his art classes. Works on his sorcery in the evenings when it gets too Goddamn quiet. He really tries not to be a sad sack of shit. Last thing Bucky needs is him pining like an abandoned dog. And if he forgets to eat now and again it's okay: Ulfadhir's given him another sack of coffee beans. He can definitely remember to drink his coffee.

His last letter from Bucky said he was getting close to the end of training, so Steve's expecting in a day or so he'll get a letter or telegram telling him that Buck's shipping out, heading east or west. He's not expecting the crack of wood from the doorframe, the sticky bit of the frame coming unstuck—and Steve looks up from his work, papers all over the kitchen table covered with half sketches and aborted ideas—and it's Bucky, tall and lean and looking like some kinda Goddamn movie star in the uniform. He's got his hat in hand, hair clipped military short and neat, rucksack slung over one shoulder.

He's stopped dead in the doorway, and he's staring at Steve like he's actually lost his fucking marbles, and Steve's got enough insight to realise he probably looks just as stupid.

“Buck,” he croaks, dropping his pencil, hands curling into fists.

“Stevie,” Bucky says, and then he's tossed his bag at the couch and kicked the door closed behind him and Steve's getting up as Bucky reaches him and they're grabbing at each other, handfuls of shirt and hair as they both haul each other in close, so it's one part hug and one part tackle. Steve's got his face smashed against Bucky's right shoulder, and he smells of starch and cigarettes and sweat and home.

“Christ on a crutch—” he starts.

“No, still Bucky,” comes the immediate answer.

“What are you doing here, Buck?”

“I got leave,” he says, with a manic kind of note in his voice, “I've got five more days, so that's a day here and then four in transit back west—”

“West?”

“Shipping out from San Francisco. Pacific theatre, some untouched tropical paradise we're probably gonna bomb to Hell. But—but you, Christ,” and his hands slide up, cup Steve's shoulders, hold him in place so Bucky can study him. Steve studies back: he's got more of a tan; the lines of his jaw and cheekbones are sharper. Eyes are the same. Song is the same, swelling like a crescendo tide trying to drag Steve under right now, like he's spilling over out of his skin.

“I've been fine, Buck,” Steve says. “Took my meds, rent's up to date. I'm fine, everything's jake. You've only got a day?”

“Well,” Bucky says. “Rest of today, and then my train leaves at nine in the morning.”
So, ballpark of 21 hours. It's not enough, Steve's greedy—and lustful, and wrathful, he's got sins coming outta his eyes—but it is what it is. He unclenches his hands from Bucky's shirt. “You gotta go see your Mam and sisters.”

Bucky closes his eyes. “I know,” he says. “I gotta see lots of people, got no idea when I'll be back this way again. But… here was on the way from the train station anyway, so I figured I'd make it my first stop.”

“Sure, Buck,” Steve says, pats Bucky's shoulders where they've rucked up the fabric with pulling and tugging, steps back a couple inches, enough to get some daylight in between them. “So, what're your plans for your 21 hours of leisure in New York?”

“Well. I guess dinner with the family. Some of the fellas from the docks owe me a drink or several. Should go see Mr Krevanek from the garage too. Other'n that… I—is it okay if I stay here tonight?”

“You're still paying rent, Barnes, of course you can—”

“Yeah, but that was a promise, Stevie, it doesn't mean you owe me anything, and you mighta shacked up with Rita Hayworth while I was gone.”

“Yeah, of course. I've secretly married a Hollywood starlet in the two months you've been gone. I'm a real fast mover like that.”

Bucky's grinning. “You never know. Your charms have always worked just fine on me.”

“No accounting for taste,” Steve says, and brushes some imaginary lint from Bucky's shoulder before letting him go and stepping back, jamming his hands in his pockets so he doesn't get grabby again. “Go see your people, Buck. Your sisters all missed you like Hell.”

“Just them, huh?” Bucky says, and he's grinning and stepping back too, but he's also tucking his hands away in his pockets and the tone in his voice is wrong, a little too intent to be joking, and his mouth and his eyes don't match.

They match, though: Steve and Bucky. They are both being fucking idiots.

Bucky's at the door, playing with the latch and looking back at Steve, saying, “I guess I'll catch you later? Swing back through after—”

“No,” Steve says. “Wait. No. I'm sorry, I've gotta—” and he strides forward, plants a hand on Bucky's shoulder and shoves him around so his back’s against the door, drops to his knees and grabs Bucky's hips and leans in to mouth at the crease of his groin.

“Oh fuck,” Bucky says, then, “Oh, doll—” and then he loses the thread again and Steve flips the buttons to open up his fly, shoves up his shirt with one hand and hangs onto his hips with the other and presses wet sucking kisses to the clean lines of his pelvis and down to just above his cock.

Bucky jams a hand into his hair, fingers combing through. “That's perfect, darlin’. Stevie. You're aces,” and his voice is shaking, breaks off with a gasp as Steve shifts down and takes his dick into his mouth, and he ain't plumped up all the way yet, is still getting with the program, so Steve can fit most of it into his mouth with no effort, works his tongue against the underside and presses so the head of his cock is rubbing against the roof of his mouth. There's a thump—Bucky's got his other hand in a fist, just hit the door with it, and Steve rolls his eyes up, sees Bucky chewing on his lips and staring down at Steve like he's done something fucking miraculous.

“Oh, darlin’,” he says, and it comes out wobbly, not quite a moan, and Steve winks at him—can't
give him a grin with a mouthful of dick, so that's the nearest thing to it—and doubles down, sucks and slurps and licks and works his tongue and lips and soft palette.

Bucky's firmed up now, all long and swollen and heated up on his tongue, and there's enough of him that Steve can't get all his cock in his mouth anymore, has to back off and let his hand take up the slack. Buck's hips have started doing a long curling ocean wave, not so much thrusting as rolling slow and gentle, and he's watching Steve all the while, his lips red with being chewed at, eyes blown wide and black.

Steve picks up the pace, and Bucky makes a little strangled noise like he's choking back a groan and then he says, “Fucking Hell, doll, Stevie, Mother of God. Christ you look pretty down there. You're a Goddamn pinup, I swear to God, and the mouth on you—oh, fuck—think that mouth of yours might just kill me—” and then he breaks off, eyes falling closed and his head dropping back against the door with a hard thud.

Steve's tasting precome now, sweet and salty and pulsing onto his tongue with every twist and pull of his hand, and it's perfect. It's all so fucking perfect, the heat and the taste and the silk over muscle feel of Bucky's dick in his mouth and the way he's slowly unraveling, bitten off animal noises and chewed lips, hand getting rougher in Steve's hair as his self-control goes to Hell, and Steve's dick is so hard he might die, throbbing up against his fly and leaving him with a wet patch in his slacks.

Christ: he's a sinner, and this is his Heaven.

But then Bucky's gasping out, “Holy fuck, Stevie, I ain't gonna last—oh, darlin’, Christ you're good to me, I could fucking die happy with my dick in your—oh, fuck, doll. I'm gonna—oh,” and then there's another thud as his head hits the door again and his dick is swelling and pulsing and he comes, hand knotting in Steve's hair as he bites down deep on his lip again. And Steve swallows down everything he's got, bitter-salty flooding over his tongue, humming and working him through it until he's gasping and hitching his hips back.

And then Bucky's saying, “Don't,” Bucky rasps, and Steve looks up. Bucky's watching him, head lolling and pupils spilled to vast black pools like he's been drugged, like he's been hit in the head, but he's zeroing in, focusing on where Steve's working over himself, and—“Don't,” Bucky says again, “that's mine.”

And then he's leaning forward, grabbing Steve by his shirt front and hauling him back up onto his feet and kissing him, open-mouthed and sloppy, and Steve moans and opens for him, stumbling as Bucky's walking him backwards, and then his ass is against the table and Bucky's licking deep into his mouth, reaching down to grab Steve's ass in both hands and lift—

—and plant Steve down on the table, right in the middle of all his Goddamn papers and sketches, shoves him back with one last hot wet kiss until Steve's leaning on his elbows, legs dangling, dick jumping at attention from his lap, half-covered by the bottom of his shirt. Bucky leans in, shoves the shirt up, takes Steve's cock in his mouth—Holy Christ, oh sweet fuck—right to the Goddamn base, and works him over like he's made cocksucking an Olympic sport, all tongue and spit and slick red lips and the back of his Christ forsaken throat, Steve can feel the back of his throat, God Almighty—

—and then he's calling out, “Oh God, Buck,” and grabbing for him, catching handfuls of hair, something to anchor him to the earth before he flies to pieces, shuddering out from himself in waves of opening that are so bright and sweet that they hurt, and he's sharply aware of every living thing for a block in every direction, every human soul and cat and dog and plant pushing up through the pavement, and the fires of making and unmaking are unspooling from his centre and the music has swollen into a flood that's crushing him, so he can only just hear himself sobbing, crying out—
—and he comes, and the wild torrent of heat and light is through him and out the other side, blazing on through like a wildfire, and Bucky's drinking him down, every pulse of him, humming and looking smug as Hell. Steve uncurls his hands from Bucky's hair, pats his face and cheeks with shaking hands, and then slumps back onto the table like he's been shot. “Oh God,” he rasps, broken.

“Well, that was the hottest Goddamn thing I've seen in a long fucking time,” Bucky says, presses a kiss to the hollow of Steve's hip and then rests his head on his thigh like it's a pillow. Steve finger combs Bucky's hair and settles into his breathing, drawing it out deep and slow, because he feels shaky as shit, like he might fall to pieces, and the last thing he needs is his body sabotaging him.

Again.

They're both quiet for a long moment, breathing and settling back down to earth, and then Bucky asks, “Is that meant to be a can of beans, or...?”

Ugh. Steve waves a hand at the papers he's sprawled on top of. “Commission piece,” he says. “Ad for canned spinach, God help me. What do you mean, meant to be?”

Bucky holds up one of the papers. It's rough, more of a caricature, just the outline of the idea for the ad. “Coulda been just about anything. Not exactly your best work, Stevie.”

It's true, but—“Jerk,” Steve says, brings one foot up to poke Bucky in the ribs. “You can get up off my johnson now.”

“Bossy,” Bucky mutters, gets up and pulls Steve forward by the legs until he's just got his back on the table, and then hauls him up and reels him in and kisses him like a Hollywood damsel, all tongue and a big back bend.

“Oh, I'm good. Get off me and go see your Mam. I'm angling to replace you in the will, and she'll be real shirty with me if she finds out I kept you longer than I had to.”

It's funny because they're all poor as dirt, and because Steve's not going to outlive anybody, not with his dicky heart-lungs combination. They've been making will jokes since forever, only more so when they're actually in the Shadow of Death—round the time his Mam died, or anytime Steve's been desperately unwell, or with Bucky shipping off to war now.

“You gold-digging hussy,” Bucky says mildly, and makes no move to go. Steve lifts his hands and digs his fingers into Bucky's ribs, high up close to his armpits, and he writhes and breaks away.

“Punk,” Bucky says, and,

“Jerk,” Steve says again.

********

He's halfway through cooking himself dinner—sausage and mashed potato with canned spinach, may God have mercy on his soul—when Steve realises that's the first time they've fucked and he's not been a girl for any part of it. No dress, no shoes, not a lick of makeup. Just plain old Steve, bare feet and button down and hemmed-up trou, with a couple of days of sparse stubble dusted on his chin. Just—
What the Hell that means, he really can't say.

He hadn't thought about it at the time, obviously: was in too much of a hurry to get a mouthful of dick. But it was different, not their normal.

Normal: Steve gets an itch, puts on one of his dresses and presents himself like a gift for unwrapping, Bucky jumps on him like he's the last bus of the day. Or, more rarely: Bucky gets an itch, goes and buys Steve a pretty little something—panties or lipstick or shoes—and asks him to wear 'em, and then he jumps on Steve like he's the last bus of the day.

Either way, they've had signals, a call and response, and it's kept this—all of this, this messy obscene neurotic sticky morally indefensible shit show—somehow separate from the rest of their friendship. Maybe protected the rest of their friendship from the fucking shrapnel that's gonna come off of this when it blows up on them.

He's just jumped that barrier, thoughtless and feckless, and Bucky—Bucky let him.

Yeah, Steve's got no fucking idea. He might've just changed everything. He might've just fucked it up entirely. But then—

But then Bucky might get cut in half under Japanese machine gun fire a month from now. But then lots of things.

Steve pours himself several fingers of gin and eats his fucking dinner and reads a couple articles from the latest *Catholic Worker* with the singular resolve of a man facing the electric chair, and does not fucking brood for a minute longer about the whole stupid mess of where he and his idiot best friend are putting their dicks. In Jesus' name, *amen*.

*******

Steve's dreaming about shapeshifting into a bird—into a falcon, like he's seen Ulfadhir do, only when he tries he ends up being a seagull instead—when there's a thump and a clunk, heavy shoes being kicked off onto the wooden floor. He rolls over, bleary, smears at his eyes with the heels of his palm to shift the sleep outta them. “Buck?” he mumbles.

“Shit—sorry, Stevie,” comes the reply, and Steve can see the dark outline of Bucky, moving around the near-black room with all the careful precision he's got when he's had more to drink than he should've. “It's late, it's early. Didn't want to wake you, go back to sleep.”

Steve smiles, rolls onto his side, pushes the blankets back. “Put the lamp on, Buck.”

“No, I've got this—oh, fuck me. What was that?”

“Sounded like a whole stack of library books, Barnes,” Steve says, trying not to laugh. “Put the lamp on.”

“Right, hang on—” The lamp comes on, deep gold light spilling, and Steve lids his eyes just enough to keep from being blinded, just enough that he can still watch Bucky turn back to the bed and see him: in his prettiest white lace panties, garter belt and stockings, with one of Bucky's best going out shirts worn open over his shoulders and a smear of shell-pink lipstick on his mouth.
He smiles, slow and lazy, watches Bucky freeze, slowly straighten up, his wet mouth falling open.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” Bucky says. “Maybe don't go back to sleep.”

“Wasn't planning to,” Steve says.

Bucky's looking dazed as he crosses the room, flipping open the buttons of his shirt and crawling up to kneel on the bed. Steve sits up and puts a hand out, runs the pads of his fingers down the skin of Bucky's chest where it's being exposed, the soft curl of dark hair running fine down his sternum. Bucky sighs, opens up the last buttons and shucks the shirt off his shoulders, lets it drop to the floor. Reaches forward and cups Steve's jaw in both hands, studies him, grey gaze flicking from his eyes to his pink mouth and down, neck and collarbones, back up again.

“Christ, you're a sight for sore eyes,” he breathes.

Steve blushes like a stop light, shifts his gaze to Bucky’s ear. “Buck,” he says, flat.

“Don't you dare fucking disagree, I won't hear it,” Bucky rasps, and then he crushes their mouths together, licks deeply into Steve's mouth, and Steve hums, feathers his fingers into Bucky's hair, tasting him: whiskey and tobacco, the hot wet slickness of Bucky, his mouth plush and searching.

Bucky hums back, hands coming down to push the shirt off Steve's shoulders, breaks off the kiss to mouth down Steve's jaw and neck and then latch onto his right collarbone, lips and teeth, worrying at it gently. Steve bites his lip, lets himself be hauled forward by the hips until he's more or less in Bucky's lap, grabs Bucky's hips to anchor himself. His knee's ended up almost in Bucky's groin, and he can feel the press of his cock against the fly of his trou, swelling and hardening and jumping to nudge at him.

“Buck,” he gasps, and Bucky bites harder, licks at the tender spot, rocks forward to rub his dick against Steve's knee.

“Doll,” he growls, low and dark. “You gonna let me in you?”

Steve moans, shifts his leg so he's straddling Bucky's thighs, pressing their groins together. His dick has perked up, hard and full and straining against the white lace, and he's just gotta grind a little, rubs them together, feel Bucky's hard cock nudging at his own. Bucky makes a choked off noise, whips a hand down to cup the head of Steve's dick and squeeze.

Steve makes a wounded animal noise and ruts into it, mindless, and Bucky mouths at his neck and mutters, “Christ, what you do to me. This fucking getup—you're the prettiest thing I've ever seen, in your lace and silk, almost criminal I've gotta pull them off you to get at the goods—”

Steve moans, again, louder, and then thrusts into Bucky's hand and gasps, “Please, Buck.” He flails for a moment, grabs Bucky's cupped hand, his hips, his shoulders, glancing his hands down over the hard lines of his back—he's got leaner, while he was away training, like some last dewy layer of puppy fat has been burned off—until they land on Bucky's ass, cup and squeeze, try to pull him in even closer. “Please,” he says, pants into Bucky's hair.

“What's that, darlin’?” Bucky asks, slipping his hand into Steve's panties to lightly fist the length of his cock, and Steve throws his head back and bites his lip to smother the needy animal noise that's trying to come out of him.

“I want it,” Steve mouths, “I want it, Buck. Please,” and he grabs at the fly of Bucky's pants with shaking hands, fumbles with the buttons—
and it flips some kinda switch in Bucky's head because he goes from teasing to grabbing, plants Steve flat on his back in the bed and hauls the little panties down his hips and off, snaps open his fly and shoves his pants down and crawls outta them, until he's knelt over Steve with a hand planted either side of his head, leaning in to kiss him again and again, open-mouthed and hungry.

Steve throws his legs around Bucky's hips and pulls, hauls them closer together until their cocks are pressed together again, ruts into that pressure. Bucky breaks off the kiss to bury his face in the crook of Steve's neck and brokenly groan, “Jesus fucking Christ, doll. Where's the slick?”

“Under the pillow,” Steve says, and then blushes red as a Goddamn fire engine, and Bucky's cocking an eyebrow and grinning at him even as he pulls the little jar out from under Steve's pillow.

“Got this all planned out, don't you?” Bucky says, smearing his dick with brisk rough strokes of Vaseline, and then he reaches down to finger Steve open, gets as far as pressing one slick fingertip to his entrance and freezes, grey eyes flaring wide even as his pupils spill out big and black.

“Stevie?” Bucky says, punched-out breathless, and—

“Yeah, Buck?” Steve answers, in his best mock-innocent tone, and rocks his hips up so that long callused finger slides into him, easy as anything. He’s spent a good twenty minutes slicking himself up before going to bed, and the angle was awkward as Hell but he's got long and nimble fingers and a plan. He’s still wet and hot and open. Bucky looks like someone just kicked him in the head, like he's dazed and reeling, red mouth fallen open.

“Oh my Christ,” Bucky moans, and then he's dropped down the bed until he's eye level with Steve's asshole and he's pushing three fingers in there, watching like he's seeing a fucking miracle unfold, and Steve gasps and arches and bears down, suddenly sweating and breathless—it's good, it's so good, and it's been too Goddamn long.

“Oh, Stevie,” Bucky says, twisting and scissoring and thrusting those callused fingers in and out. “Doll, you're killing me. Look at you, all heated up and squirming—Christ, it's like your cunt is trying to suck my whole fucking hand in.” And Steve gulps and swallows and thrusts back against his hand, because he's got the angle now to brush over Steve's sweet spot with every in-out pass and it's sending fireworks lancing up his spine.

“C’mon, Buck,” Steve pants, arching and bringing a leg up so he's got a foot on Bucky's shoulder, pulling him closer.

“I've got you,” Bucky says, and then he's shoving four fingers into Steve and twisting, and Steve writhes and keens like a wounded animal, and then Bucky's leaning in and sucking the tip of Steve's cock into his mouth and Steve puts his teeth into his lower lip and sucks in a breath and throws his head back, rigid and frozen.

The music is starting to swell up through the cracks in his waking mind, blotting out everything above the gasps and pants and wet sounds of their bodies colliding. There's an itch of fire licking up his spine and into his belly, white hot, kindling the fibres of muscle and nerve and bone. It's amazing, it's awful, he might just die, it'd be worth it—

And then Bucky's pulling back, hand out and mouth off, and Steve's high and dry, wheezing, and he can feel his pulse in his cock, his asshole—he lunges, grabs, getting Bucky by the shoulder, the hip, pulling him back in: “Please, oh God—”

“I've got you,” Bucky says again. “Always gonna give you what you need, darlin’—” and then he's nipping at the skin behind Steve's ear and pulling his legs up and up, 'til he's got an ankle over each
shoulder, spread open and lifted up like his asshole is on a pedestal, and Bucky's lining up and pressing in and oh fuck oh fuck—

“—Oh fuck,” Steve sobs, and then claps a hand over his mouth to muffle himself because Jesus, falling to pieces is not part of the plan, but Bucky pulls Steve's hand away, nips and sucks at his fingertips. He's seated all the way in now, his pelvis hard against the swell of Steve's ass.

“Lemme hear you,” Bucky rumbles. “Fuck, you're so gorgeous when you lose your Goddamn head. Let me hear you,” and then he's pulling back and thrusting home again, slow and syrupy as molasses, and Steve bites his lip and throws his head back and keens, and Holy Mother it's just enough burn and stretch mixed in with his pleasure to make him so fucking hot it's like he's melting into the mattress.

“That's it, love, that's it. Christ, you're so good to me,” Bucky says, and he smears the pad of his thumb along Steve's wet lower lip before planting his hand down on the mattress again, both hands square and solid so he can put the whole of his body into thrusting—and then he does, and he's sweating, brow going down like he's concentrating, fucking into Steve slowly slowly and then faster faster, lines of tendon and muscle standing out under the slick salt of his skin.

Steve hangs on—to his own hair, to Bucky's hip—rocks up to meet him best as he can, biting his lip to stifle the little broken sobs trying to come out of him with every thrust, every push pull, the slap of Bucky's pelvis against his ass, the fire stoking and lancing up his spine brighter and brighter until—

—and it's not a sudden change, it's so gradual, the fire in his belly burning brighter and brighter and every thrust adds to it, stokes it, sends it spiralling higher, up from his swollen cock and fucking electric sweet spot, the tender burn and stretch of his asshole, up and up like sparks lifting from a fire and spiralling up into the black of the night sky into his pelvis, into his belly, until it's too much: too much heat and light, too much sweetness, his cup spilling over.

He's arching, lifting, spine curling, mouth falling open, and the noise that falls out of him isn't human, it's long and primal like he's mortally fucking wounded, and he's dimly aware that his hands are fisting, clawing, digging into his scalp and the flesh of Bucky's hip, but he can't feel it. Can't hear a Goddamn thing, past the vast swell of the music, his own song and Bucky's, the night song and the apartment song and the Brooklyn song all welling and ascending, their disparate chords and rhythms falling together—like when an orchestra is tuning their instruments, a collision of sounds that lifts and falls and comes together into perfection and clarity and unity—and it's so beautiful and terrible it hurts, aches in his chest like his heart is—

When he comes it's like hitting a wall, like falling off a fucking cliff, abrupt and stunning because he's so totally consumed in the fire and the music that the small fact of his physical body had kind of fallen away—until he's slammed back into it, arching and clawing and painting his belly and chest with spunk and—and that's his voice, way too fucking loud—Jesus, the neighbours—sobbing, beyond words.

And Bucky—Bucky's right there with him, swelling and pulsing deep in Steve's ass, and he's ducked forward to press his forehead into Steve's tits and chanting, “Oh fuck, Stevie, darlin', fuck,” as he shoves out his last erratic thrusts and then folds like a bad hand of cards, panting and shaking.

What the Hell. Steve gasps and gulps in air, brings his hands to Bucky's hair and combs his fingers into it, and he's shaking so badly it takes a couple of tries to coordinate the movement. He's shaking so bad he has to clench his teeth so they don't chatter. He's never—

It's never been like that.
But then—but then it's been a couple of months. And he's had a lot of time on his hands, and he's spent a lot of that time doing workings: making big seemings up the wall like the projector screen in a theatre, casting hexes and borrowing, sending up ghostlights instead of turning on a lamp in the evening. He's been alone, so he hasn't had to hide from anyone. So—so maybe there's more of the fire in him now than there was before? He should ask—

No, no scratch that. Scratch that out, with prejudice. He will not be asking Ulfadhir about anything pertaining to how sometimes when he fucks his best guy it feels like the world is ending. No, and Hell no, forever and ever, amen.

“Jesus Christ, Stevie,” Bucky mumbles.

“Yeah,” Steve agrees. Wonders what it's like from Bucky's end: if he also feels like he's riding the very crest of a wave of heat and light and destruction that might just blot out everything, or if that's just a Steve thing. There's not really any way to ask. He combs his fingers through Bucky's hair, concentrates on his own heartbeat, its slow and faulty rhythms, its quiet liquid push-pull.

Listens to the music, to their songs, the night music, finding the harmonies and the lulls, those quiet pulses when all he can hear is himself and Bucky, breathing.

******

Bucky sleeps as peaceful as the innocent dead. Steve waits until Bucky's well out and then gets up, pulls his rosary out, works the beads and breathes his Ave Marias and Paternosters out whisper quiet until the sun comes up, and then has his shower and brews up a couple mugs of coffee and some oatmeal.

He leaves it until almost eight to wake Bucky, passes the time sitting cross-legged on the end of the bed with his sketchbook and pencil, drawing him, close details, study after study, hands and face and hair, the lines of collarbone and chest, the well of his hip that falls into his groin, bunched sheets and rumpled bedding, changing as the light shifts through the window.

He's always loved drawing Bucky—the man is a walking billboard advertisement for sin, those fucking eyelashes, Holy Christ—but Buck's always been the kind of restless that won't let him sit and model for more than a couple minutes, so every study Steve's got of him is like this: either from when he's sleeping or when he's reading, chewing at a thumbnail and utterly immersed in one of his magazines.

The last sketch Steve did before Bucky left for Basic was of him curled up on the couch, coffee cooling at his elbow, chewing at his lower lip as he pages through Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. It's probably the best work Steve's ever done but he can't exactly put it in his portfolio—maybe it's just because he knows himself but he can read the… the hunger and intimacy in every line of it, and he feels like sharing the picture would be sharing the rest, like he might as well take out an ad in the paper. Steve Rogers: Giant Fucking Fairy. So the picture sits in his sketchbook, hidden away like two-thirds of Steve's life—

So Steve takes advantage, his last chance to draw Bucky for a while, maybe the last—no, don't even start down that path, it only leads into the black. And when it's almost eight he tucks his pencil into the book and packs it up, pours a cup from the pot of coffee sitting warm on the stove, and goes to wake Sleeping Beauty.
“Buck.” He's poking him in the shoulder, in the cheek. No response.

“C’mon, Barnes. Wake up and smell the coffee.” More poking. Bucky sighs and rolls over, hides away the cheek that Steve's been poking. Steve rolls his eyes and gives Bucky's left nipple a good hard tweak.

“Ahh! Fuck right off, Rogers,” Bucky mutters, arching away, and then goes still, slits his eyes open, wets his lips. “What—shit, what time is it?”

“Got an hour to meet your train, don’t panic,” Steve says, and presents him with the mug of coffee. Buck props himself up on an elbow and takes the mug with a trembling hand.

“Angel,” he rasps, “You’re an angel, I swear to God—” He takes an experimental sip, closes his eyes, a delirious sort of bliss crossing his face. “Oh Lord, it's real. Fucking chicory.” He sits up, swings his legs out of bed, sways for a moment, has another bigger sip.

“There's oats on the stove, if your delicate sensibilities can take anything solid just now,” Steve tells him, and saunters back out into the main room to flip on the radio.

“I’ll give you something solid,” Bucky mutters, appearing in the doorway in his undershorts, his shirt from last night slung open over his shoulders. He digs in his bag—still on the couch—and pulls out a towel and his tooth kit.

“Yes, you did. Last night,” Steve says, giving him a half grin, and Bucky stares at him helplessly for a moment before catching on and giving him a half-hearted leer. “Not really on your game yet, Buck?”

“I’ll get there. Engine takes a few minutes to warm up, is all. Okay: shit, shave, shower, train station.” He sticks his head out the front door to make sure there're no ladies in the hall to scandalise, and then makes the dash down to the shared bathroom at the far end.

They make it to the train station with time to spare, meet the Barnes women inside. It's all hugging and everyone talking at once, blinked back tears and pasted on smiles, Winnie pressing his Da’s old St Sebastian medallion into his hands and Izzy presenting him with a drawing of their whole family—Steve is included to the side, with suspenders and a shock of yellow on top for his hair, and Bucky is dead centre in his uniform—and then it's last call and Bucky's boarding, waving with his hat as he looks back, and then—

It's very quiet after the train pulls out.

Steve takes a deep breath to steady himself, then says, “Ice cream?”

Winifred gives him a grateful look, blinks hard a few times, and then answers, “Isn’t it a bit early in the day for ice cream?”

Georgie gives a wail of protest; Becca starts to grin. Steve puts on his most solemn and serious face. “I believe it is never too early in the day for ice cream.”

They go get ice cream. Steve goes to work. Life in Brooklyn goes on and on, like nothing has changed, like he was never here and gone again. Sex-stained sheets, the lingering smell of cigarette smoke, and an empty coffee mug. A few more filled-in pages in his sketchbook, more drawings he can't show anyone. That night Steve prays at the bedside until his knees are numb.
The temptation is there, for him to fall into a black hole again like he did after Buck went to training. It would be easy—Bucky’s actually gone now, not just away but gone around the curve of the globe, facing the enemy and risking his life every damn day. It would be so easy for Steve to slide into the black—God knows it’s familiar territory. But he can’t, he won’t. He can’t be that fucking self-indulgent. If Private James Barnes can wave and smile and put on a brave face as he heads west to war, Steve can keep getting out of bed, leave the gin in the kitchen cupboard. He’s got to.

He works—the sign writing job, commission pieces. Goes to his classes, gets his work done, gets good grades. Probably better than what he was averaging with Bucky around, if he’s honest; he’s got fewer distractions. Eats lunches and hits the bars with some of the fellas from his art classes. Pretty sure Joe from Life Drawing III is sweet on him, which is... disorienting.

He meets the Barnes girls at the school gates at least a couple days a week and walks them home, and on Sundays he’s at the church with Winnie and the girls, has dinner with them all that night.

He learns to heart the prayer for Intercession from St Sebastian, patron of soldiers. Wears out his rosary beads. Reads, draws, keeps up with the radio plays. Finally puts up that curtain in the bedroom and starts taking in short-term roommates—mostly guys he knows from school. It helps, not just for the extra cash but—it just helps. He’s not really used to living alone.

Has his lessons with Ulfadhir—knife work, more pressure points, philosophy. Lots of borrowing, more and more complex veils and seemings. Spends about three months mastering a working that calls things to him—just little things, a pencil or a dime, and just the length of a room. In theory, according to Ulfadhir anyway, he can use it to call a knife back to him if he’s lost it in a fight, but he’s not sure if he’ll ever actually be able to use it for that: takes him twenty minutes of single-pointed focus to get a pen to roll across the living room floor to his hand. Still looks impressive as Hell, though.

Also, tactics and strategy for combat. Which—well, he knows Ulfadhir doesn’t want him going off to war, but then Ulfadhir knows what a stubborn piece of shit he is, so maybe this is the compromise: sitting on the living room floor, couch and tables shoved out of the way, in the middle of a vast seeming, terrain and mountains and thousands of tiny soldiers moving around as if he’s a bird hovering a hundred feet above it all, watching. Seeing how they move and collide, surge forward and fall back.

Some of the battles are modern GIs and tanks; others have elephant cavalry, Spartan phalanxes, trebuchets and scorpions. One has dragons, and Steve thinks at first that Ulfadhir is fucking with him, but the man narrates the battle progress, troop movements and shifts in terrain in just the same neutral tone as he had used outlining the Siege of Jerusalem in the Second Crusade.

Writes to Bucky: what he’s getting up to, updates on the Barnes clan, neighbourhood gossip. Includes short stories torn from the science rags that he loves, and pictures Steve’s drawn: Izzy in her Sunday best, Becca working braids into Georgie’s hair. Gets letters back from Bucky, and reads them ‘til the creases in the paper threaten to tear.

He doesn’t write too often, and reading between the lines it’s clear that’s because he really hasn’t got much that’s good to say: the censor won’t let him say where he is exactly, but it’s damn hot all the time, particularly at night, rains enough that everything is mud and his socks are never dry. And that’s without the Japanese. He doesn’t write about combat, if he’s seen it, and maybe it’s because of the censor or maybe he’s just trying to keep Steve from fretting.
It doesn’t work. He’s lit enough candles for St Sebastian down at the church to illuminate half the heavens.

At the six month mark he tries again to enlist. He figures he’s got an okay chance this time—he hasn’t had an asthma attack in years, his heart’s not playing up anymore, he’s actually put a little meat and muscle on his bones for the first time in his adult life—but they still send him packing. 4F.

It burns. Word is filtering out from Europe, and some of it’s probably crazy rumours but there’s never this much smoke without some kinda fire: word about the systematic persecution of undesirables—Jews, fairies, cripples—that Nazis are destroying their homes and businesses, are rounding them up and shipping them off to only God knows where. It sounds too crazy to be real, and it’s the other side of the world, but Steve looks around himself and sees streets full of dirty undesirable migrants, the fruits that go down to the Navy Yard, or—or fuck, himself, or Joe from Life Drawing III.

He knows how fragile they all are. And it burns that he can’t do a damn thing to help.

And then it’s been almost a year and the telegram comes, and his heart squeezes hard, so hard that white dots blink in his eyes like car headlights at night—but when he gets it open it’s okay. It’s okay:

IN BRIS AUS SAFE WELL STOP

HOME SOON REDEPLOYED STOP

KISS MOM STOP

JBARNES

When he arrives, shaking and gasping for breath, at the Barnes house, with the telegram in his fist, Winnie meets him at the door with her hair in curlers and tears on her cheeks, and they’re a tangle of voices and limbs because she has a matching telegram, only hers reads HUG STEVE.

*******

It's almost another month later and Steve is coming home from work, green and white paint daubed up his arms and sunburnt across his cheeks and nose—he's been up a ladder, freshening up the lettering on the Tubmans Greengrocers sign, caught some sun, is tired and hungry—and he kicks at the door where it’s stuck in the jam and shoves his way inside and finds one JB Barnes sleeping on his couch.

Or he had been sleeping—kicked back, legs crossed, his hat pulled down over his eyes—now he’s half-uncoiled, blinking at Steve and pushing the hat back up, and he's in uniform but his boots are half unlaced and the jacket is slung over the back of a chair, and there's some scruff on his chin that sure as Hell isn’t regulation. Bags under his eyes.

“Hey, Stevie,” he says, after they’ve both stared at each other for long enough, and it’s like a wire snapping under tension, Steve lurching forward and going to his knees next to the couch, throwing his arms around Bucky’s middle and hugging him hard enough to weld the two of them together.

“Hey, Buck,” he says, muffled against Bucky’s sternum. “How’ve you been?”
“Oh, you know,” Bucky says, one arm around Steve’s shoulders and the other hand feathering into his hair, hugging back just as hard. “Nothing to write home about.”

“You jackass,” Steve says. Bucky feels too skinny, all wire and muscle over bone. Winnie’s going to take one look at him and start cooking, Steve can see it now. But he’s here, he’s here—Lord God, thank you. He’s here. “What happened? How come they’re redeploying you?”

He can feel the shift, Bucky going still, his breath catching for a heartbeat and then coming out slow and controlled. “Nothing good,” Bucky says, soft. “I—uh. Listen, you want some coffee? I made a pot,” and he’s sitting back, letting go.

Steve fists his hands so he doesn’t grab on like the needy wretch he is, sits back on his heels. “Sure, Buck,” he says, quiet, because he can see the way tension is crawling up the lines of Bucky’s arms and shoulders, the way his eyes are flicking around and not settling. Nothing good, for sure. “You found my secret stash?”

“Was that meant to be secret?” Bucky asks blithely, and goes into the kitchen, gets down a mug from the cupboard and makes him coffee just how he likes it, the lightest trace of milk and an Imperial shit tonne of sugar. Steve picks himself up off the floor and sits on the couch, watches him; he can see the traces of sandwich makings on the bench as well, a mug washed and drying on the edge of the sink. Bucky’s been here long enough to settle in, at least a couple hours.

Which reminds him: “How long have you got before you’re shipping out again?”

“I’m getting my orders from the home office tomorrow, so—maybe the day after that? Won’t know for sure until I find out where they’re sending me.” He brings the mug over and passes it to Steve across the back of the couch, stands back and leans against the table. “Scuttlebutt is that they need warm bodies for the 107th, so that’ll mean Europe. Italian front.”

“That’s the rumour?”

“That’s what I hear, anyway. So what’ve you heard? Update me, Rogers, what’s been going on around here? Has Sammy Krevanek made an honest woman of his girl yet?”

Christ, Steve wants to ask again. Wants to find out what’s put that hard edge on Bucky’s smile, what’s chasing him that he can’t settle his eyes in one spot for too long. But Bucky’s not talking about it, not now anyway, so Steve grits his teeth and pastes on his best look of casual contentment—he’s spent a lot of time making stupid faces in the bathroom mirror preparing for this moment—and updates Bucky on the comings and goings of their narrow slice of Brooklyn, until his coffee runs dry and he gets up to wash his mug at the sink.

“School’s out for the day, Buck,” Steve says, speaking up a little over the moan of the pipes. “Wanna head over to Dean Street and see ‘em all? Izzy’s put on about a foot of height while you were away, I swear she’s angling to be taller than you—” and then there’s a light touch at his hip and he jumps and whirls, almost throwing up an elbow.

Buck flinches away, hands to himself again. He’s stepped in right behind Steve, about a foot between them like they’re gonna start dancing, and Steve’s reminded in his bones and guts and feckless heart all of a sudden about the first time they’d ever—when Buck came home early and found him in his lace-collared dress, threw him against this very sink and ruined him. He’s standing head ducked and hands opening and closing, watching Steve’s shoulders and chest and hands and hips like he’s waiting for his cue.

“Is this—do you still—” Bucky stops and starts, and Steve reaches out and grabs one of those hands,
laces their fingers together—feels the thick calluses on Bucky’s palm and fingers—and lifts until he can press a kiss to the back of his hand. There’s a new scar across the second and third knuckles, and Steve keeps his gaze there, waits.

“Oh,” Bucky says, soft and punched out of him, and then he steps in, puts his arms around Steve and pulls him close, buries his face in Steve's hair. “I didn’t wanna—I mean, it’s been a year, you might’ve—met somebody, or—”

“Barnes,” Steve says, about to argue, but then—but he has met people. He’s met lots of people. He’s had opportunities. He’s just not taken any of ‘em.

But this isn’t—*can’t* be—they’re not sweethearts staying true through thick and thin. They’re both fellas: sooner or later Bucky’s gonna want to take one of those girls he dances with home to meet Winnie and the family, to marry her and start a family too; sooner or later Steve’s bum heart or dicky lungs are gonna stitch him up one last time.

Fuck it all—“You talk too much,” Steve finishes, and covers up that long pause in the middle by grabbing Buck by the back of the head and pulling him down and kissing him.

Bucky sighs against his mouth, shudders and then kisses back, mouth opening, soft and wet and easy. He slips Steve some tongue and Steve hums and returns the favour, and his pulse is in his ears and this—this is not *them*, not their normal thing, the safe thing where Steve’s a girl so it’s not really them and none of it’s real but—but. *Fuck it all:* extraordinary times, extraordinary measures, all that business. And then Bucky’s nipping at his lower lip, dropping kisses on his jaw and the top of his head. “Okay,” Bucky mutters into his hair. “Okay. You got a roommate at the moment?”

“No, just me,” Steve says.

“Okay if I stay here tonight, then?”

“Fair warning: I will kidnap you if you try and stay someplace else.”

Bucky snorts with laughter, and then mouths at his hair like a horse until Steve shoves him away. “What would my poor mother think of that?” Bucky asks, grinning.

“If she caught me halfway through your window in my burglar’s blacks? It’d be far from the worst thing she’s caught us doing.”

Bucky laughs again, grabs Steve and slings an arm around his shoulder. “Holy shit. Remember—we were 14—that abandoned house on Wykoff—”

“And you were there with your ass hanging out the window, and Larry just ran like the wind soon as she came round the corner—”

“Some fucking lookout you were, Jesus Christ.” Bucky grabs his hat and jacket and steers them for the door.

“Yeah, I’m still not clear why the kid with astigmatism was lookout,” Steve says.

“And that’d be why I’m crawling around in mud cuddling a rifle to get paid, instead of running a criminal empire,” Bucky muses, and they head for Dean Street.

The descent of the Barnes household into chaos is immediate and absolute. It takes almost twenty minutes just to clear the front foyer, between all the hugging and crying and crying and hugging, and then somehow Steve finds himself bringing clean handkerchiefs and glasses of water and sugar
cookies to Becca, who’s sitting on the stairs having the kind of crying jag that comes after lancing a wound that’s been festering for a long damn time. She’s been solid as a rock for the whole year—this was due.

And Winnie is also crying in the kitchen, and singing to the radio and dancing from counter to counter and cooking—he coulda made money betting on it, if anyone was silly enough to take the bet, and she’d started meal planning the second she’d clapped eyes on her son.

And Bucky and Izzy and Georgie are playing some kind of game that seems to involve running around upstairs screaming and howling at each other.

It’s—loud. Jesus, it’s very loud.

Christ, Buck must have missed this like air and light; and Steve can only really get it in his head, not in his body or his gut, because he’d grown up friendless and with just his Mam, but for Bucky this—the noise and mess and crashing and howling and laughter—this is home.

“Thank you,” Becca says, taking the plate of cookies and smiling up at Steve, and her eyes are red, smile wobbly, but she’s okay: “I'm just really happy.”

“I know. Hey, me too,” Steve says, and gives her hand a squeeze where it’s on the bannister, and then he ducks back into the kitchen. “You need any extra hands in here?”

Winnie is chopping carrots with extreme prejudice. Her face is wet with tears but she’s smiling too, stops chopping to hug him like he’s just asked to marry one of her daughters. “All’s well, thank you, Stevie,” she says and then she’s back to cooking and Steve escapes. Upstairs there is a crash, followed by peals of laughter.

They stay through dinner—rabbit and veg stew with mountains of warm bread rolls—and dessert—bread and butter pudding woven through with apple—and then Bucky reads the girls a bedtime story and even Becca listens, far too old for fairy tales, her head in his lap where they’re all piled together on the couch. And then they’re out into the night, and Bucky throws his arm around Steve’s shoulders and says, “Rogers, let’s go drinking.”

“If you’re looking to get me drunk, you know I’m pretty much a sure thing, right?” Steve asks, and Bucky snorts and then laughs a manic sort of laugh and steers them into the nearest bar.

They bar-hop home over the next couple hours, never more than one drink in any one place, Bucky restless and a little wild around the eyes, and when they get home he jams the door closed, grabs Steve by the shoulders and plants him back against it, and then leans in and kisses him, light as a bee kissing pollen, the barest wet brush of lips hovering and meeting, his breath warm and sweet on Steve’s skin.

“Yeah?” Bucky asks, and:

“Yes, Buck,” Steve answers.

“You gonna—can you dress up nice and pretty for me?”

Steve bits his lip so he doesn’t whimper and presses his forehead to Bucky’s sternum. “Any requests?” he asks the floor.

“Stockings,” Bucky says. “If you still got ‘em. Want your legs wrapped in silk while they’re wrapped around my head—” and Steve convulses, throws his arms around Bucky's neck and pulls his face down and kisses him, mouth open and searing hot, all demand and hunger. Bucky plants his
big hands on Steve’s lower back and opens to it, rumbles a hum low in his chest, and Jesus God but
his tongue is clever, licking and sucking and curling to slide alongside Steve’s tongue, tasting of
smoke and whiskey and sin.

In the bedroom Steve hauls open his clothes chest and pulls out the stockings, lipstick, soft little pale
blue lacy slip. Turns back to Bucky, who’s sat down on the bed, tie open and flicking apart the
buttons on his dress shirt and watching Steve, his gaze dark and steady and hungry. Steve meets his
eyes and blushes, dips his head, watches through his eyelashes as Bucky’s shirt falls open and reveals
the landscape of his body, all wiry muscle and skin burnt deeply gold. He’s beautiful, and Steve
wants to draw him almost as much as he wants to—Hell, Mary and Joseph, just map every inch of
his topography with his hands and mouth.

Steve whips his shirt off, drops trou and steps out of them, stands in his undershirt and shorts just as
Bucky’s shrugging his own shirt off his shoulders, and the lamplight’s not much but Steve can see
the cluster of scars on the meat of his right shoulder, star-shaped white and pink and angry red
against the tan, smeared over skin and down into the curve of his collarbone. He hisses, steps in with
a hand out to touch, stops himself just shy and looks Buck in the eye.

“Doesn’t hurt,” Bucky says, and Steve touches, feels the slippery smooth of scar tissue dappled over
skin. He steps in and kisses, dots his lips over the markings, tasting the salt of clean skin. Christ,
Christ, it’s all he can do not to go to his knees on the spot with sheer gratitude—that it was a shoulder
and not the ribcage, the soft and vulnerable gut. He licks along the length of Bucky’s collarbone,
closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, and then drops a kiss on Bucky’s waiting mouth and steps
away again. Grabs up his bundle of lace and silk and ducks behind the curtain that splits the room in
half.

“There’s a story you’re going to tell me, about that shoulder of yours,” Steve says, shucking off his
underclothes and letting them drop.

“Yeah?” Bucky asks, his voice low and rasping.

“Yeah,” Steve says, hauling the blue slip on over his head, tugging so it falls sweetly over his tits and
narrow hips. “Not right now, though. I got designs on you, Buck.” He smears a little of the lipstick
on, the soft blush pink, hands steady enough to do it without a mirror, presses his lips together to
spread the colour around.

“You’ve got designs, huh? I might have an idea or two of my own,” Bucky says, and Steve grins,
flips back the curtain and crosses to sit on the edge of the bed, next to Bucky, close but not touching,
bending down to slip his toes into the stockings.

Bucky’s down to his undershorts, leaning back on his hands, all lazy arrogance—and it’s a front,
Steve can read the tension in the set of his shoulders, taut line of his abdomen, deliberate angle of his
head. He’s—nervous? But then, so is Steve. It’s been a year. They’re different people, now. There’s
a lot they’ve both gotta relearn.

“I’m open to suggestions,” Steve says, tugging up his stockings, smooth long movements so the silk
lies even over his skin. They stop high on his thigh; he’d need a garter belt if he was going to run
around in them, but this’ll work just fine for decorative purposes. “What were you thinking?” he
asks, smoothing the silk with his fingertips.

“I was thinking you should ride my face until my jaw seizes up, and then I could fuck you,” Bucky
says, very casual, lying back with his hands behind his head, and every drop of blood in Steve’s
body is redirected to his dick.
“Jesus, Buck,” he wheezes, rolls over and crawls up to stare down at Bucky, meet his eyes, and Bucky’s wild-eyed and grinning like he’s just won a bet so Steve shakes his head, grins back, leans down and kisses him, shaking with laughter.

“Well, it’s been a year,” Bucky says when the kiss breaks, “We’ve got time to make up for. Ain’t no point in pussyfooting around it.”

“Mother of God,” Steve says, and then he’s kissing Bucky and Bucky’s grabbing him by the hips and hauling him over so they’re sprawled together, chest to chest, and Steve can feel Bucky’s dick where it’s pressed into the crease of his hip and thigh, hot and heavy and throbbing with his pulse. The noise that comes out of him is hungry and too high-pitched to be dignified—but then, you know what, fuck it. He’s already wearing a lacy slip. Dignity is overrated.

He rolls his hips, grinds down, and Bucky hums into the kiss and rolls his hips up in reply, and then they’re necking and panting and grinding like teenagers, grabbing handfuls of hair and hip and ass, and then Bucky tears his mouth away, grabs Steve’s cock under the slip and fists it, gasps, “Fuck it, darlin’, Stevie, come on. Sit on my face, I fuckin’ want it—” and Steve groans, low in his chest, helpless to stop it and blushing like a stoplight.

“I ain’t had a shower since last evening, Buck,” Steve says, hips still rolling because apparently they just do that now, outside of his control, like his dick is doing the steering, and—

“Did I fucking stutter?” Bucky asks, with a crazed note in his voice as he grabs at Steve’s thighs and pulls, and Steve bites his lip and goes with, lets himself be manhandled into position.

And then he’s astride Bucky’s face, toes by his ears and knees in his armpits, and looking south, down the line of Bucky’s body—and sweet Christ he’s all muscle and gristle and bone, strips of deep tan and pale where the sun’s caught him, the soft line of dark fur that runs down his belly and into his shorts and that spreading dark wet patch on the front of his shorts where his dick is swollen up and weeping, and all of him taut and coiled even as his hands are spreading Steve’s cheeks apart, opening him up.

And then Bucky is open-mouth kissing the rosebud of his asshole, licking in and pulsing his tongue, fever-hot like there’s nothing else he’d rather be doing, and it’s so fucking filthy that Steve just about comes on the spot.

He moans like a cat in heat, arches and claws his nails into Bucky’s ribs, and cries, “Oh God, Buck, Jesus.” Lunges forward and grabs at Bucky’s shorts, lifting the waistband away to free the deep-red swell of his cock and then shoving them off and down, too frantic for any kind of grace about it, until he gets them to mid-thigh and gives up, grabs Bucky’s cock instead and mouths at it. He can only get the tip into his mouth from here, but that’s—

“Fuck yes, doll,” Bucky growls, and then drives his tongue into Steve’s ass, wet and sloppy and hungry, and the bright tickle of fire spirals up Steve’s spine and settles in his gut, sparking and burning.

Steve thrusts back into it, rocks forward sucking and working his tongue like it’s the heart of summer and he’s gotta get this ice cream cone on board before it melts, and the back-forward shift rubs his dick against Bucky’s collarbones, leaves a wet trail on the skin. It feels fucking good, so he does it again, and again, and then Bucky pulls his knees up, puts a bit more curve in his spine and brings his hips and cock a little closer to Steve’s face, and Steve sucks in as much as he can get and works his tongue against the head, works the rest of the length with his hand, tastes the salt of pre-come welling on his tongue.
He can feel and hear Bucky’s choked gasp pressed into the skin of his ass, and then Bucky’s licking him again, long flat slides of his tongue up the length of him from perineum to sacrum, and there’s a spit-wet finger rubbing at Steve’s hole like it’s asking permission.

“Please, please,” Steve pants, and then Bucky pushes that finger into him, slow and easy, rocking it in with the rolling thrusts of Steve's hips, still pressing his mouth in and licking at him there, hot and wet, and it feels like there’s spit fucking everywhere, like he’s wetter than a girl. And then—fuck—

And then Bucky crooks that finger, just a little beckoning forward bend, just enough to rub the callused pad of his fingertip against Steve’s sweet spot, and the fire in his gut goes incandescent, spilling into his blood and bones and fingertips, like if he were to look right now he’d be physically fucking glowing—but he can’t, can’t even pry his eyes open, and every muscle in his torso is pulling taut as wire.

He’s making helpless animal noises around Bucky’s dick, sucking and fist ing it hard and quick because this is too good, and he’s not gonna last, and he needs Bucky there on the same page, needs it like he needs air and sunlight. He’s still rolling his hips, thrusting down on that crooked finger, his rhythm going to pieces as he gets close to the edge.

And then something inside him snaps, tears open, and the fire is flooding through him, like a train through a tunnel, riding him down from sky to feet and through, from ground to skull and through, spilling over and out his mouth and eyes and hands, the roar of music vast enough that he can’t even hear himself, knows only distantly that he’s sobbing against Bucky’s abdomen, shapeless vowels, “Oh, oh, ohh—”

His orgasm slams him back into tissue and bones, back into his cock spurting white in streaks down Bucky’s sternum, back into his ass clenching up tight like he’s trying to suck Bucky's hand in and keep him there, and he’s moaning so breathless it’s almost a whisper, still thrusting. “Fuck, yes,” he hears Bucky growl, “That’s it, love, gimme it,” and his spare hand comes down—it’s been on Steve’s thigh, rubbing a blunt thumb up and down over the spot where bare skin yields to silk—and he grabs his own cock and tugs, once and twice, goes rigid, makes some kind of bitten off groan like he’s in pain, and the first stripe of his spunk hits Steve in the neck.

Steve hums, finds the strength to lift his head, and the next wad hits him in the mouth and chin. He freezes for a second, then—what the Hell. Ain’t like he hasn’t had it in his mouth before. Raises a hand to smear it off his chin with the ball of his palm and then lick his hand clean.

Bucky’s hand comes up, catches his at his fingers and traces his lips, the smears of jizz still there. His chest is working as he breathes hard, shuddering a little on the out-breath. “Holy shit,” he mumbles. “That’s inspiring.”

“Is your aim just really bad, or—” Steve begins, and Bucky laughs out loud.

“My aim is fucking excellent, actually,” he says, and then, “Are you okay? You—at the end there you sounded like you were about to die on me.”

“Didn’t sound bad enough to stop you gettin’ your rocks off,” Steve says, awkwardly dismounting—his right knee clicks—and then sprawling on the bed on his belly, one hand landing on Bucky’s chest.

“Emperor Hirohito coulda personally flown a Zero through our kitchen window and it wouldn’t have stopped me gettin’ my rocks off,” Bucky says, and he rolls to face Steve, throws an arm over his waist and hitches them closer, knees and elbows and limbs tangling together. Snugs his chin to the top of Steve’s head. “You’ve got no idea what you do to me, do you?”
Steve tucks his head so he’s talking to Bucky’s collarbones. “I got some idea,” he says, and Bucky pulls the blankets up and tucks them in, never mind that they’re halfway down the bed and cock-angled with nary a pillow in sight: this is where they’ve landed, so this is where they’ll lie.

It’s quiet for a long time—Brooklyn’s humming with her night music now, so a lot of the brashness has gone to sweetness, syrup and malt, and the rumble purr of machines and traffic have an ocean kind of susurration to them now, and Steve’s listening to the Brooklyn song and the huff of Bucky’s breath and almost asleep when Bucky speaks, soft and level, the dark like a confessional.

“I’m a real good shot, point of fact. That’s why—my shoulder, when it happened. Japs bombed a supply ship as it was dropping off gear for us, and I was Johnny on-the-spot. Volunteered to help unload ’cause I wanted to see if I could steal some more quinine or shit paper for the guys in my squad—you don’t know, Stevie, half of us were sick with the squirts or some kinda fever almost all the time.” He shifts a little closer, drops his voice further. “So there I was when the bombs started falling, and I caught some shrapnel with my shoulder. Didn’t even feel it ’til an hour later, I was too busy running around, getting guys under cover—half those fellas were green as shit, didn’t know what to do.”

Steve bites his lip, presses a dry kiss to Bucky’s collarbone, listens: “I—well, I’d been there for a couple months when Captain Harris put a rifle in my hands, asked to see what I could do,” Bucky says. “And it turns out I’m a good shot, Stevie—never been really good at much of anything before, but I can kill a guy from hundreds of yards out no problem. Ain’t that a Hell of a thing. So—so your rifle butt sits against your shoulder when you’re sharp-shooting, and me having a torn up shoulder was bad news.” He’s shaking his head side to side like he’s disagreeing, the movement slow and small.

“So they stuck me on a hospital ship—no field medicine for me, Cap wanted a proper orthopaedic surgeon to look at me, make sure it healed neat and clean so I could be out killing Japs again double fucking quick. And I was on the Tasman with a pinup nurse changing my bandages, fifty fucking miles out to sea when my squad walked into an ambush and got shot to bits and I wasn’t there, Stevie, I wasn’t there.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Steve whispers, burrows deeper into Bucky’s arms and throws an arm over his waist, drops a kiss over his heart. “Jesus, Buck.”

“And that’s why I’m being redeployed, see? ’Cause the unit I served with doesn’t exist anymore. The ones that ain’t dead got medical discharges, and there was a couple who stayed at camp, too sick to march, but I ain’t seen them. They’ll be redeployed too, anyway. Captain got word to me on the Tasman but I ain’t privileged to see the casualty lists so I don’t even know who made it out or—” He chokes off, falls silent.

Steve’s chest hurts, fucking hurts, as bad as it did when his heart tried to quit on him. He pulls the blanket up over their heads, throws arm and leg over Bucky like he’s winching him in, like Bucky’s the small one and Steve’s got a hope in Hell of keeping him safe. “Jesus, sweetheart,” he whispers against Bucky’s forehead. “I’m so Goddamn sorry.”

Bucky shakes for a long time, hard enough that Steve can hear the soft creak of his teeth pressed together so they don’t chatter, and Steve holds him, hard, with all the wiry strength he’s got, all the righteous fury and desperate prayer he’s got, whispers against Bucky’s skin the same comforting nonsense his Mam always whispered to him when he was unwell: “There, a stór, I’ve got you, sweetheart,” and at some point they both fall asleep.
Steve wakes to the soft clunk of his bottom drawer sliding closed, blinks and looks up. Alarm clock reads twenty past four. Bed is warm but empty. What—

Oh.

Bucky crawls back under the covers with him, drops a kiss on the small of his back, and then presses a slicked up fingertip to his perineum. Steve gasps, because it’s cold, and then spreads his legs because it’s Pavlovian at this point, and then wakes up a bit more and asks, “Really, Buck?”

Somewhere under the blankets Bucky bites him on the meat of his ass, lightly, and then kisses in the same spot. “Did you think I was gonna talk big and then not follow through?” Bucky rumbles, his voice rusty with sleep. “I told you: first my mouth, then my dick.”

Steve rolls his eyes, and then arches and gasps a little because Bucky’s just pushed his finger in, slow and easy, rocking and pulsing it as he goes. He buries his face in the mattress to stifle his hum of sleepy satisfaction, squirms, says, “Well, I guess I was gonna deduct points from your performance if you hadn’t—oh sweet Christ—”

They don’t get back to sleep until just before the sun rises.
Chapter 10

Steve's got a half day—he's seeing a guy uptown about some commission work, and the fella's been pretty vague on the details so far which means it's probably blue, Tijuana Bible type stuff. Not that he's complaining—the money spends the same, whether it's men's socks or ladies' frilly underthings that he's drawing. Better some paper girl for the creeps to stare at than the real thing, anyway.

Bucky's spending the morning at Dean Street with his family, and then getting a train into town to get his orders. They're both slow to get moving, hungover and short on sleep, power through a pot of coffee between them and then jostle at the wash stand to get shaved and presentable and out the door.

The meeting is pretty painless—and yeah, it's blue books again, so he heads straight home after, drops off his portfolio and the rough storyboard he's been given to work with, because walking the streets with that stuff under his arm just feels like borrowing trouble. Here, women and children of Brooklyn, have some saucy pinup pics dropped in your lap, courtesy of local artist Steven G Rogers.

And then he's still got a few hours to kill before he's meeting Buck again, so he swings down to Queen of All Saints, buys a few candles for Her upstairs and lights them and runs through a few Ave Marias. Slows on his way out past the confessional but—but he can't get cleared right now. It would be a lie: confession requires repentance, some intent to change your ways, and he fully intends to sin again in the immediate future, soon as he can get one JB Barnes behind a closed door. He can try and stay on the good side of Her upstairs, though: She lived and loved, found ways to feed kids and negotiated relationships and all that mess that comes with life, so he figures She knows the score. Here's hoping She'll intercede if he gets hit by a bus tomorrow, still neck deep in sin and bad decisions.

And then he's at liberty again, with a few shards of loose change in his pockets, so he heads to the cinema.

And he's short on sleep and short on patience, still aching like a bruise in his chest from where Bucky was pressed into him in the night, shaking and shaking. So when the asshole down front starts yelling at the newsreel about the guys fighting overseas, Steve's temper frays quicker than it should, and then—

And then he's in an alley with the asshole in question, and this jerk's already out of breath trying to land a clean shot on him. And most of Steve is furious with this loudmouthed bullying jackwit, but there's a small, ugly part of him that's wanting to laugh, to bare teeth like a feral animal.

Shouty the asshole swings, and it's wide and slow and so clearly telegraphed Steve could sway under it, step around it, swing off it, but he tries not to—well.

The goal is to incapacitate—not to maim, not to kill—and by annoying fucking paradox the more Ulfadhir teaches him, and the more he knows about fighting, the more he's gotta be Goddamn careful. He almost put out some jerk's eye about six months ago, was halfway through the strike when he remembered and pulled it, and he's been gun-shy since—and no one he fights ever has the same consideration for him.

He hits them, they think it's a fluke. He puts them down, they bounce up angrier: because he looks like an underfed pansy faggot, and it pricks their fucking pride, and they don't stop coming at him 'til someone's hurting bad enough to quit. And Jesus, he doesn't like hurting people—but he likes running away even less. You start running, they don't let you stop.
So he turns his head as the punch comes, lets it graze past his jaw, makes a half-turn and dives for the
ground. An asshole will never resist the chance to kick you when you’re grounded, at least in Steve’s
experience, which means he’ll come in close, be in range of Steve’s legs so he can bring him to the
ground too, and then—

And sure enough Shouty steps in nice and close, and Steve coils his left leg—

“What was that you were saying?” Shouty asks, sneering, and Steve grins up at him—gotcha, sweet
pea—and snares his leg between Shouty’s, wrenches behind his knee with his crooked foot, and
Shouty blanches—

—and then he’s lurching back, hauled by the scruff of his shirt, Bucky snarling, “Why don’t you
pick on somebody your own size?” and putting himself between them.

Steve… blinks. Stares. Sits up, head cocked, and watches: Shouty swings again, the same slow and
stupid hook he’d used on Steve, and Bucky dodges and hits back, kicks him as he’s staggering
away, and it’s over and done with.

Christ, but it’s not fair: one exchange, two big dogs snarling, and then it’s done, because bullies and
assholes see Bucky and recognise the threat in him: that he’s big and strong, Army, a scrapper. Steve
—same asshole, totally different fight.

“Sometimes I think you like getting punched,” Bucky says, hand out to help him up. Steve stares at
the hand, turning it over in his head—okay. It’s been a year, is all. And Bucky’s always waded in,
helped him out in fights: he’s not the one that’s changed. That’s all Steve: he’s been finishing his
own fights for a long time now. He bites his lip, reminds himself that pride is a sin.

“I had him on the ropes,” he says, and lets Bucky help him up.

******

It’s Bucky’s last night in town—he’s shipping out tomorrow morning, for London and then Italy,
bound for the 107th with a promotion to Sergeant. “It’s all that experience I’ve got, yelling
instructions and pretending I ain’t panicking,” Bucky says, jostling Steve by the shoulder.

“What, with your sisters?”

“With you, ya punk.”

So he’s gotta go out with a bang, which means they head for the World Exposition. *The World of
Tomorrow*, according to the banners and signs, and everything is chrome with strips of light on it,
bombastic music blaring through every speaker. Crowds are thick, food is expensive, and Steve’s got
a headache within the first ten minutes but he plasters on a cheerful look of interest and keeps up
because Bucky is grinning like a kid, nose to the glass at every display, reading every sign down to
the fine print.

He’s always read *Amazing Tales* and *Popular Mechanics* cover to cover, has been pulling things to
pieces to see how they work since before he knew how to put ‘em together again. He’d got his first
job in the garage purely because he was always in there anyway, poking and asking questions. So
this is perfect; this is JB Barnes all over.

It’s during Howard Stark’s big presentation—a flying car, of all things—that Steve spots the Uncle
Sam poster, and—well. It’s been a while since he tried to enlist, almost six months. He’s in better
health than he’s been in his whole life. Maybe if he doesn’t mention the asthma when they ask about his medical history? He’s already lying about where he’s from. They can’t say no forever.

He slips a hand in Bucky’s hip pocket and pinches him, and Bucky jumps, tears his eyes away from the stage. “I’ll be back,” Steve says, leaning up to speak straight into his ear, and Bucky nods, grins brightly, and Steve gets the wild urge to drop a kiss on that smile—shit, like he’s Bucky’s girl for real, like that wouldn’t get them both kicked to bits or arrested. Stupid, stupid. Hands to himself, jammed into his pockets, and he works his way back through the crowd and over to the recruiting station.

******

When he strides out again he’s got a card marked 1A in his pocket and his ears are ringing, heart pattering like it hasn’t done in years, skin running hot and cold like he’s feverish because soldier, the doctor called him a soldier, and I can give you a chance, and—

And Bucky weaves out of the crowd and slings an arm around his shoulder. “Stevie! Where were you, pal?”

Steve hesitates, because the last thing he’d done before leaving the station is sign a whole stack of non-disclosure agreements, and he should have thought of a lie but he’s flying too high, and then Bucky looks over his shoulder, sees all the Army bunting, the MP standing watch out the front. “Shit, Steve. Again? Really?”

“Yes, Buck—”

“And who were you this time? Steve from Ohio? Listen, you keep trying, they’ll catch you. Worse, they’ll take you,” Bucky says, hauls Steve by the shoulder until they’re out of the flow of the crowds, tucked in behind a concession stand. The sudden wave of cinnamon and sugar in the air is like walking into a wall.

“Would that be so bad?” Steve asks, and Bucky’s eyes flare wide, mouth starts to open so he can reply, but: "Buck, this is bigger than either of us. People are dying, men are laying down their lives. I can't do any less."

"You'll die," Bucky says, very matter-of-fact, and then he closes his eyes hard, mouth working like he's in pain. "Okay? War doesn't care how much heart and guts you've got. You'll die, you stubborn piece of shit."

"I've been on borrowed time since the day I was born," Steve says, and Bucky flinches like he's been slapped.

"Don't say that," he snarls. "Don't fucking say that."

Steve opens his mouth, starts: “Buck—” and stops again. Closes his mouth, closes his eyes, closes everything down and pushes it in, because he can't do this. They can't do this. This is Bucky's last night before he ships out again, and this is way too public a venue for them to be having a conversation this intense—they're getting looks from the people going by, and the fella at the concession stand is very obviously eavesdropping.

He rubs at his hairline, takes a deep breath, plasters on a sheepish sort of half smile and opens his
eyes again. He's got this: he can lie. If there's one thing he's good at, it's lying.

“I'm sorry, Buck, okay? I'm sorry. I won't try again, I promise, I'm done. Forget about it, alright?
Let's—” He shrugs, jams his hands into his pockets—diversion, quick course correction, and it
makes him sick how easy this is—“Let's go dancing, find you a pretty girl to fling around.”

Bucky stares at him for a long while, and he's still frustrated, tense around the eyes and mouth,
slowly shifting to something more open. “You hate dancing,” he says at last, low and flat.

“I hate dance halls,” Steve says. “I ain't actually danced enough to have an opinion in any direction.
But it's your last night in town, Buck, and we're not gonna spend it bickering behind a funnel cake
stand.”

Bucky slowly smiles, crooked, and there's still something tight around his mouth: he hasn't forgotten,
but he's prepared to accept a ceasefire. “So you wanna spend it holding up the wall in some crowded
smoky club instead?”

Sounds like Hell on Earth, but: “I'll take it on the chin,” Steve says. “Someone's gotta hold that wall
up, give everybody room to jitterbug.”

It is just as Hellish as Steve figured it would be, but Bucky's so handsome in his uniform he winds up
dancing with five different girls one after the other, and by the third he's forgotten he was angry with
Steve, so—well, mission accomplished. And Steve sits at the bar, nurses his watered-down whiskey,
keeps half an eye on the dancing, and runs lists, plans, strategies in his head. He's got three days to
get his affairs squared away, and then he's gotta report to Camp Lehigh. Report for training, report
for—whatever comes next.

1A: he's got his chance and he's taking it, with both hands.

*******

Basic is—well, he gets why a lot of fellas are saying it's Hellish, and it is pretty miserable, but—

But Steve's been within kissing range of Death twenty times in his life by now, easy, between his
heart and his lungs and his pathetic immune system, flu and strep and pneumonia and measles.

So he's sore. So he's struggling to get a good breath in. So he's exhausted. So he's lonely and every
other guy in the candidate pool hates him. So what the fuck else is new.

He knows Colonel Phillips expects him to quit. He knows half the fellas in the pool don't think he
deserves to be here. And God knows, it is hard, and his asthma don't seem to be playing up anymore
but he's still five-foot and a hair with all the upper body strength of a ten-year-old girl, but there's
been days in the past where it took every bit of stubborn rage in him just to keep breathing, in and
out, so: fuck them all. Even if they don't pick him for the trial in the end, he's going to enjoy proving
'em wrong.

It's a solid week of grind and blood and sweat, of being shit on by the drill instructor and half the
guys in the pool with him, and the food's bad and the coffee's worse. He's up pre-dawn every day,
up late every night learning codes and protocols, and when he does sleep it's veiled and rolled up
small under his bunk: that asshole Matthews pinned him as a faggot day one, told every-fucking-one,
so sleeping in his actual bed amongst rest of the guys isn't an option, not if he doesn't want the living
Hell kicked out of him. But—

But the doctor likes him—he can read it in every line of his face and body, so he must still be in with a chance, even if he can't master that Goddamn rope ladder or run the full three miles. And then there's her.

Agent Margaret Carter is everything he wishes he could be when he's a dame: curves and curls, perfectly put together at all hours of the day and night, lips redder than the blood of her enemies. She's also smart as a whip—scuttlebutt is that she's an intelligence officer on loan from the British, and before that she was a code breaker—and ferocious and without mercy and glorious like some kinda spear-wielding primeval goddess. She'd punched that asshole Hodge in the face within two minutes of meeting him and Steve wasn't sure if he wanted to laugh out loud or fall to his knees in worship.

She likes him too—he catches half-smiles and speculative looks—but she's all business, looking for a candidate, and so far out of his league he might as nurture a crush on the man in the moon.

The grenade is what turns it around, convinces even that miserable bastard Phillips. He's jumped on it without thought—and Jesus, he can't tell Bucky about any of this because of all the non-disclosure agreements but even if he can he'll never tell Bucky about jumping on a grenade because he will not be amused—and then only registers after he's lying on the damn thing that its song is wrong—because mechanical objects have their own song, a deep and rhythmic humming and clicking, and this grenade has only the softest background hum, is inert.

"Is this a test?" he asks, like some kind of idiot because clearly it is, and catches Erskine’s smile, the Colonel’s reluctant agreement: and two days later the other candidates are done, packed off into units and shipping for the front, and he's the only one left.

And the test—the real test—is tomorrow. A new breed of super soldier—Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, it sounds like something outta one of Buck's spaceman dime novels, or the comics he'd read as a kid, but—but it's happening. To him, his body, his meat and potatoes and fucked up flesh. Tomorrow.

He's alone in the barracks—they're all packed and gone, and Christ it's big and very quiet in here but at least he can sleep in a bed tonight without waking to a sock in the mouth and a foot in the guts—and he's starting into a rosary, is just up to his third Ave Maria, when the door creaks open and a Lieutenant walks in. Dark hair, crisp creases, not someone he's met before, and he's jumping up to salute when he hears the guy's music: ice floes and a slow and steady back beat as inexorable as winter coming. Ulfadhir.

"Et benedictus fructus ventris tui Iesus," Steve finishes, presses a quick kiss to the beads—a promise to come back and finish what he's started—and tosses them into the open suitcase on the end of his bunk. “What are you doing here?” he asks.

Ulfadhir stalks down the length of the room, letting his seeming fall away until he sits unveiled on the bed next to Steve's, legs up and crossed. His tunic today is cloth-of-gold with black panels, and his boots are smeared across the soles with mud—and Steve's colourblind, yeah, but he's pretty sure that mud is blue and purple. As if he needed another reminder that Ulfadhir isn't from around here.

“A better question would be, how did you find me? As, of course, you left without a word, nor any note or message—”

“I'm sorry,” Steve jumps in, before he can get too much of a head of steam. “I couldn't think of a way to leave you a message that couldn't be intercepted. Figured you'd have a way to find me. And lo and behold…” He raises a hand, waves it at Ulfadhir as if he's manifested him with his will.
“Behold,” Ulfadhir says, in his most grandiose tone, and waves both hands, sending shimmering waves of light rippling around him in all directions, like the image of a Saint appearing wreathed in Heavenly light.

Steve snorts, grins. “So: how did you find me? No, I'll guess. The geas?”

“Correct,” Ulfadhir says. “My turn: what are you doing here?”

“You've been snooping,” Steve accuses, and Ulfadhir doesn't blink, just quirks his mouth irritably—of course, don't be obvious—and Steve sighs, scratches at his hairline. He kind of—look, he knew all of that, has put it together from the hints and snatches of conversation he's caught while he's been here, but when you lay it all out like that, bald and without compromise—“When you put it like that, it sounds pretty stupid.”

Ulfadhir, deadpan, reaches behind him and grabs the pillow and lobs it hard at Steve's head. “I taught you better than this,” he hisses.

“So be it then. Erskine, Stark, Phillips: for all their sakes, you'd best be right. If, come the morning, they kill or maim you with their precious project, I will visit such misery upon them they will beg for death.”

“That is in no way reassuring,” Steve says, a little choked with the way his jaw is pinched between Ulfadhir's hands.

“Trust is the poisoned cup offered with a smile, trust is wilful blindness. I remember, I know. But I do. I trust ‘em.” Steve shrugs, apologetic. “I've been watching and listening everywhere for a week solid now, and Dr Erskine—this is his project—he believes in what he's doing. In me. I trust ‘em. I'm sorry. I know this isn't what you wanted for me. But I have to help.”

And done, gone, Ulfadhir's hands lifting away from his skin, and Steve sags back across the bed, chest heaving, every square inch of skin dewed with sweat. “Nnn—” he manages to get out, rolls to his side and gasps in some deep breaths to control a sudden surge of nausea—not on the bed, not on the bed. “Ahh,” he says next, after a few more deep breaths, and then: “Ahh. Christ. What the Hell was that?” He swallows hard, pushes up on his elbow, shoves away the hair that's glued to his
forehead, gets his eyes to focus and fixes them onto Ulfadhir. “Did—did you *geas* me again?”

“To the contrary: I removed a binding,” Ulfadhir says. “You may find—ahh, there we go,” and as Steve doubles over and vomits, Ulfadhir pulls a silver bowl out of nowhere and holds it neatly under his mouth. He's fasting with the procedure tomorrow, nothing much in his gut to come up, just a few mouthfuls of green bile. Jesus. He's gonna have to brush his teeth again.

“What kind of binding?” Steve asks, straightening up again. He feels—nauseous. Wobbly. Like he's too big for his skin, spilling over everywhere. Hot, staticky, sticky, itchy. Edgy, like there's snakes coiling under his skin and he needs to do something with them, move or writhe or run or—

“It is customary when teaching sorcery to small children, that one binds their latent magic, confines it into a shape—smaller, so to speak. Easier to handle, when one is first learning the art. When you were a child, I de-clawed you,” Ulfadhir says. “If you intend to surrender your body to the tender mercies of science—worse still, if it works, and you are become their perfect wind-up soldier—well then, you will need your claws.”

“Oh,” Steve says, idiotically, puts his head down in his head and closes his eyes and just sits with it for a moment, the tidal surging of heat and light in his blood and bones. Jesus Christ. “This is—this is all me? This is—” He swallows over another surge of nausea. He can feel his whole body throbbing with his pulse. It feels like he's got blood and fire spilling out of his fucking eyes. “There's a lot in here,” he says, helplessly.

“You will adapt to it,” Ulfadhir says, flat, gets up. He grabs a handful of Steve's hair and cocks his head back so he's meeting Ulfadhir's eyes again.

“Don't die,” Ulfadhir says.

“I'll do my best,” Steve says.

“A pox upon your best,” Ulfadhir says. “Lie, cheat. Do your worst.” And then he lets go, turns away, and walks back out, fingers dancing as he goes—so he leaves a Lieutenant, neat creases and dark hair, and the veil simpers and fades as the door swings closed behind him.

Steve stays sitting for a long time. Gropes for and finds his rosary beads and works them between his hands absently. Tries to—to adapt. To figure out how to—to even move, because it feels like he's a cup that's full to the brim and over, to the bulging meniscus of fluid above the rim and if he moves incautiously he'll spill everywhere and then—Christ knows what. At last he gets up, takes a deep and steadying breath, puts his rosary back again and gets out toothbrush and powder.

Step one is to get rid of the bile lacquered to his tongue and teeth. Everything else follows from there.
“It's probably too late to go to the bathroom, right?”

His voice sounds hollow, flat, bounces back at him in the tiny metal chamber. He's sweating, running with it—and it's not nerves, he's never been a nervous sweater—whatever the Hell was in that blue stuff is burning into him, hot and heady as a fever. He can feel the muscles in his chest, arms, thighs starting to dance, micro spasms, and taken one by one they're nothing but they're coming faster and faster, running deeper and deeper toward the bone, and—and it's starting to ache.

Everything from outside the cradle is muffled, coming tinny and distant through the metal, so he can just hear the edge of Erskine’s voice—no words, just the tone and pitch of it, and then a pause, and then—

The humming starts. There's a soft white light pooling in the chamber, and everything is vibrating in sympathy with that hum, and the fever heat in his muscle and bone licks up bright and wild. It's—when he was a kid and they had some spare change he and Buck would go to Coney Island, eat funnel cake and play sideshow games and splash in the water at the ocean’s edge, and he always forgot about the sun until it'd already burned him red raw, and that's what this is like. Only it's not just his skin that's sunburnt—it's muscle tissue and sinew and right into his bones and teeth. And the light—

The light is getting brighter.

The burn cuts deeper.

It's starting to hurt. It's starting to really hurt, like biting at his lips to keep from yelping kind of hurt, shutting his eyes to cut down the razor edge on that light—God, it's getting brighter, the humming kicking up higher and higher, high like he can feel his bones vibrating with it. He gasps in a breath, and a high-pitched keen escapes on his out-breath, and he bites his lip harder to strangle it. Erskine, Peggy—they've bet everything on this, on him, and he'll damn well buck up and bear it.

And then the light gets brighter, cuts deeper, and—

He keens again, and this time he can't stop it, and the light gets brighter and cuts deeper and every muscle in his body spasms at once, like they're trying to rip away from the bone, and his jaw tears open and he's screaming, howling like a kicked dog, and then—

There's a fire in his belly that doesn't come out of a blue tube, that's all him, his life force and claws, and suddenly those claws are unfurling, opening out and gathering—

The fires of making and unmaking lance through him like blades, and he screams and writhes, puts his teeth clean through his lower lip, and the fire from inside him crashes into the fire that's pouring over him, like two storm fronts meeting, insane power boiling over, only it's not spread out over miles of empty sky: it's inside him, his skin and meat and bones turning to lava and ash in the firestorm.

It's—

It's not working.

Chemical and fever, heart fire—it’s not working—it should be working but he's wrong, they backed the wrong horse, he's wrong and a freak and ergi and whatever Erskine thought he saw in Steve that
his serum should be magnifying is clearly not in there. He's less than human, and this was never going to work—

The light cuts out. The pain stops, instantly. He's shuddering, shaking, and the taste of blood and lightning is so thick on his tongue it's rank.

He's—

He's still himself. Still little Stevie Rogers, 4F, unfit to serve, freak show, all of five foot some and a hundred pounds if he holds a stack of Bibles. It didn't fucking work.

What a Goddamn screw up.

Outside the cradle there's a tangle of voices shouting, and then someone pounds on the metal and—it's Erskine's voice: “Steven? Are you—can you hear me?”

Christ, they must think he's dead or something. “I can hear you, doc,” he shouts back, and the words come out scratchy. He's done a number on his throat with all that howling.

“Get it open, Mr Stark, get it open,” he can hear Erskine saying, and—

No. Not yet. He's—fuck, he can't face them: tiny and sweat-soaked and blood sheeting down his chin from his lip, a total failure. He can't—

Closes his eyes, grabs a fistful of magic, twists his left hand into the hexing gesture, and shoves.

There's a bang, followed by the hiss of sparks spitting, a half dozen voices crying out in dismay, and then: silence, all the background purr of electronics cutting off dead. It's quiet enough to hear, muffled:

“Did—did we just lose power to the whole apparatus?”

“I think—yes. Damn and blast it—”

“Fine, fine, we'll open it manually. You there, my socket set is in the third drawer over there—”

“Steven.” Erskine again, and he must be standing right close because he's clear enough to hear past the yelling in the background. “We have to open the cradle by hand. It will take a few moments. Are you—can you tell us how you are?”

Did it work, is what he's asking. Jesus Christ, Mother Mary and all the fucking Saints, what a screw up.

Steve wets his lips, gropes around for—something, anything he can say, some way to let the doc down gentle, and then there's pounding again, another hand bashing against the metal of the casket, and now it's a woman's voice calling out: “Steve, are you alright? Are you hurt?”

Peggy, God. Steve drops his head so it's pressed against the lead lining. If they'd given her the serum she'd have kicked the whole Western Front into shape in a matter of weeks, but they'd bet on him—and in a few seconds he'll have to look her in the eye and she'll know what a bad bet that was, what a Goddamn waste of Army resources and time and fucking oxygen he is. “I'm okay, Agent Carter,” he calls back, and it takes every bit of training he's got to sound—normal, for any given value of normal.

“When you—when you went silent we feared the worst,” she calls back. “I'm glad to hear your voice. Did it work?”
God: he can't lie, he can't obfuscate, because in a minute they'll be looking at him and they'll know. He's got nothing, unless he—

Well. A veil wouldn't work, a seeming won't hold up. He'd have to physically change, and he can't do that, it's not—

But it is possible. He's seen Ulfadhir do it, become a cat or a hawk and fly off as casual as if he's just hailing a cab: not a seeming, but physical transformation, matter and meat and bones.

It's a stupid idea. He doesn't have the training, or the juice to pull it off—Ulfadhir is an immortal sorcerer from another Goddamn world and Steve is—Steve. So even if it's theoretically possible he's got a snowball's chance in Hell of working it, but—

But fuck it. If there was ever a time to try something stupid, it's now.

“Steve?” Peggy calls again, and there's the thump of her hand on metal again.

“I—I don't know,” Steve says. “I don't know. I feel different?”

There's a pause, scuffling noises, a few metallic thunks and some low muttering, and then Peggy again: “Alright, just—Steve, we have to move and let the technicians work. We'll have you out in a jiffy. Hold tight.”

“Yes ma'am,” Steve says, closes his eyes and leans back into the padded embrace of the cradle, makes his breath deep and slow, deeper and slower, and then he turns inward and falls into the depths of himself.

The fires in his belly rise to meet him as he sinks, and he twists his hands absently, weaving them around his knuckles like lengths of fine wool. He's got no idea what he's doing but if he did—if he did know what he was doing he'd start by putting together the image in his mind's eye, same as he would for a seeming. So—so they were hoping for a super soldier, which means—

Means everything he's not. Tall, in vigorous good health. He'd need to be fast, and cunning, and more-than-human strong, the super part in super soldier, and—

Thinks of Superman, the one from the comics—Bucky's shown him a few issues when they're loitering at the news stand—all artists steal, is the thing, and that's a good base to work from. Tall and muscle bound, broad shoulders dropping sharp into a narrow pelvic girdle—that exaggerated triangle shape—and stronger and faster than human, but—isn't Superman some kind of alien? No: he's gotta be human, just more-than-human. Not an alien. Not a freak. Not colourblind, or asthmatic. Not Steve.

He builds that image, fills in the particulars until it's solid as the Earth's crust, and then—well, it should still look like him a little. Same hair and eyes. Just a little broader, more—Hollywood. There, that's—that'll do, anyway.

Outside, more thumping sounds. Outside, metal shifting and moaning. The cradle shudders. He takes another breath and goes deeper within.

Everything has a song. Steve has a song. The image he's holding together in his head has a song. He tilts his head and listens, listens with every fibre of his attention, and when he hears the notes the two songs have in common he hums softly with them, and he's twisting his hands and twisting his hands, pulling more and more magic through him, feeling a heat and ache building in his fingers and working up his arms.
The songs repeat and he hums along again. There are more notes in common this time. He's starting to sweat again, the sheer concentration of holding the image steady in its tiniest details—his cowlick, the fine shifts in texture of the skin on his hands and knees—he's never done any work with this many tiny moving parts and if he gets it wrong he might leave himself without a cock—for God’s sake don't let me get this wrong—

The magic pulls tighter. He's shaking up the length of both arms with the strain of holding it all. The songs begin again, and there are more notes in common again. He's—

The fires of making and unmaking are licking up and through him now, chewing through his sternum, and there's sweat pouring down his face like he's fucking cooking himself. He turns his hands again, pulls more magic out and through, and the ache in his arms branches into his shoulders and chest. His heart gives a little hiccup, stutters—Christ, he hasn't had palpitations in years—oh God, don't let me get this wrong—

The songs begin again, and they're so close together now it's like the flimsiest layer of cotton is separating them, a sheet that's been washed too many times and you can see straight through, and his heart is skipping beats like it's going out of fashion and he's burning, he's burning, it's too much for him to hold—

The songs begin again. He takes everything he's holding—the image, the song, the fires of making and unmaking—and he holds it in his hands—and Christ they hurt, like broken knuckles, bone deep—lifts his hands and takes a last shaking breath and shoves.

Something breaks. It sounds like bones. It sounds like the world.

It's like being hit by a train—the pain is absolute, devouring—one of those big cross-country freight trains, and it's cleared him up and kept right on going so fast and powerful the driver won't even know until he stops and checks the front grill and there's smears of liquid Steve in there—and then it's gone again and he's sagging into the padded casket, rigid like every ligament has pulled tight to wire, and there's a Godawful noise ringing in the—oh, that's him: he's screaming. Right.

Stops screaming. Sucks in a breath. It goes in, and in, and in, his chest opening like a flower, like a huge powerful bellows, like—

Oh. Oh, Christ, God Almighty.

He's done it.

“Steven?” comes Erskine’s voice, and it's clear as fucking crystal—God, he can hear it, hear everything straight through the lead—there’s a dozen conversations going on, and Stark's cursing under his breath as he wrestles with a bolt, and Peggy’s coming up to the casket again—and Steve knows it's her, the sound of her feet, heeled shoes on the concrete of the floor. Christ, he can hear her heartbeat.

“Steve, what's happening?” Peggy shouts through the casket, and beyond her Erskine is saying softly, “He's not being irradiated any more, the process should have stopped.”

“I'm okay,” Steve calls back, and his hands are shaking as he pats himself down, and he can scarcely move now: the cradle hasn't got any smaller but he's bigger. A lot bigger. Remembering his anatomy markers from the life drawing classes—pectorals, deltoids, biceps and triceps. What the Hell, it worked, it worked—

There's a last clunk and the casket judders, and then he can hear Stark directing guys into teams
—“You’re going to need at least four guys per side: those door are mostly lead and they weigh almost four hundred pounds a-piece,” and Steve takes a breath and reaches out with a tentative hand, finds the joist across the inside of the door.

“Here, I—let me help,” he calls, and grabs and pushes and lifts. And it takes about as much effort as picking up a sack of potatoes—a little awkward because of the shape and the leverage, but—Jesus, Mary and Joseph, he can do it. Lifts four hundred pounds of lead and steel, moves it gently to the right and puts it down to lean against the side of the cradle. Looks up because the room’s gone silent, like one vast breath has been sucked in and held.

Everyone—every eye in the room, they're all looking at him.

Christ, he did remember—he’s got a nose, right? Nose, nipples, dick—all the details accounted for. He reaches up, pushes up the small glass panel that hinges down over his face. “Hi,” he says, half-choked and awkward as Hell.

“You did it,” Stark says, sounding like he’s just been punched in the head, and:

“We did it,” Erskine answers, and the quiet breaks, everybody speaking at once, and Stark and Erskine step in to help him out of the chamber on shaking legs and somewhere up in the viewing bay Colonel Phillips is crowing, “How do you like Brooklyn now, Senator?”

Peggy parts the crowd and stops in front of him. Her face is neutral but there’s something wild and unhinged around her eyes. “How are you—you’re bleeding.” Her hand comes up to his chin, to the smear of slick red from his cut lip.

“S’okay,” Steve slurs. “Just bit my lip, is all.” God: he's looking down at her. He's almost a foot taller than her. He can scarcely fucking process it, all of it, and the room is so loud with everyone talking at once, and—Jesus Harold Christ. Is that how blue looks through human eyes?

Fingers pinch his chin and drag—it’s Erskine, pulling him down so he can inspect Steve's mouth. “It's healed already,” he observes. “Not even a mark.” And he looks—pleased, smiling softly, but also like he's calculating, and there's a little furrow in his brow: confusion. It's too quick, Steve realises—inhuman quick. A cut deep enough to bleed this much shouldn't have closed over so fast, not even with the serum to turn cells over in double-quick time. Goddamn it, he's fucking this up already.

“Congratulations, doctor,” one of the technicians is saying, and Erskine turns away, and then Peggy is pushing a white t-shirt into his hands.

Some photographer with a Jersey accent is thrusting a handkerchief at Peggy like she's an assistant or something and saying, “Come on, honey, let's get the claret off his face, we need pictures,” and the look of cold fury on her face is so beautiful that Steve’s gotta duck his head to keep from grinning, and past the photographer and the dozen other voices all speaking at once he can only just hear how Erskine’s breath has caught, frozen in his throat.

A heartbeat later he hears the clear metallic click of a lighter.

A heartbeat after that the bomb goes off.

******
Gunshots. Screaming. Erskine, his breath hot and rank with the smell of blood, dying on a concrete floor.

Running. Peggy in her perfect shooting stance, cool as a cucumber. Running again.

Taxi. Car horns blaring. Asphalt under his bare feet, and his fucking legs are so long he feels like a baby giraffe, all knees, and he's keeping pace with a car, and every time he thinks that's as fast as he can go his body kicks it up a gear—

Rolling, falling, coming up with the taxi door in his hands like a shield. More gunshots, people scattering. Christ, they're at the docks: Steve always came past this way when he was dropping off lunch for Bucky, and now—

Now this asshole's got a tiny submarine, like something outta Bucky's terrible science comics, and Steve never used to be a very strong swimmer but this body takes to the water like a shark, and his fist on the glass is like a hammer—

On the pier the guy is grinding out, “Heil Hydra,” between teeth clenched over a mouthful of spittle and froth, and as Steve hears his heartbeat quit he looks up, looks around: at the water, at the folks clustered at the end of the pier, staring. At his own hands and forearms, because holy shit, holy shit. At the sky: oh, blue, and it's everything the poems promised him it would be, cool and clear and astonishing.

And he can hear sirens in the distance, police cars incoming, but for now it's quiet. All quiet for the first time since he stepped out of the cradle. Which is—

He can't hear anything.

He can’t—

Closes his eyes. Jams the heels of his palms against his ears, and turns in, in, in, but all he hears is the slow and stately whoosh of his heartbeat, regular as a metronome.

The music is gone.

Everyplace has its own song, and the docks are no different: it's full of the call of seagulls, the clockwork clanking rhythm of mechanical things, traces of songs from all over the world, all dancing light across the vast and ponderous rumbling purr of the ocean. He's spent hours listening that song, sitting down here having lessons with Ulfadhir or shooting the shit with Bucky, he knows it like he knows the sound of his Mam's voice—

Silence. There's not a trace of music, not from anything. The world has gone inert, lifeless.

Past the press of his hands he can hear himself, a punched-out whine slipping outta him like a kicked dog. Keeps going within, groping around for the feeling of—but all he's getting is the biological feeling of his gut working, heart beating, lungs smoothly filling and emptying. The big blood vessel in his abdomen bounces in time with his pulse. He could piss. Otherwise, jack squat.

The fire is gone.

“Mister, are you okay?” It's the kid who went into the water, standing dripping a few feet down the pier now, the only one brave or stupid enough to get this close. And here's Steve, on his knees next to a corpse, with his eyes squeezed shut and hands over his ears like he's gone fucking bananas. He takes his hands away, opens his eyes, tries to get his face to do something reassuring, something like he's not a Goddamn lunatic.
“I'm fine,” Steve says, and in a lifetime of lying that's got to be one of the biggest lies to ever slip his lips, and he can't make it sound like anything but, voice coming hollow and broken.

The kid is eying off the corpse. “You didn't kill'im, did you?”

“No,” Steve says, hearing himself from a distance. He should be herding the kid away from the scene of violent death, trying to find his mother, but his miraculous fucking legs wouldn't hold him up right now. The silence in the middle of everything is awful, complete, bigger than God. “No, he killed himself.”

The kid pulls a face, a thoughtful moue of his lips. “Huh.”

Steve's body, they tell him, is a miracle of science.

He can run a mile in a minute and a half without breaking a sweat, a minute and five if he pushes for it. He can lift—well, honestly he's not sure—they pile more weights on for lift after lift until the bar breaks at five hundred pounds, but it’s easy, smooth and easy, the ache in his muscles clean and sweet. His memory, they quickly realise, is eidetic; he can see better than twenty-twenty, can hear the heartbeats and respiration of everyone in the building. The bruises and scrapes he picked up fighting a car have healed completely within twenty-four hours.

He is, as advertised, the perfect soldier, and the technicians draw vial after vial of his blood, hoping they can reverse engineer Erskine's work from it now the doctor and the serum are both gone, poured out. Steve can't tell them that there's no use: that the serum never worked on him, that he's a fraud. Can't tell them. Can't do anything about it, now: they all rolled the dice, Erskine and Phillips, Stark and Peggy and Steve, they all placed bets and rolled and it's the law of averages that someone was gonna have to roll snake eyes.

He's a super soldier. The United States government has their first and only super soldier.

It's cost the world Dr Abraham Erskine, who was a better man than Steve's ever been and deserved a Hell of a lot better than to have died on a concrete floor with his life's work left incomplete.

It's cost Steve his magic.

Hell of a Goddamn thing.

When Phillips tells him the plan is to stash Steve in a lab somewhere the science-spooks can poke at him until they work out what he’s made of, for a few crazed moments he thinks about running, ploughing straight through doors and walls on the way out, trying to disappear.

Christ only knows how: he can't veil, can't blend into a crowd. He's spent his whole life hiding in plain sight, in the sick knowing that if anyone works out what he can do—could do, used to be able
to do—he’d never be safe, and the thought of sitting still and quiet while scientists poke and stare at him, measure and bleed him, is enough to make the skin crawl up his back. So when Senator Brandt offers him a way out he grabs it with both hands and his teeth.

Which is how he finds himself:

He’s standing onstage in a concert hall in Washington DC, day one of rehearsals for a Goddamn USO show, day five out from the cradle. And the lighting guys are having a yelled conversation about spotlight angles in the pit below, and the backdrops reek of fresh paint, hard as acid in his sinuses, and the stage manager is telling him to start his lines over from the top for the fifth Goddamn time because there’s still too much Brooklyn Mick in his accent, and it’s a lot, it’s a lot going on all at once. So when he starts feeling dizzy it doesn’t register at first, background noise, but—

But he doesn’t get dizzy. Not anymore, not in this body. Super soldiers don’t have anaemia, or dicky hearts, or nervous constitutions, or—

And it’s getting worse—back wall melting to white and grey, wooden stage floor going to jelly under his feet. Christ, Christ—

“I need to—can we stop?” Steve asks, and his voice comes distant, like he’s hearing himself talk underwater. “I’m going…” he adds, loses the sentence mid-thread because where in the fuck can he go? He just—a door that closes, that’s a start, someplace no one will see if he faints or pukes or— shit, Christ. He’s supposed to be perfect, no physical ailments, and they’ll all see and they’ll know what a Goddamn fraud he is—

A door that closes. Start there. He thrusts the script in his hand at the stage manager and turns, exit stage left, and he can hear the manager behind him, calling, “Kid, wait—hey, Rogers,” but there’s exactly no fucking time to talk about it, he needs—

Green room, hall and to the right. And there’s a washroom through there, with a lock on the door.

He’s got one hand up, tracing along the wall as he walks. Can hear his footsteps, shoe soles hitting the wooden floor, heavy, fast, dysrhythmic. Can’t really feel his feet though, or anything below his hips which—Christ, that’s not good. Not good, not good—

Into the green room, staggering, spare hand coming to his mouth and clamping down. Empty room, thank God, no one to see him almost go to his knees trying to make the corner. He grabs a chair—hears the crunch of the rail back giving way—grabs for the doorframe and hauls himself through, into the tiled space of the washroom—

Knees on the tiles. Grab the door and shove it closed, find the lock—shaking, shaking. He’s gotta fix the lock closed by touch, can’t see a whole lot—the world is closing right in, white and grey smears—

The lock clicks home. He hits the tiles, elbows-chest-chin, feels the bites of pain somewhere in the distance. Oh God—Mam, Buck, it’s a bad one—

He hasn’t had a seizure since he was ten. The docs said he’d grown out of it but add that to the long list of things doctors have been wrong about. Only—

Only it’s not—he remembers white noise filling his head, like listening to the radio tuned between stations, and this is—he’s shaking, like he can’t stop, like he’s gonna shake to pieces but it’s not—one of the neighbour kids showed him once, what he looked like seizing: eyes rolled up and limbs twitching out and contracting and spine arching, and this is—not that.
And then the pain hits him.

He’s got his hands over his mouth, clamped down hard enough to bruise, and somewhere past it there’s still sound spilling out, helpless and animal like an injured dog, curling in on himself on the mouldy tiles, burning from the bones out, like—Buck used to get bad growing pains, would talk about the bruised ache deep in his ankles and arms, and it’s like that but everywhere, sharp and bright as surgical steel, and he’s moaning and shaking, thuds of his heels hitting the wall and his head on the tiles, and—

And gone again, and he’s gasping for breath, wet with cold sweat—

The music hits him like a tidal wave, crushing—song of the concert hall, of the shitty bathroom tiles, of mould spores, traces of music from the people who’ve fucked in here seeping out of the walls and —and his own song, Gaelic nursery rhyme laid over with a slow jazz tune, winter nights and the wind humming against the window frame, a gentle asthmatic wheeze woven through. His song, his music: he can hear it, all of it—

He’s small again. Himself again.

“Ahh, Christ,” Steve says, slurring it like he’s drunk, like he’s been kicked in the head.

A new song creeps in, a human song, piano notes—and then a knock on the door, booming like thunder. Holy Mary—he’s had magic hangovers before but this is—Christ on a cracker, it’s like being stabbed in the eyes.

“Hey, Rogers. You in there?”

Well, fuck.

*******

He hasn’t got enough left in the tank for a veil. Not enough for a seeming. God, he’s scarcely got enough to make it back up onto his feet, but lying down and quitting is not an option, has never been an option.

So he goes out the narrow sliver of window and scales the side of the building, blinding headache and sweat-slicked hands and all. Ulfadhir oughta be proud—an unpredictable enemy is a dangerous one.

None of his clothes fit—he’s a kid playing dress-up in Da’s wardrobe. His shoes are a fucking joke—he throws them out the window ahead of him, makes his way down the bricks in his socked feet. He’s in an alley, running behind the hall. Reek of trash and piss. Sixteen hours ago he was having dinner with a senator, and now—Christ, if he wasn’t hurting so bad he’d laugh.

It’s a long walk back to his hotel—not far as the crow flies but he’s gotta stick to back streets. Take a weaving path, try to not be seen. He hauls some old playbills outta the closest bin, scrunches them into his shoes until he can fit ’em, folds up the hems of his trou and cuffs of his shirt, sets off.

Ends up taking almost two hours.

And then: spare blanket out from the linen press, slither in under the bed and curl up tight and crash
like Wall Street in ’28. Good fucking night.

He sleeps for four hours, which is when some noisy asshole comes in, half-assed sweeps the room, stalks out again, whisper-yelling: “How in God’s name did they lose a seven-foot tall walking comic book character?” Slams the door behind him. Steve twitches, bites his lip to keep from whining. Fuck, his head—thanks an awful lot, pal.

Time to look at the hand he’s been dealt, anyway.

He’s got the music back, got his magic back—he conjures a tiny ghostlight just to check, and it’s kinda pasty and feeble—like him, for Pete’s sakes—but it comes when he calls, illuminates the bedsprings and dustballs and hair under the bed. So he’s got some options back, but—

But. He could disappear now—veil and walk out, pockets stuffed with whatever cash he’s got, get away from this whole Goddamn circus before anyone finds out what he is—but the US Government knows what he looks like. He’d have to vanish under a seeming and stay vanished for the rest of his unnatural life.

And he’d be letting down… everyone. Christ, everyone who’s backed him this far, everyone Goddamn depending on him now: Brandt can go fuck himself, he’s not as adept a liar as he thinks he is and the smug self-interest that oozes offa him is just—but there’s a dozen folks hired on for this stupid show already, and more to come in the future. Their livelihoods are all on him, now.

And there’s still a chance he could get deployed. If he proves he’s worth his salt.

Shit.

Shit.

Steve closes his eyes. Prays, short and sweet and fervent: Oh Lord, I know I’m a fuck up, but I swear I’m trying. Crawls out from under the bed, combs his hair out of his eyes, takes a deep breath and readies the shape-change spell.

*******

He starts timing it.

There’s a page in the middle of his notebook with a list: windows of time. Five days, four hours; four days, twenty hours; six days and zero hours. Windows of time as the super soldier, as Captain America—Lord, the fucking hubris—before the spell wears off and snaps him back, like a tyre’s inner tube stretched for too long and giving way all at once.

He knows what the symptoms are. Can start to predict it, almost a day in advance. It gets easier—like his asthma, his palpitations: they don’t go away, but he learns how to manage ‘em.

The change gets easier, too. Now he knows what’s happening, doesn’t have to try and fight it off. Still hurts every time—hurts like he’s dying, but—but he’ll take his wins where he can.

Two weeks later he’s wearing scratchy wool tights and an idiotic winged cowl, and standing on a stage in front of a row of dancing chorus girls. Flogging war bonds: every one you buy is a bullet in the barrel of your best guy’s gun.
Fuck it all.

Washington, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Atlanta, Dallas. They bus and train from city to city, perform for one or two or three nights, move on. He shakes hands with senators and mayors and congressmen, poses smiling for photograph after photograph—and he can't conjure illusions when he’s big like this but he can still knock up a convincing smile, broad and bright and guileless: because this is his job now, this is what he's got. Make the people happy, get them on board, get their hands in their pockets.

They won't let him fight but if this is how he can help he'll suck up his fucking pride and do it, because like everything else in the Goddamn world, war costs money. Beans, bullets, bandages.

The chorus girls teach him how to do stage makeup and treat him like part of the furniture backstage—Beth sits on his knee to do her hair if there’s no seats free at the mirror, Kitty hangs off his shoulder and flicks a foot up behind to adjust the strap on her shoe. In Chicago a woman breaks into their hotel and he finds her in his bed after a show, has to get security to get her out of there, and the next day all the girls are furious, incandescent, and he finds out he’s been declared no-woman's land. If they can’t have him, no one can.

Steve’s on board with the sentiment—he’s only ever had the one lady to bed, years ago, and he's not gonna take up with anyone that wasn't looking at him past the inflatable biceps. And then there's Bucky—

Christ, Bucky. He's somewhere in Italy, last Steve heard—he’s only had three letters so far, doesn't know if it’s because Bucky's busy or in danger or deployed where the mail lines don't go, or if Buck’s just got nothing good to say, is trying to keep Steve from fretting. It's not working: he could be dead. Jesus, he could be dead and Steve wouldn't hear about it for months—

If he goes down that road it gets awful black so he tries to stay clear of it. Draws portraits of the girls, helps with the heavy lifting, smiles until it's glued to his face, kisses babies. Practices orating with his voice coach to smooth the Brooklyn out of his vowels. Reads and prays into the night when he can't sleep. Tries to keep moving, because if he stops moving he'll just worry about Bucky, worry about getting caught with his pants down, or start to listen for the music that he can’t even hear like this, to listen to the awful fucking emptiness in the centre of things, and then he really will fall to pieces.

Times his life down to fifteen minute intervals so he can work around his shape changes. Puts deep red gouges into his fist, biting down to stop from screaming as he makes the change in green rooms and hotel rooms, once in a congressman’s powder room—fuck, but that was a nervous evening.

He writes to Bucky. It feels like writing nonsense because he can't tell him anything—half his life falls under the Espionage Act right now. I've got a job with the war effort, I'm moving around a lot. Fills in the gaps where the words can't go with candy bars and fresh socks, article clippings, a sketch of the Golden Gate Bridge. Please stay safe. Not quite a half-page of writing every time, like the silence in the guts of him is spilling out all over.

Los Angeles is the end of the chorus line and they settle in for a month, make a movie—it’s Godawful silly but some of the special effects aren't bad. And then word comes down the line that they're going east again: all the way east, back to New York and east again, onto a boat and away. They're taking the Star Spangled Man to Europe.

******
And then he's in Italy, and someone with a Hell of a good arm is throwing a rotted cabbage at his head, and he can't even blame them because it's only fair: he's a fraud, a dress-up toy playing at being a soldier, and they're the real thing, walking wounded dotted through the crowd.

It's not until after the show, when Peggy finds him backstage—

—and God, Peggy. It's been six months since he's seen her last, at the SSR lab under Brooklyn, and she's still... She's still sharp enough to cut yourself, still elbow-deep in all the muck and intrigue of war like she was born to it, and her hair and makeup are fucking flawless, never mind that this camp is snuggled up like a lover to enemy lines. If only he had the colouring to pull off red lipstick without looking like a whore.

But it’s not until she comes to him after the show that he finds out—

"Those men are what's left of the 107th," Peggy tells him, and something black and crushing opens up inside of his head and chest—like a sinkhole, like the world is falling away—empties him out so he can only just hear himself past it, sounds like he's speaking at a vast distance:

"Sergeant James Barnes, with the 107th," he's saying to Colonel Phillips, and then—

He's in a plane twenty miles into Austrian airspace, with a revolver and his prop shield, a radio transmitter smaller than his hand, boots and jacket and a stolen prop helmet that probably won't actually deflect anything worse than a nasty look. With Peggy and Howard Stark, who for some reason has agreed to throw in on this—this gamble, this roll of the dice—Steve thinks it's the engineer in him, wanting to put his work to the test. His work being Steve, in this case: wanting to see what he can do. Test until destruction.

That or he's trying to get into Peggy's drawers. Or hey: why not both.

He's never fired this gun in earnest. Basic training taught him the nuts and bolts, but that was with a different pistol, in daylight, in cold blood, on stationary targets. Never live fire. He's never parachuted from a plane before either, but suddenly there's anti-aircraft fire lighting up the sky all around them, so—what the Hell. How hard can it be.

And then—

Christ, he'd give his right arm for a veil working right now. Or a quick illusion, just enough of a weaving to make him look like he's got one of those black uniforms on if no one's looking too close—duck behind that tank, half a dozen guards in black trooping past, slide out and follow 'em—

He can't hear the music in this fucking behemoth Cap-shape, but he can hear most everything else: and this factory is alive with humming, a high and vibratory hum like nothing he's heard before. If he's someplace really quiet and he just gets still and listens he's found he can hear the purr of electricity arcing inside lightbulbs, shrill and cutting, and this is higher than that again.

It's coming off the machines, off the component parts and devices they're piecing together, out of the Goddamn walls, and everything is dotted with lights that glow blue—bluer than blue, blue that looks—he knows about the spectrum of light, he borrows—fuck, used to borrow—from animals with eyes that aren't human, so he knows there are colours of light outside of what the human eyeball can read. This blue is not meant for human eyes.

And past the humming he can hear massed feet shuffling, massed bodies breathing and coughing and spitting, and he winds his way across the factory floor and carves a path that way: to the prisoners,
the 107th, to Bucky please Christ please Mama please let him be there—

He's not there.

“Do you know what you're doing?” the English fella is asking him, as prisoners spill out around them, moving from cage to cage. He's pale, ginger little moustache, smeared with the dirt of war and work and manufacture—they all are, Steve can see: worn and bruised and too skinny and on fucking fire now that they're out, now that the shoe is on the other foot and they've got a chance—

“Sure,” Steve says, “I've punched out Hitler over two hundred times.”

And then—

“I thought you were dead,” Steve says, and he's holding onto Bucky by the shoulders because he doesn't wanna let go of him, not for a minute if he can help it, and Bucky's shell-shocky and white-pale, frayed at the edges, reeks of fear-sweat and blood and something ugly and chemical, and he's looking up at Steve—Jesus, he's actually gotta look up to meet Steve's eyes—

“I thought you were smaller,” Bucky says.
Chapter 12

The march from Kreischberg back to Allied lines takes four Goddamn nervous days. They move mostly by night, in groups of twenty scattered over a range of about three klicks, and Steve would give an arm and a leg and his Goddamn balls for a veil working, an illusion, anything to hide them, keep them safe; but he's gotta work with what he's got. Two stolen trucks, one fuck-off Hydra tank, some torn camo netting and a half dozen sheets of canvas from the back of one of the trucks, a stash of Kraut-brand MREs that works out at about half a meal per fella per day, and four hundred and two Allied soldiers from five nations, twenty-eight of 'em too sick or injured to walk.

Steve's counting the hours, days. He was on day one of his cycle—his cycle, like ladies have, because he's a fucking dame—when he first crossed into Austria in the back of Howard Stark's plane, which means he's got roughly four days of wiggle room, plus or minus twelve hours. If he gets caught out, if the spell breaks while he's out here in German-occupied forest—he's got the outline of a plan. It involves calling a halt, running and hiding. Please, Christ Almighty, please let it last just a little longer—

On about the third day it becomes clear that no one is actively looking for them, and that fits with intel some of the Azzano survivors have: that Hydra were firing on the Krauts, on their own side. Whoever got out of Kreischberg—that faceless nut job Schmidt, say—they must not be talking to Nazi command.

It's still a Hellish long four days. Please, God, just a little longer.

********

Allied lines and everyone breathes out at once, and they converge on an actual road and march as a group, a rough and ready unit of walking wounded, of half-starved furies. And then it's only another five hours to camp, where—

“Let's hear it for Captain America,” Bucky hollers, and everyone's cheering and Steve's smiling a pasted-on smile at Peggy—she's gorgeous as usual, cinnamon eyes and the glow of satisfaction coming off her like a cat banked up in bowls of cream—and cataloguing his symptoms. He's been feeling slightly out-of-step with the world for a few hours now—like someone's come and moved all the furniture half a foot to the left of where it should be—and his temper has gone snappy—shit, he really is like a lady on her cycle—and now his fingers and toes are starting to tingle and numb out, which is—bad. One of the late signs.

He's got an hour at the most before the spell breaks. Looks around for Bucky—and he's gone, faded back into the crowd. Again. Fuck.

And there's no time to even look at that whole can of worms, he's got to—and he nods in the right places, smiles, shakes hands like he's got all the time in the world, and then there's a private at his elbow, an aide to Colonel Phillips, and he's steering Steve into a tent—oh Christ, oh Lord thank you—and he almost backs out again because there's a captain's dress uniform hung up from one of the roof struts, but: “That's for you,” the aide tells him, clearly biting at the inside of one cheek to keep from smiling. “That's yours, sir. Captain.”
Steve rolls his eyes away from the uniform because—Christ on a bike, he’s a Captain like the Easter Bunny is a rabbit, it’s ceremonial, it’s politeness, and he hasn’t earned a damn thing but—gotta backburner that. There is no fucking time. “Uh, thanks,” Steve says, and then, when the aide keeps standing there, attentive—oh, shit. “Dismissed,” Steve says, and the private salutes and goes, crisp as a new bill. God, that's going to take some getting used to.

Alone for the first time in five days. Steve turns to the tent flap, fixes all the buttons closed. Kicks off his boots and tears off jacket, trou, overshirts. He’s shaking, the tremors starting up, legs twitching and working like he’s trying to hold his balance on a plate of jello.

Drops to his knees next to the camp bed—it’s a proper bed, legs and wire frame, no bed roll here. Perks of rank. Steve grabs at the blankets with shaking hands, mounds them down the centre of the bed. Enough to pass at a quick glance—there’s no time for anything fancy. He’s—time’s up.

Folds over, head to knees, hands over his mouth, teeth into flesh, into bone—can’t scream can’t scream can’t—

The pain passes and he gasps, breathes in long and wet and tasting of iron past the blood in his teeth. He’s himself—skinny and small and useless, head heavy and aching like someone’s stoved it in with a brick.

Crawls in under the camp bed. It’s not quite a foot off the ground, tight even for him, wire mesh pressed against his shoulder when he curls up on his side, cradles his head in his scrawny arms, blacks out cold.

*******

When he wakes it's because a familiar voice is singing, “Steven, you’d better be decent in there,” and then the tent flap is being flung open and—

Fucking Christ—Steve throws a seeming, just enough of one—a hint of blond hair and a forehead glimpsed under the blankets, a little more bulk in the middle where his chest and hips ought to be. Peers out between the legs of the camp bed, sees bare legs, ladies’ shoes, staying in the doorway. He veils, inches forward enough to see—and it’s Sophie, from the chorus line, dark curls falling from the confection of hair she’s got mounded at the back of her head, and there’s Ada and Helen, with Dorie and Beth hovering just beyond—

“I’m not, I’m really not,” he calls, lets the anxiety seep into his voice, gives the seeming on the bed a little twitch like someone’s moving around in there.

“We thought you were dead, you big jerk,” Helen snarls. “Haring off like some kind of hero—”

“Present yourself for discipline, soldier,” Dorie says, and then the tent flap falls closed again.

Steve waits, watches, but—they’re not coming in. Thank Christ. If this was a hotel back home they’d be invading the room, to haul him out of bed and keep yelling at him. Here—the middle of an Army camp, eyes everywhere—propriety keeps them out. He’s got a few minutes of grace. Breathe out.

He’s done the shape change spell dozens of times now—every five or six days for seven months and counting. Never hurts any less but he can force it through in double-quick time now, belt between his
teeth and the folded blanket smushed over his face to muffle his gasps. Swabs the cold sweat off his skin and hauls on dirty shirt, trou, boots, combs fingers into his hair. He looks like a train wreck but this is all the clothes he’s got in here, except for that dress uniform which he's disgracing by even looking at. So—

Shoulders out through the tent flap to face the music.

“Uh, hey,” Steve says, and then Ada is slapping him on the back of the head, and then Helen grabs him hard by the ear and kisses him on the cheek, and Sophie is throwing her arms around his neck and he can feel tears in the press of her eyelashes to his throat.

The story emerges in between smacks and kisses and hugs: the show broke up a few days after the star went AWOL, and most of the girls are already on their way back to the States but about a third of them took reassignment to set up a USO centre out here.

“Sorry I left you in the lurch,” Steve says, scratching at the back of his head.

“So you should be,” Dorie says. “If I wanted a man who’d take me far from home only to vanish without a word I'd still be with my husband.”

“My helmet!” Ada cries, ducking into the tent and snatching it up from the floor, her thumbs pressing into the dents and scars in the paint.

“Looks better on you,” Steve says, and Ada gives him a narrow look and Helen accuses him of being a flirt—which is just… Look, they were all shacked up in close quarters for six months, they know what an awkward asshole he is—and then they're hauling him off to show him the hospitality tent they’re setting up.

*******

The ladies put him to work, setting up the fold out tables, and then he does a slow lap of the tent with Beth sat on his shoulders pinning up the leftover bunting from the Star Spangled Man circuit around the roof, and by the time they’ve got the tent whipped into shape they’ve all swapped stories, and he’s apologised about twenty more times and the ladies have forgiven him—enough to stop sassing him with every second breath, anyway.

Night has fallen, thick and black as pitch, and the manic buzz of the huge electric lights overhead presses against his ears and skull and skin, inescapable as the music ever was. Steve is past hungry, a hundred miles past hungry, like he could eat his way through a concrete wall—this body guzzles fuel like a Sherman tank, and he's been on rationed MREs the whole way from Kreischberg, same as the other fellas. He leaves the girls with another round of hugs, checks that he's got his stolen prizes still tucked up under his jacket, and follows his nose to the mess tent.

And then, fuelled up and clear-headed—and alone, he's gotta effect a strategic retreat from the mess tent, every fella in there wants to talk to him—he hits the showers and returns to his tent, one hand resting over the folded cloth in his jacket. Feeling the weight of it there, the itch in his skin. He’s—look, it’s a stupid fucking plan, but then all his plans are stupid these days and—and he needs to get square with Bucky.

In the tent he lights a lamp—it had appeared while he was gone, along with a camp stool, washstand and mirror, a couple more uniforms and his suitcase from the Spangled circuit. Sheds his jacket and
lets the stolen pile of shimmering fabric and leather drop to the canvas floor. Sits down on the camp stool and stares into the star-patterned cloth like it might hold the answers.

The pile falls open, the striped skirt unfolding and one sweet kitten-heeled pump rolling free. He rubs his face and breathes deep and works the tension in his wrists to keep his hands from shaking. He’s throat-punched his way through a Hydra factory five days ago but this is—shit, shit oh dear. This is worse. This is—

Bucky hasn’t spoken to him since the factory. Not outside of yessir and strategy talk, anyway. Which—they’ve been nuts-deep in Nazi occupied territory, and Christ knows Buck’s got a right to take as long as he’s gotta to pull his head together after… everything. Torture: call it what it is. Those squid fucks were hurting him for shits and giggles. So it’s not like Steve’s expecting a whole lot, but—

Not even eye contact. Not even So how about those Dodgers.

Catches him staring every now and again, gaze distant and that deep notch he gets in his brow when he’s stumped on what’s wrong with this Goddamn engine. He’ll answer a question if it’s posed directly, and then he’ll throw a sir on the end like—

Like he’s a stranger.

So: to Hell with all of this. Time for plan B.

Steve leans forward, picks up one of the shoes, holds it next to his booted foot. Laughs, soft and punched-out—Christ, his feet are almost twice the size. This body is… He’s so grateful for clear lungs and a straight back, for the strength that got him through a one-man rescue mission with his ass intact, that lets him help people in a way that’s real, that fucking matters. He’s grateful—

—and he misses playing with the fires of making and unmaking, painting Technicolor seemings up the walls or whipping up ghostlights in every shade of red and pink and amber and gold. Misses just sitting and listening to the music—of people, of places. Misses humming along and then changing the tune just a whisper, and watching the whole world side-step to catch up. Spent most of his life hating everything about his little body, his real body, but—

He misses being Bucky’s girl. Ain’t that a Goddamn thing.

Steve claps his hands, pulls in a deep breath and lets it out with a sigh, closes his eyes and furrows his brow and reaches down and in and down and in. There’s nothing there—no sense of the fire rising to meet him, just the gross physical awareness of his body doing what bodies do—but he reaches just the same.

Reaches for the feel of waking up slow on winter mornings, for wet chests and niggling coughs, for the feel of charcoal smeared on his fingers and on the page, for the taste of his mother's victory cake and asthma cigarettes and cheap gin, for Dodgers games on the radio and nursery rhymes in Gaelic. Reaches for bone aches and gut aches, for a world rendered in gold and red and green and greys, and when he’s got all the pieces he breathes deep and fixes it in his head and starts to hum.

The song starts out toneless—his song: he can’t hear it like this but he’s heard it every single day for the first twenty-four years of his life so he’d better damn well remember the tune. Toneless, whisper quiet, a few repeating notes, and he breathes deeper and reaches deeper and the tune starts to take shape. It starts out like one of his Mam's lullabies with notes of Brooklyn traffic sounds, and then comes weaving in a few bars of one of his old jazz favourites, and by the end of his song he's humming in the breathless patterns of an asthmatic wheeze, and then it starts again at the top and he rolls his wrists and starts to make the gestures of making and unmaking.
He can't feel the power moving because it's not, he can't—this is stupid, this is fucking stupid. Nothing is happening.

Something is happening.

Maybe? Is something—it's like the air is pulling tight around him. Like everything is getting denser, tenser. Like he’s climbed in the back of an ice truck, and the air on his skin is cold and sharp as a razor. It might be nothing. It might—he sings through to the end of the song and starts again.

Nothing is happening, and this is the most pathetic thing he’s done in a lifetime of—and Christ it’s cold, and his breath is—like it’s coming through a straw, like his asthma is playing up, only—
—only he can't breathe, and—fuck, he really can’t, and—choking, letting go of the song and everything and—oh Jesus help—

Falling.

And he lands on his back on the floor in his tent, heaving and wheezing through a haze of pain like he’s landed on razor wire, on broken glass, only—and it eases back, drops like the Hudson at low tide, and he opens his eyes and blinks away the wet smears in his eyelashes, looks up at his legs where they're cocked awkward against his fallen camp stool, and they look—

Smaller.

Everything looks… smaller.

He holds up his hands, shaking. Sees his wrists, fine and dainty as a girl's, poking out of the cuffs of his too-large shirt. The swell of music hits like he’s driven headfirst into a brick wall. His veins and bones spark with liquid fire. He puts his hands over his face—small hands, narrow jaw—and clamps down to smother his whisper-scream.

He’s done it. Damned if he knows how, but he’s done it.

Then he kicks the camp stool away, rolls up to standing, almost trips straight over again in a tangle of boots and trou. His hands are still shaking as he strips, spans his ribcage with his hands, his narrow waist and hips. Everywhere he touches he meets flesh and bone, can feel the fires of making-it-so through his skin. This is real, he’s not—he’s not trapped, not stuck in a meat-box, deaf and dumb.

He’s done it, and he can do it again.

He grabs handfuls of his hair, pulls. Strangles the wild laugh that's bubbling up inside him and grabs up handfuls of striped skirt from the floor of the tent.

The skirt doesn't sit quite right on his hips, but it bounces real nice as he turns in place. He has to contort himself to fasten the zipper on the backless top, and it's cut to flatter breasts he doesn't have; he pulls it down hard to flatten the bosom and the v-cut neckline ends up halfway down his sternum. Acceptable. He hauls on the silk stockings from the bottom of his suitcase, steps into the kitten heels. They fit like they were made for him. Wets his hair and combs it back from his face, inks his lips in the soft shell pink that's come with him all the way from home. Throws back the flap and marches out of the tent before his courage can fail him.

It's close to midnight but the camp is still heaving, no one interested in lights-out regulations on a night like this. Men are coming and going, sitting sprawled outside their tents to pass a bottle around or play hands of cards. Over by the mess tent someone's strung up a sheet and set up a film projector and they've got a movie playing. He walks through the middle of the camp, throwing his best nowhere veil in all directions around him, and no one looks up and no one turns a hair.
He passes the group of fellas that had been Bucky's cell mates at the factory—good men, solid, from what he'd seen anyway, but drunk as lords right now—and beyond them is Bucky's tent, one of a row of little two-man numbers they've had to pop up in a hurry to deal with all the returned POWs. He can see there's a lamp lit inside; if he closes his meat ears and listens to the music, he can hear notes of the song he knows is Bucky's, that lilting Irish melody with brassy big band notes woven through. It's slower than he's heard it in the past, sadder, but still so pure and clear that it cuts him to the quick and he has to stop for a minute, breathe for a minute.

He does a circuit of the tent, dotting veil with his fingertips like daubs of paint on the ground around and on the canvas of the tent itself, and when he's completed his circle he comes back to the tent flap and pushes his way inside.

Bucky's lying on his bedroll, reading a letter by the lamp light. His spare hand is on his chest, clenched in a fist like he still can't relax, even here, even now. Steve grits his teeth, takes a deep breath, and drops the veil.

Bucky startles badly, rolls halfway to his feet, stops. Stares. His face has bled white like he's seen a ghost. The letter he was reading is a crumpled mess, forgotten in his hand.

"Stevie?" he breathes.

"Yeah," Steve says. Steps forward, more into the pool of lamp light. It's taking all he's got to just stand square, to not flinch or try and hide any part of... of all this. This stolen outfit, these skinny limbs. Christ, what if Buck doesn't—

"Stevie," Bucky says again, like he's taken a hit to the head. He drops the letter and stands, steps forward, slow and careful. Steve steps in to meet him. Bucky's hands land on his shoulders, stumble up to cup his jaw. There's something wild in his eyes, like he's just hanging onto the ragged edge. He wets his lips, runs his thumbs over Steve's cheekbones. Steve can feel the calluses from his rifle.

"I thought you were bigger," Bucky rasps.

"I'm whatever you need me to be," Steve says, and then Bucky's crushing their mouths together like he's drowning and Steve is air, all tongue and teeth and hunger. He tastes of tooth powder and cigarettes and whiskey. His fingers comb back, feather into Steve's hair and hold him in place and he starts to kiss and bite his way down Steve's jaw and it's all Steve can do to hang onto the front of Buck's uniform shirt, like he's making time with a hurricane front.

"Buck," Steve's gasping, "Oh God, Buck," and Bucky is biting and mouthing at the column of his throat. His stubble rasps; they're both shaking hard. Bucky grabs his ass, finds the lace panties he's got on under the skirt, makes a little winded noise like he's been sucker-punched. Scoops Steve up bodily and lays him out on the bedroll and crawls over to kiss him again. Steve's giving as good as he's getting, mouths open and licking and sucking and biting, unbuttoning Bucky's shirt and arching up, trying to get—skin on skin, heat, touch, friction, Jesus—and then Bucky drops his head to mouth at Steve's tits straight through the blouse.

Steve drops his head back and bites his lip to choke back a moan, and Bucky slips a hand up and under the blouse, finds a nipple and clamps down with—blunt nails digging in, oh Christ on a crutch, oh—clawing the last of Bucky's shirt buttons open and shoving at it, back off his shoulders, and Bucky sits back, shrugs the shirt off and dumps it to the side. He's dropped his ass right in Steve's lap, and Steve grinds up into it, gasping. His cock's a swollen weight, throbbing and tenting up against the lace and he can feel the fire starting to pool there, building and burning.

Bucky slips his fingers under the halter straps of Steve's top and tugs at it. "How does this come
“Zipper in the back,” Steve says, still grinding up against Bucky’s weight and heat, and then Bucky shifts and grabs Steve by the hips and flips him onto his belly. Steve whines—Christ, how undignified, but—and squirms and then Bucky catches him by the hips and hauls back—shit, he’s almost never this grabby, and Steve won’t admit it in a month of Sundays but it’s turning his crank like nobody’s business—and then Bucky’s leaning in, chest to back, hot and close and heavy. Steve can—Bucky’s cock is pressed into the crease of his ass, throbbing straight through the cotton and lace of their clothes, and he’s hard enough to drive nails.

“Christ,” Steve pants, and thrusts back against him.

Bucky bites his shoulder hard and says, “Close, but no.” He’s got the zip open, sliding a hand in under the top, kneading and pinching at Steve’s tits.

“Barnes,” Steve snarls, push-pull back and forth between the hand on his chest and the dick rubbing against his balls and asshole. Bucky kisses him on the shoulder, same spot he’s just bitten, open mouth and hot as a brand.

“You got it,” Bucky says, and drops one hand down to cup Steve’s dick through the lace. Steve gasps and thrusts into it—Holy Mary, fuck, he’s gonna finish before they start at this rate. “Fuck, doll, you’re prettier than a pinup,” Bucky mumbles into his shoulder. “I wanna—can I do you with the stockings and skirt on?”

“Please, Buck,” Steve chokes out, and now he’s got a hand on his chest and another on his cock and Bucky’s cock against his ass and it’s almost too much, too much of everything.

“You want me to take care of you, darlin’?” Buck asks, low-voiced, licking and mouthing at Steve’s neck, that tender spot where earlobe meets throat. Steve makes a broken sound, wordless and dragged outta him, and Bucky hauls him up, sitting on his heels with Bucky wrapped around him like scaffolding. Flips up the front of Steve’s skirt and tugs his panties down to free the length of his cock and—oh fuck, oh God Almighty—heat and pressure and the soft tug of his calluses, and—up and down, tight, head of his thumb pressing just under the crown and Steve’s wet as a girl for him, slicking the way, Bucky still mouthing at Steve’s neck just behind his ear.

And then—and then he stops, which oughta be illegal, Barnes—and nips Steve’s ear and uncoils himself up and off the bedroll.

“Rude,” Steve growls, shifts to pull his panties off and throw them to the side, grabs his own dick and tugs at it. Bucky grins, crooked and wild, dropping to his knees next to the pack at the foot of the bed. Shirt off, Steve can see the star-patterned old shrapnel scar on Bucky’s right shoulder, white and pink against the milk pale of his skin, a couple new scars on his forearms, yellowed bruising on his back over his kidneys. There are dimpled patches of scar tissue in the crook of each elbow where those Hydra assholes stuck needles in him, again and again. New notes in his song, not discordant but contrasting. He’s not the boy who left Brooklyn, but then neither is Steve.

Bucky pulls the little jar of Vaseline from the bottom of his bag with a grunt and turns back to the bed. He’s watching Steve touch himself, pupils blown wide and black, and the set of his face and body is predatory, fox stalking a rabbit. He crawls back onto the bedroll, slow and deliberate and unstoppable as a landslide, slants his hot mouth over Steve’s and swallows his sigh. He’s still crowding forward so Steve lets himself fall back, Bucky settling between his knees and kissing him hungrily, and then Buck hunches back and drops his head to take Steve’s cock in his mouth.

Steve keens, like the sound’s come right up from his toes, drops his head back and tries to—hold
still, not fuck into him, be a gentleman, Christ—and combs his shaking fingers into Bucky’s hair. Bucky’s not wasting any time, taking him deep, sucking and swallowing around him, and when a slick finger pushes gentle and firm against his asshole Steve’s toes curl and he whips one hand up, bites down on the meat at the base of his thumb because he doesn’t wanna go, not yet.

“Oh, Buck,” he whines around his hand, and he can feel Bucky’s silent laughter in the shudder of his shoulders, the shift of the mouth around Steve’s dick. His finger slides home, slides out and slides in as smooth and slow as his mouth is hard and urgent, and on the third in-out slide he hits the bundle of nerves at Steve’s centre and Steve gasps, the fires of making and unmaking that pool in his groin arcing up the bony ladder of his spine like lightning.

It’s—Christ, it’s so—he’s hitting Steve’s sweet spot, just one fingertip and light as a breath, again and again—and the burning in Steve’s belly is fever bright and his spine is arching, squirming—fuck, bang on the money every time, like—like a Goddamn sniper. The noises Steve’s making are fucking inhuman, biting moans pressed into the meat of his palm. The heat coils higher, tighter, slick suction and feather-soft pressure and he hauls his hand out of his mouth and gasps, “Stop, sweetheart. Jesus Christ. You gotta stop—I’m gonna go, please.”

Bucky pulls up off Steve’s dick. His lips are bruised red and wet with spit and sex. “I think you’ve missed the point of this exercise, doll,” he drawls.

“Want you, first,” Steve says, and Bucky’s expression shifts, eyes narrowing as his pupils open wider, black ink spilling over grey slate. And then he pulls out and slicks up half his hand and jams three fingers back in.

Steve arches again, groans deep, draws one leg up to plant his heel in Bucky’s back. That’s—fuck, it’s too much, it’s perfect, and the burn of it licks in with the wildfire stirring in his belly, sends flame spiralling higher. He’s clawing at Bucky’s hair, hands moving without any kinda prompting from his brain, and Buck seems to take that as his cue to start sucking Steve off again, humming low in his chest. Steve can’t stop shaking.

The fire is arcing up his spine, up from his belly now into the bottom of his ribcage, and he can feel it surging when he breathes in, panting, like gusts of wind whipping up a campfire. This is the first time he’s fucked around—with anyone but his own hand, anyway—since his magic’s been off the leash, and it’s—fuck. He might fucking levitate, he might fucking explode, and—and then the ache and stretch shifts to fullness, sweetness like molasses, and he tugs at Bucky’s hair and kicks him in the back and gasps, “Buck, I’m ready. I need you.”

Bucky pulls up off his dick with a little passing kiss on the tip. His grin is absolutely feral. His fingers in Steve’s ass go pointed again and—oh sweet fuck—jam right up into his business and grind deep. Steve keens like a wounded animal and writhes on the bedroll, caught between squirming away and pressing back into it.

“Christ, darlin’, look at you,” Bucky rasps. “You’re fucking gorgeous. You’re a Goddamn work of art.” He scoops up the open jar of slick with his spare hand, digs out a healthy fingerful of Vaseline and smears it briskly onto his dick.

“Bucky,” Steve moans, all grasping hands grabbing for Bucky—hair, shoulder, dick—and then Bucky’s pulling his fingers out of Steve’s ass and grabbing his left leg to haul it up bent crooked like the right, hefts his hips up on a deep angle, jams a wadded up towel under his ass.

“S’okay, doll,” Bucky says, leaning over him, tip of his dick against Steve’s asshole. “Stevie-darlin’, I’ve got you,” and he starts to push in, slow and syrupy and easy.
Steve’s moan is long and punched-breathless and guttural. He grabs at his own hair, at Bucky’s shoulder, trying to—to not squirm or thrust or arch, just—letting Bucky steer, letting him control the pace as he eases in with tiny thrusts, and the sharp sting of opening opening opening eases back, gives way to smouldering heat. He’s so full. “Oh, Buck,” he says, and it’s one part curse and one part prayer, Bucky’s pelvis finally sitting snug against his ass.

“Fuck, love. You’re perfect,” Bucky pants. “God. You’re aces, Stevie. You’re so good,” and he starts to ease back out and thrust back in, slow out and hard in. Steve grabs at his hair and shoulders, pulls his face down to kiss him on forehead and temples and mouth between breaths. They’re wet with sweat in all the places their bodies collide, flushed and shaking, running hot enough to scald, and Bucky’s arms are down and braced on either side of him now, Steve rocking his hips up to meet him as Bucky fucks him, faster, harder.

Bucky shift, brings a leg up, knee snuggling close to Steve’s ass, and it changes the leverage and deepens the angle and—Christ on a bike, oh fuck, oh no—and now he’s hitting Steve’s sweet spot with every Goddamn thrust. And Steve’s right back to wild animal clawing, blunt fingernails digging at the blanket, at Bucky’s shoulders, at his own hair. He’s coiling, tension building like piano wire pulling tight, chanting out, “Buck, God, God, Buck,” like he’s lost all his other words.

It’s too much, it’s too much, it’s the fire in his blood surging plasma hot and arcing up into his ribcage and lungs and heart. It burns like his sternum has butterflied open, and it’s so fucking good it hurts and it hurts so fucking much it’s ecstasy, and he’s spiralled up so damn high he’s gonna smash to bits when he falls.

“Buck!” he cries, gives warning, “Buck, I’m gonna—oh, God—”

“Fuck yes,” Bucky pants. “Gimme your sugar, darlin’, I’ve got you.”

He comes, and it’s like falling off a cliff and then somehow you’re flying, like a single heartbeat that drags infinitely, and he’s flayed wide open and the fire is pouring through him, out of his chest, and for that endless moment everything is—

—is the wild swell of the music, louder than shelling, and the heat and light searing through him like he’s swallowed an electrical storm and the press of Bucky’s song against his skin and the vast tidal pulse of the night rising within him like a black sea until—

—until he spills, and falls, arching, spine lifting like a puppet on strings and—

—and then he's limp and shaking on the bedroll, cold and empty, and he gasps and breathes in for what feels like the first time in a long time, opens his eyes, looks down and—

—see the streaks of spunk, running silvery white up his chest. His solid, curving chest. His Goddamn anatomy textbook model chest.

He's…

He's big again.

Oh, fuck.

Bucky is half-crouched at the end of the bedroll, one hand cupped protectively in front of his groin and the other holding an ugly-pragmatic sort of knife that he's pulled from only God knows where. He’s watching Steve, jaw ticking and blanched grey-green, that wild look back in his eyes like he’s holding his shit together with twine and chewing gum.
No one moves for a long moment.

Steve drops his head back on the bed and whispers, “Son of a bitch.” Closes his eyes, takes a deep breath and lets it out. Then he sits up, slow and gentle, like Bucky’s a nervous horse he doesn’t wanna spook. The remnants of fabric from the skirt are left on the bed like torn shreds of chrysalis. The stockings seem to have survived the transition intact but the rest of the outfit is trashed. Add it to the bill.

"Christ Almighty, Buck," he says. "I'm so sorry."

Bucky chews at his lip for a moment, then rasps, "So, you... I didn't know you... So you change back and forth." He shifts his grip on the knife, moves to the head of the bedroll crabwise, giving Steve a wide berth, and stows the blade neatly underneath. His hands are shaking bad, voice coming so level it’s almost toneless.

"No one knows," Steve says quickly. "This is classified as Hell, Buck, way above both our pay grades. I shouldn't even be here." As lies go it's a good one: implies a lot without stating anything specific, protects him and Buck, keeps Ulfadhir’s secrets without triggering the Goddamn geas. It might even be a silver lie, though he'll leave that call to the master of the art. God, what happened?

What the Hell—he’s always felt like his magic was going bananas whenever he fucks around but this is the first time—but then: shit. This is the first time he’s—done it since Ulfadhir took the binding off his magic. So—so he stirs it all up getting dicked, and then loses control of it, and then—and the shape change spell is the only real one he’s done in six months. It’s like a trench half a mile deep through the centre of his mind. So his magic...

Makes like water, like electricity. Takes the path of least resistance.

What a Goddamn fuckup.

"Did you... Did you violate the Espionage Act so we could have one last fling?" Bucky sounds amused, scandalised, like he's fronting: like the light tone is choking him.

“—" Steve starts, stops, processes. Grabs at the halter-necked top—it’s hanging around his neck like a napkin, tiny against his super soldier frame—and tosses it to one side. Tries again. "Well, yes, but —why would it be the last fling?"

Bucky is quiet for a long moment, staring at Steve; he’s studying his ear real close, his forehead. It’s not quite eye contact. "Stevie, I don't know if you’ve noticed, but you're kind of different now."

"But I can change back and forth!" Steve says. "I can—gimme a minute and I can do it right now—" Hopefully, probably. “Hell, Buck, I know you're only gonna want me when I'm little—"

"Stop, Stevie, hang about a minute, just—what?"

Steve stops, takes a breath. Jesus—he’d thought he'd left shame behind right about when he'd started wearing lipstick and perfume with his dresses, but they don't fucking talk about this stuff and it's choking him as bad as the geas ever did. "I know you like me... when I can be your girl."

Bucky stares at him, then grabs a handful of his own hair and fists it. “God fucking fuck," he says, staring at the tent wall like he’s seen God in the canvas. “Jesus Christ, we are both so fucking stupid." He turns away, tugs at his hair some more, rubs at his mouth, goes still. Then he turns again, drops to his knees, grabs Steve by the shoulders and fixes him with some deep eye contact.

"Steven Grant Rogers," he says. "In this moment, as you are right now, do you still want my
johnson?"

Steve makes an inhuman noise and strangles the fucking crazed laugh that's trying to claw its way out of him. Keeps his eyes on Bucky's and not on his dick by sheer force of will. Tries to—to—what the Hell is happening here, is—how do you even answer that, should he—does Bucky… Fuck.

_Pater noster, qui es in caelis: sanctificetur nomen tuum._ Here goes everything.

"Yeah, Buck. I want you, whatever size."

"Fuck," Bucky says again, and then he claws a hand into Steve’s nape and reels him in and mashes their mouths together. It’s—teeth clashing hard enough to split skin—the clumsiest piece of shit attempt at seduction anyone’s ever made. It’s perfect.

"Unh," Steve says, and Bucky kisses him again, slips in some tongue, shoves him back on the bed and crawls in over him.

"Christ, look at you," Bucky says. "Look at you. You're a Goddamn Michelangelo, come to life and walking." He runs his hands down Steve's abdomen, tracing the lines of his chest, belly, pelvic girdle. Cups his balls with one hand and reaches further down with the other to rub blunt fingertips against Steve's asshole. "Not a girl, he says? Christ, doll, I never once thought you were a girl." Drops his head to lick and mouth at Steve's cock.

Steve moans—the sound torn outta him, slick heat and oh _God_—gets hard again faster than he ever has in his life. This body—this ridiculous fucking thing he's dreamed up, ground beef and stubbornness held together with a whisper of song—he can't feel the fires of making and unmaking, and he can’t hear the music that makes up the bones and tendons of the living world, is deaf and dumb and headblind but—but _Christ Almighty_ this body is so _fucking sensitive_ and his recovery time is nonexistent, and right now with Bucky doing sinful things to his dick that feels like a fair trade off.

Bucky sucks lazily at the head, works the base of his dick with his hand, pulls off with a sloppy pop and grins crookedly at Steve, his lips as red as a wound. "There's more of you to love down here, doll," he says.

Steve palms his face and throws his head back, can feel himself lighting up like a stop light. "Oh Hell, Buck."

“But you still blush red as a strawberry. Not so different—”

“You all talk now, Barnes?” Steve growls into his hands, and feels Bucky's shoulders shake with silent laughter before he starts giving the very tip of Steve's cock tiny kitten licks until—fucking jerk, such a _jackass_—Steve breaks, sits up, hauls Bucky up by the shoulders and knots his hands into his hair and kisses him stupid.

Bucky hums into his mouth and Steve lets his hands run, palms down his neck and chest, over the dappling of shrapnel scars on his shoulder and down his back, tracing the vertebrae with his blunt fingertips. It's different, they are different: Bucky's all wire and muscle now, any spare flesh burned away by military rations and torture, and Steve is—God, his spread hands can span the width of Bucky’s chest.

Steve mouths down Bucky's jaw and neck, tasting sweat—the same, the same, no matter what else changes—and Bucky drops his head to the side and grabs at Steve's chest, traces around a nipple with one lazy fingertip, running his mouth low and rasping: “Doll, that's so—you're so good to me—Jesus, I could write sonnets about these tits—yeah, Stevie, that’s—your pretty fucking _mouth_, God,”
and then Steve grabs Bucky's dick and starts to stroke it, firm and steady, slick with Vaseline and pre-come, and Bucky's head rolls back, biting down on his lip with a soft wounded groan.

He didn't finish earlier and he's hard enough to cut diamonds now, hot and throbbing up into Steve's hand. "Fuck, darlin'," Bucky gasps, hot and wet in Steve's ear, and Steve throws his other arm around Bucky's waist and lifts and twists, drops him onto the bed roll and lunges over to straddle his hips, their cocks pressed flush together.

Steve grinds down and mouths at Bucky's shoulder—he'll always be Bucky's punk but it's Goddamn fun, being able to manhandle him like this when it's always been the other way around—and then Bucky's gasping in his ear, "Christ, doll, you may kill me like this," and Steve freezes, flushes cold and queasy, hearing the breathless wheeze in Buck's voice and—oh shit, two hundred and thirty pounds, Rogers: come on.

He sits back, starts to lift his weight away—Jesus, fuck, this fucking body—and Bucky's grinning up at him, propping himself up on his elbows and saying, "What a way to go, though, right?" Leans up to take Steve's right nipple between his teeth and mouth at it, and Steve's stuttering moan is—yeah, that mouth is made for sinning, it's good, but also—thank God. Bucky still wants him, even though Steve's big enough to crush him with his Goddamn thighs now. Bucky still wants him, even though he's never even looked at fellas before. Bucky still wants him, in spite of everything.

Steve cups their cocks in his hand, rubs at the heads with the side of his thumb, roots around in the blankets with his other hand until he find the jar of slick, still open. Scoops some out with his trigger finger and smears it onto Bucky's dick. His hands are shaking again and he feels as graceless as he did straight out of the Vita Ray cradle, the first time he changed shape, all Goddamn elbows and legs. He's a mess, but it seems that's still what JB Barnes likes, so—Steve rocks forward, fists Bucky's dick to hold it on the right angle, and sits back on it, slow and steady, biting his lip—oh fuck, oh Mother Mary and all the Saints, oh fucking fuck—as it slides into him, broaches him, splits him wide.

Bucky's face is pressed to Steve's sternum, arms wrapped around his torso and hands clawed into him like stigmata. He's shaking, his breath puffing hot and wet against Steve's skin, and between gasps he grinds out, "Oh God, oh fuck, Stevie," and then, "Sweet Christ, doll—I can't—oh shit, don't stop."

It's—oh Christ, it's too much—if Steve was thinking with his head instead of his suffering dick he'd have figured that shape shifting mid-screw might affect the quality of the prep. This is a different Goddamn body, and he's tight, he's so—there's still Vaseline up there, somehow, and Bucky's pre-come easing the way, but it's tight and it hurts. Holy Christ it hurts, the knife edge between pain and ecstasy, as full and burning-hot as he's ever been.

Christ, this ridiculous body—every nerve ending has nerve endings, like there's an arc-welding patter of sparks spilling out from his ass over his groin, thighs, belly. It's too much and he'll die before he stops.

It takes a century or a heartbeat and then he's sitting in Bucky's lap and they're both panting and shaking. Bucky's dropped back flat onto the bedroll, his hands biting bruise-deep into Steve's hips, his eyes drowning pools of black ringed with grey, chewing at his lower lip.

There's a long pregnant moment of stillness—Steve feels fucking drunk with it, the too-much and the radiant heat and the way Bucky is unravelling like an old sweater under his hands. Then Bucky asks, "Stevie, doll, you okay?"

"Yeah, Buck."
"Can I fuck you now?"

"Yeah—" he starts, and then Bucky plants his feet on the bed and fucks up into him—oh—hard, hard enough punch the breath from his lungs and the brains right outta his skull. It's—fuck—rolls his hips and keeps going, short and fast and hard and Goddamn unrelenting, and Steve—catching at Bucky's hands where they're biting into his hips and hanging on, hanging on like it's all he can do. He's—biting back sobs—it's so good, it's too much, and—

Bucky can't fuck him like this when Steve's small, porcelain bones and parchment skin. And Steve still—he feels like a giant sometimes, ungainly and awkward, and it makes him crazy that he can't use his sorcery in this body, and right now none of that matters a Goddamn: because he can be solid, he can be a brick wall for Bucky to throw himself against—and at some point he's started making ugly animal noises and he can't seem to stop.

"Buck, 'm'gonna—" he gasps.

"Come on," Bucky pants, takes one hand off Steve's hip to fist his dick, and it's all Steve needs to throw him over the edge. He spills in streaks of white up Bucky's belly and chest and in the distance he can hear himself making more of those wounded animal cries but he's got no more control over that than he does over the tides, his whole world narrowed down to his cock and balls, to Bucky's hands and dick deep inside him, to the Goddamn fireworks display that's happening in his groin.

And then Bucky's crushing him down against his chest and coming too, the pulse and heat of him spending up inside Steve familiar even in this different shape, choking out a near-silent groan like it's been ripped up from his toes. Steve can hear his heart pounding, the bellows of his lungs and the creak of the bones in his arms as he finally relaxes enough to loosen his hold.

They lie together, panting, shell-shocked. Steve recovers first, enough to snug his face in next to Bucky's neck and kiss his hammering pulse point. "You okay, Buck?"

"Am I okay?" Bucky echoes. "Jesus Christ, Stevie, are you okay? Did I hurt you?" He presses kisses to Steve's hair, runs his hands up and down his spine like he used to when Steve was a kid, spine twisted into one long line of back ache.

Steve smiles into Bucky's neck. He feels sore and well-fucked and sleepy and euphoric. "It'll take worse than you to hurt me like this, Barnes. I'm good."

"I'm sorry, Steve."

"Buck, I'm fine," Steve says. "Guess you needed that, huh?" Levers himself up enough to get his weight off Bucky and then drops like a sack of potatoes next to him, tugs Bucky to face him. Bucky's arm comes over and goes straight back to petting his spine.

"Need my goddamn head read, is what I need," Bucky mutters, his eyes heavy-lidded, and then he presses a line of kisses to Steve's collar bone and up to the base of his throat, just under where the collar of his uniform will sit, and here—oh Christ, oh fuck—bites down, sinking teeth deep like his jaw's a vice clamping slowly tighter, and Steve gasps and squirms. It's—when bears claim territory in the woods they mark up the trees with their claws, and—and that thought tangles in his head with the sharp pain of Bucky's teeth and the warmth of his mouth and smell of his skin, of their spunk and sweat, makes his cock twitch and start to rise again.

Bucky lets up, licks at the wound and looks down, down where Steve's dick is at half-mast and nudging against his thigh. Steve sighs, hitched his hips back, and—and Bucky presses in, firm, thigh snuggling into Steve's groin. When he looks up his grin is as bright and clear as Steve's seen it since

“It’s the serum,” Steve lies, blushing like a Goddamn tomato again. Jesus Christ, this freak show body. “Sorry.”

“You don’t ever gotta apologise for this, Stevie,” Bucky says, reaching down and grabbing Steve by the cock. “This is a perfect miracle sent down from on high in answer to my prayers,” and Steve choke back a laugh—Lord, Bucky, you can’t say things like that—Ave Maria, gratia plena—and kisses Bucky hard to shut him up.

*******

Bucky gets dressed and hikes across the camp to Steve's tent, brings him back a change of clothes. In theory Steve could shape change and veil and go himself, but theory won’t keep him warm at night if his magic shorts out again. Christ, that coulda been very fucking bad. His magic runs stronger with the leash off, but—but he can’t trust it, not all the way. Never really gave himself the chance to relearn it before he went into the cradle and came out Captain America, committed—to the one shape, to the Army, and then the Spangled circuit and the whole Goddamn tissue of lies.

Steve dresses, sorts his hair into some semblance of order, gives Bucky a kiss—it’s quick, just a brush of lips, he’s thinking about—and then Buck hauls him back in and dips Steve and lays one on him like he’s a dame and it’s the big scene in the movie, and they’re both laughing into the kiss, bumping teeth like stupid kids.

Back in his own tent he strips off the uniform again, folds it neat and sits on the bed in his undershirt and shorts. Tugs at his hair, gets up again, paces. He feels like he probably should sleep but he’s jangling, on edge like he always gets just before he’s gotta go onstage. In the end he sits, pulls out his notebook and pencil, starts to draw.

He draws Peggy in her shooting stance, dark eyes fierce. Draws Bucky with a cigarette in his mouth and his rifle held across his body. Draws lines of men and trucks and a tank in the forest. Draws his mother sitting at their kitchen table, with her half-glass of gin and a wry smile and all the light of her soul pouring out through her too-thin skin. And by the time he's done marking in her laugh lines and the creases in her nurses uniform it’s sun up, birds calling and men cursing their way awake and the distant smell of industrial quantities of burning toast from the mess tent.

Steve puts his notebook away, splashes some water on his face and pulls the uniform back on, combs his hair and ties his boots and heads out to see what happens next.
Chapter 13

What happens next is London, a debriefing with all the SSR intel buffs that makes everything that's come before look like a Sunday picnic, and a few days of furlough in the city. After the third day, the powers that be drag him back in and offer him command of a unit, small and specialised, men of his own choosing, and he understands what's not being said: it's the way out of the pickle he's put them in.

He's proven himself too loudly and publicly for them to put him back on the Spangled circuit, but if they give him a small unit, guerrilla missions, do it all through the SSR, then he's far enough outside the regular chain of command that he won't actually fuck up the entire European theatre with his inexperienced half-cocked shenanigans.

Plus they want him to concentrate on Hydra, and with everything—Erskine’s killer, the threat that Schmidt presents, those Goddamn blue glowing weapons, what they did to Buck—anyway, sign him right the Hell up.

He makes up a list of the guys he'd noticed on the march from the factory back to camp, guys with useful skill sets and initiative and grudges. Takes his list to Bucky, who'd served with them and been a prisoner alongside them, who moves things around on the list, makes suggestions, frowns. "You need a sniper," he says.

"Any suggestions?"

Buck splays his hand over the paper and shoves it back over the table at him. "Me, you dumb punk. I can shoot the hairs off a gnat's ass from half a mile away."

He's a little over two weeks out from that Goddamn table in the isolation ward at Kreischberg. He's still too pale, bruises under his eyes, and he's trying for cocky right now but there's something around his eyes and mouth that says he's bleeding out from somewhere.

Steve wants to wrap him in blankets and feed him chicken soup like Winnie Barnes makes it and suck his dick and never let so much as a cold breeze or a harsh word ever touch him again, but he's also aware this is Goddamn Bucky Barnes. The closest he's ever seen Buck come to backing down from a fight is backing up a few steps so he can grab up that broken half-brick and wade back into the fight with a fucking weapon.

"Has medical cleared you?" Steve asks.

"Sure did," Bucky says, sitting back in his chair. "I'm fighting fit." It's not an outright lie, but it is an obfuscation—his casual slouch is a little too casual. Steve wets his lips, thinks about calling him out on it, but then Bucky launches straight into telling him how he needs to approach the other fellas, how many drinks he should get into them before he asks them outright, and Steve lets him pull him into strategy talk.

That night he recruits the rest of the Commandos. A week later they're in the back of a truck being smuggled into Austria for their first mission.

******
Their target is a Hydra base somewhere on the side of a Godforsaken mountain in the south of Austria, and the whole mission is a clusterfuck more or less from the start.

SSR analysts are convinced there's a base here somewhere, between the map that Steve saw in the factory, collated intelligence about the movement of troop carriers and supply trucks, but *fucked* if the Commandos can actually find the damn thing now they’re here. It's been two days, almost, since they got to this mountain and started looking in earnest, boots on the ground: two days of prowling through mud-dark forest, canopy thick as porridge, and evading Hydra patrols—in force, ten or twenty at a time—and cold food because they can't risk a fire, and bugger all sleep.

They’ve tried a dozen times to follow the patrols back to base and—God only knows how they’re doing it—the Krauts seem to vanish into thin air every time—they’ll get into a dense copse of trees or behind a ridge line or some other thing that screws up the sight lines, and then just fucking vanish. The Commandos are all pissed off and exhausted and the longer they're here for, the better chance they'll be found and the pooch will really be screwed.

A force this small—they’ve only got a hope of pulling this off if it's a surprise attack. And they're getting real close to losing the element of surprise.

They hit the forty-eight hour mark and Steve calls a halt. They're in a rocky crevasse where two ridge lines meet sharply, dense enough with brambles and bushes and a fallen tree that they'll be all but invisible once they're bedded down. Falsworth and Dugan are on watch, one up on either ridge so they can see in all directions. It's as safe a place as they're going to find to get in a burst of shut-eye before they're all too badly compromised to get this done.

Steve's wrapped in a blanket but not sleeping, staring up through the dead leaves and tangle of fallen branches into the sky. There’s a hawk circling overhead, slow and stately circuits, and he’s half-watching and half—*fuck*. Feels sick as a dog—he's a fraud: he's got no idea what he ought to do next. These fellas are counting on him, and his training in the Army so far has focused a Hell of a lot more on projecting his voice and lifting dancing girls overhead than on actual tactics for combat in the field. Even if he could find the fucking base, even if the Hydra patrols didn't keep vanishing like they were stepping behind a veil—

—and then he feels stupid, he—Pete’s *sake*, Rogers. Really fucking stupid.

*Veil.*

Veil, illusion, Goddamn *sorcery*. He’s a dumb punk like Bucky’s always telling him, he’s fighting with both hands tied behind his back. Ulfadhir has spent sixteen years training him for exactly this sort of shit. If he was here he’d have slapped Steve by now.

Steve takes a deep breath. Looks around and—and he’s deep in the thicket, tucked away from sight. Listens hard; hears soft snores and the regular susurration of sleep from all around. If he's going to do this, he's got as close to perfect privacy as he’s ever gonna get out here.

Who is he kidding, *if*—he’s doing this.

He claws his way deep down until the yammer in his brain shuts up and he can hear himself think. Calls up memory—memory of how his real body feels, memory of how the fires of making and unmaking feel when they writhe and coil inside him, memory of his song: of Gaelic nursery rhymes and asthmatic wheezing and Brooklyn traffic sounds. Cramps his hands into the gestures of making and unmaking and starts to hum along, as quiet as he can. Keeps humming as his body runs with cold sweat, as he shakes and his muscles all start to cramp, as that terrible pressure creeps over him until his heart is racing and his ears are roaring—
It hurts—Jesus Christ on a bike, oh Lord—like being torn in half, hurts so bad he puts his teeth through his bottom lip to keep from hollering.

And it works.

He gasps, pats himself down, feels his skinny little limbs and bird bones. He's himself again, the music roaring back into him like water from a burst dam—tree songs and rock songs and sky song, the chaotic symphony of a half dozen different people songs colliding and overlapping. The fine hairs on his skin stand on end with the slow liquid surge of fire through the channels down his arms and legs—God, but that's good. Like stretching out a limb that's been bound in a plaster cast for months on end.

Okay, first things first—he shifts his breath, makes it quick and hard, shoving fire through the channels and pressing his clenched fists against his chest to centre himself there. Keeps pumping his breath, keeps pulling up fire and jamming everything together, tight as a golf ball right in the middle of his chest like an ache, a weight on the bone—and his high-strung little heart joins in, skipping along anxiously with the breath—until all thought, all his hopes and fears, all his flaring life force is contracted into that one spot—and then he lets go, breath and fists and will, and he's dimly aware of his body arching up as his awareness lifts up and out, up and away, up into the open air.

The wind carries him up, effortless as a helium balloon, up and up. That hawk's still circling three hundred feet overhead, and he gently lets himself drift up to it, easing closer, seeing streaky plumage, dark-gold totally focused gaze, mean claws. He's only ever borrowed from Brooklyn wildlife before, seagulls and rats and dogs, so the feel of the hawk's mind as he gently settles in is—different. Cool as a cucumber, single-pointed. He leans in, presses in, drapes his awareness over and around the hawk's mind like a new coat going on over your shoulders, tight in places and loose in others, and then the shift happens—

—lurch like he's drunk, like the floor just dropped out from under—

—and then he's embodied again, wind moving over his pinion feathers, the updraft he's riding like a warm pressure against the softer down over his belly. The hawk's eyes are—they take a minute to get used to—attracted to tiny movements, not so much to the big picture. Takes a bit of concentration before he can start getting a feel for the landscape as a whole. When he does he gives a little shriek of satisfaction, taps into muscle memory and lets himself circle higher, studying the mountainside.

He's up there for—maybe ten minutes? Gets hard to track time when you're not embodied, or wearing other-than-human skin—when he spots the Hydra patrol about a mile north of where the Commandos are bedded down, moving in single file down a ravine like a pitch black millipede squirming out from under a kicked rock.

There's ten of them, most armed with plain old Karabiner rifles—like the Nazis use—but three armed with those energy weapons. He circles slow and lazy, watches their progress with all of the terrible and ancient patience of a predator. The hawk is a good teacher.

When he sees them spill out of the ravine and into forest he drops lower, watches closer, catching glimpses of movement through the canopy, until the movement ceases and they're at rest, and he needs to get closer, needs to see. He pulls up the muscle memory of the hawk again, drops through a gap in the canopy fast as a bullet, snaps out his wings like a paratrooper and lands neat as a pin in a tree immediately above the squids. One of them looks up; the others show zero interest.

He stifles the urge to shriek defiance and hate at them, and—and the hawk catches a glimpse of what he's thinking: about what Hydra did to Erskine, to the men of the 107th who never made it away from Azzano, or from Kreischberg. What they did to Bucky. The hawk sits with this for a couple
heartbeats and then shows him how to shake out his feathers and groom them—hawks, it seems, are pretty pragmatic in the face of horror—and Steve’s about to start grooming when one of the Hydra soldiers pulls out a fat metal ring of keys.

Another squid lifts up a heavy rock—or it looks like it ought to be heavy, but he’s just hefted it to the side like it doesn’t weigh more than a Bible—lifts it away from what looks like a random rock formation, and—oh, okay. That's kind of clever.

Steve waits, and watches, and when all of the Hydra mooks have climbed inside and the way has closed behind them he shrieks again, high and exultant. Throws his gratitude at the hawk—he’s never borrowed with an animal that gave a single shit about his gratitude, one way or the other, but it seems polite to say thanks just the same—and lifts his awareness out of its body, pulling the tendrils of his self away from its mind and bones and muscle fibres, and then he throws himself south and south, back to the Commandos and his body.

He's shuddering back into his meatsuit—it’s an awful kind of good feeling, because it’s like relaxing into bed at the end of a long day and also like squeezing your foot when it’s gone numb, the mad surge of pins and needles that follows, all at the same time—so there's a bit of twitching and stretching involved, like everything has to click back into alignment—and when he cracks his eyes open, Bucky’s sitting over him. He's cross-legged, rifle in his lap, keeping watch around them with the same kind of terrible focus as the hawk. Steve gives a little gasp as his lungs and airways hook up again and Bucky's gaze snaps to him.

"Okay, Stevie?" he breathes.

"Why aren't you sleeping?" Steve asks, mouths silently, and thank Christ it was only Bucky who caught him—like this. Shrimpy and scarcely recognisable. Next time—because of course there'll be a next time, if he can get the magic-without-magic trick nailed down he'd be silly not to keep using it—he needs to remember to veil his body before he goes borrowing, or maybe throw a seeming over himself so he looks like he's still... all there. Still Captain America-sized. He’ll have to hold two Goddamn tricky workings steady in his head at once, to pull it off, which—challenge accepted.

"Heard your breathing change," Bucky mouths back, and of course he fucking did. He's only been microscopically attuned to every shift in Steve's breathing since they were kids. "Why are you..." He trails off, waves a hand at Steve. "Smaller?"

Steve—doesn't have a lie ready. Shit. He keeps his expression steady—like water, still surface, turbulent depths; thanks, Ulfadhir—and his gaze fixed on Bucky’s.

"I just—I need to, sometimes. It feels better, more comfortable," he says, and it's nonsense and Bucky's raising his eyebrows, because if there's one thing Steve's never been in this body it's comfortable, not between his asthma and his spine and his ulcers. “Not physically, I mean, but…” and he trails off and lets Buck fill in the ending, and at last Bucky nods understanding and looks away, back to keeping watch, to keeping Steve’s secret safe.

Steve sighs, then he pinches off a glove between his teeth, holds it clenched there and works the shape change spell. Surge and collision of blinding pain—Christ, Christing fuck—and he's Cap-sized again. He blinks a few times, spits out the glove and licks his lips, resists the dumb urge to pat himself down and make sure all his parts are accounted for. Bucky's staring at him again, eyes wide and chewing at his lower lip.

"Get some shut eye, Buck," Steve breathes. "We're gonna be taking that Hydra base before sundown, and I need you sharp."
Bucky blinks, nods like he's just accepted this as Gospel truth—based on what only God knows, this mission’s been nothing but a highlight reel of Steve fucking up so far—and lies down, eyes closed and rifle to hand. It feels a little like when they'd doss down in a bed nest back home, and Steve breathes deeper for a moment—breathes in Bucky, sweat and cigarettes and gunpowder and the wool of his coat—and then closes his eyes and starts planning the assault.

******

First:

"Oh, those tricky bastards," Dum Dum says, as Steve flips the fake rock off the stack—it's plaster of Paris, painted and fixed with moss—and reveals the locking mechanism underneath.

It's Monty, with his classy accent and the family tree he can trace back to some royal connection in the 17th century, who pulls out the lock picks and gets to work while the others stand guard.

It takes ten long minutes, "Bugger," mumbled low around a mouthful of picks half a dozen times, and then there's a loud clunk and Monty has to scramble out of the way as the whole rock formation starts to slowly pivot on its base, opening up the chute into the tunnel network underneath.

"Shall we?" Monty says, and—

"Quite, let's," Steve answers, and as he's the idiot with the shield he goes first.

Next:

"Uniforms, coming up," Morita says. The network of tunnels runs deep into the mountain, centred around what looks like a series of old mine shafts cut down into the earth. It's dark and narrow and wide-flung and that favours them, a small force making a stealthy incursion, but they've also got no idea where anyone or anything is. They could round a corner and stumble on a force of two hundred Krauts behind a barricade, or upon the kitchen, or the Goddamn latrines. Hence, uniforms.

Morita and Gabe leave their packs and guns, take a couple of knives and disappear down one of the badly lit tunnels that branch off from the staging area where the Commandos are hiding. The wait for them to come back is awful, eternal, infinite, and Steve's about to ditch the plan and go after them when two Hydra goons come marching back down one of the other tunnels toward their position.

Head to toe black uniform, ugly full-face helmet, and there’s the low scrape of knives being pulled, everyone coiling and ready and—and one gives a jaunty wave and flips up his face mask. Gabe. "Heil Hydra," he says.

They have two of the full body uniforms, another one that's minus the mask, and a lab coat with shirt and trou. It's enough to work with, and they couldn't be picky, not lurking in the dark waiting for guys to go by solo or in pairs. Monty puts on the incomplete uniform, Frenchie puts on the lab coat, and it's dark enough that if they're moving quick, no one will see the knife-holes against the black fabric.

Then:

Team One goes down, Team Two goes up. Fellas in the uniforms take lead, find the corridors and shafts that are clear—or mostly clear anyway—and the others follow. This is not Kreischberg, not a
factory—there’s no POWs so no one is standing guard, and they’re clearly not expecting attack.

Team One is Steve and Frenchie and Morita, collecting hardware as they go: energy weapons and ordinance, anything that looks like it might go boom. Team Two is Gabe and Bucky and Dum Dum and Monty, tasked to scout for industrial equipment or labs, any gear or tech or intelligence they can steal.

They move fast, get real close to Hydra goons—scientists and soldiers, coming and going—and then knife them or punch them, swift and near-silent, hide the bodies as they go—so they’ve been in there for almost half an hour before anyone raises an alarm.

At that point things get hairy:

Steve’s got rearguard, alarm klaxons are blaring, it’s dark and loud and messy. Frenchie and Morita still have the lead, and they’re backtracking the way they came because no one feels like being exotic right now: they’re on a tight fucking schedule.

They look enough like Hydra at a first glance in the dark that they can get pretty close before the squids they’re encountering realise they’re not giving the proper pass codes, at which point—

Morita melts to the left, Frenchie melts to the right, hard against the wall and smooth as a well-oiled machine, and Steve pelts up the middle shield first before anyone knows what’s happening, draws attention, draws fire. And then the fellas open up—they’ve both got a stolen energy rifle now—and then Steve throat-punches anyone still standing. It's brutal and efficient and practiced as the chorus girls from the USO circuit, and they're almost right back where they started when they hear crazed howling and rifle shots coming from one of the other corridors.

They both look to Steve, who looks at Dernier. "Moins de vingt minutes," he says. "Ces salauds fous," and Steve’s French is still garbage but he knows what twenty minutes sounds like. Christ, this is going to be tight.

"Okay," Steve says, and they head back into the belly of the beast, back towards the mad bastards that make up the other half of their unit.

And then:

Team Two is pinned down in an intersection, and they've managed to secure themselves with a stack of crates on either side but there’s Hydra at every choke point out of there. Which stops mattering once Team One comes up behind one of those choke points and Frenchie and Morita open up with those energy rifles again. Steve charges in, low and shield-first and brutal, collides like a truck with the guys still standing.

Four go down—there’s the crunch of bones breaking—and—three still standing—throws a punch that breaks a neck, kicks another guy in the gut—hard enough to damage something soft inside him, if the way he's writhing and not getting up again is anything to go by.

Someone shouts: "Rogers," and he turns and brings up his shield just—catches a bayonet on the downswing, and he pulls one of the knives from his harness and stabs up and under the shield, aiming for the belly—but there's a crack and he feels the heat of a bullet passing close enough to kiss and the guy's head jerks back in a spray of blood and bone fragments. He drops; Steve turns. Bucky's popped his head up over the edge of their knocked together barricade, is sighting down his rifle with a face like steel, jaw tight like he's fucking furious.

There's a lull for half a second—there’s still two more squads of Hydra mooks right there but they
seem to be stalled for a heartbeat, engine not turning over, which—okay, ten of their own were just put down in about a six second window, and now Steve's standing out in plain sight in his ridiculous walking American flag suit, so yeah, it might be a little hard to process.

And then Dernier steps out too, pulling the pin on his last grenade and casually lobbing it at the closer of the two squads, and Steve turns and roars, "Move!" at Team Two, but it turns out they didn't need telling—they’re moving, using the distraction to dart out from cover and into the corridor where Morita is waiting, laying down cover fire. And then—

Steve ducks behind his shield, pulls Frenchie down with him, and there must have been some of those energy weapons in that squad because the explosion is a lot bigger than just a grenade, big enough to knock him on his ass even from the other end of the chamber and behind a layer of vibranium. They scramble back, claw up to their feet, and then Dugan's there hauling Frenchie up and they throw themselves down the corridor and back to their infiltration point, Steve and his shield in the rear. A squad of Krauts follows, and Steve deflects a couple bullets, but then—

Bigger explosion, from the chamber they've come from, big enough the world shakes and chunks of concrete and dust fall from the ceiling. "What the Hell was that?" Morita yells—they’re all running, breathless, punch drunk and deaf from things going boom—

"Those crates we were hiding behind," Gabe hollers. "It’s why they couldn't shoot through 'em, take us out. Full of energy cells for those guns of theirs."

"Salauds fous," Dernier says again, emphatically.

"They wouldn’t want to risk blowing up half the mountain. Seemed a good bet," Monty says.

"Wouldn't want to blow up half the mountain," Dugan crows, and then laughs like the crazed asshole that he is.

"Move, move," Steve yells. His ears hurt like someone’s put an icepick in 'em and his skin feels hot and tight. Enough Goddamn explosions. Well, one more. "So help me God, I'll pick you up and carry you."

And then:

They're out and running, down the mountain, down through forest, crashing and bulling straight through the undergrowth, any stealth abandoned for speed. Steve's got the rear again, and when they fall—Monty, then Morita, made graceless by exhaustion and speed and rough terrain—he catches them up by the belt and throws them back on their feet without slowing, and when bullets come from their left he puts his shield and his body there—another two squads of Hydra goons closing in, must have popped out of another concealed entry to cut them off—they can't even slow down to return fire, not yet, not even Dernier knows what the safe distance is on this thing—

There's a boom, and it's deep and visceral and subterranean, nigh well fucking chthonic, like Steve doesn't so much hear it with his ears as feel it vibrating in his teeth and pelvic bowl. He's prepared for the top of the mountain to go flying in a rain of fire and falling rock, but what happens is less Fourth of July fireworks and more slow and inevitable and deceptively gentle, like the whole mountain just jumps and then slumps an inch or so, an old man after a long day. And then—

The collapse happens in patches at first, like the mountainside is breaking out in a rash, and then those patches spread and the whole damn side of the mountain is sagging in on itself, layers of tunnels and mine shafts and labs and barracks and storerooms and only God knows what else—Steve only saw maybe a fifth of the base on his flying visit—all of it giving way and crashing in on
itself, stone and rock and concrete and masonry giving up under the terrible weight of the Earth.

Trees crash down. The east side of the mountain peak gives way, and rocks the size of tenement buildings roll down. The rumble and shudder of stone falling goes on and on, like a Goddamn earthquake, and they’re all in a half-crouch or hanging onto each other to stay standing, the trees swaying like saplings in a summer storm.

The destruction rolls downhill toward them, finally ebbs to a stop about twenty metres away. Those squids that were flanking them—gone. Fallen into rock, like the mountain opened its maw and fucking swallowed them.

It doesn’t so much stop as slowly taper off. The ground is still trembling when Bucky uncoils from his half-crouch, looks at Steve and at Frenchie with wild eyes, asks: "What the Hell?"

“Well, that worked,” Steve says. He feels like he's yelling, but they’re all half-deaf.

"What the living Christ did you mad bastards do down there?” Dugan asks.

“There was some old TNT,” Steve says. “Bottom of one of the shafts. This must've been a mine, not long ago. And a huge machine, right down the bottom of another shaft. Lots of blue glowing bits. We figured it would probably go boom. Frenchie rigged up a couple bombs with some of those timers Stark gave us.” Steve surveys the damage, rubs at his forehead.

"Je suis un artiste,” Dernier says cheerfully.

"Vous êtes un fou,” Gabe tells him, slugging him in the shoulder.

“Any rate, I don't think Hydra or the SSR will be salvaging much of anything from that, so tell me you guys found something useable,” Steve says, slinging the shield over his shoulder to hook onto the harness.

Team Two look amongst themselves. They're all looking—uneasy, no one quite managing eye contact. Bucky's staring into the pit that was a Hydra base ten minutes ago, still with that ugly set to his jaw.

"There was no manufacture taking place, that we could find," Monty says. "We did find labs with experiments ongoing, and Jones captured what he could on camera." Gabe hefts his pack and pats it, confirming the camera is still on board.

That was clear and concise and also evasive. Clearly there's a story here. Clearly no one wants to tell the story right now. Steve nods slowly, looks everyone over. "Okay to keep moving? Let's get off this mountain before it gives way out from under us."

******

It's a two day hike overland from the base of the mountain to the rendezvous point. Steve activates the one-way burst-transmitter Stark gave him—he’s kept it in a roll of socks in his pack this time so it doesn’t suffer the same fate as the last one—so their contact will be there to meet them. There’s still an hour of daylight and they use it, even though the fellas are all close to crazed with exhaustion and adrenaline-crash, bruised and battered. But they don't know how many have survived the base collapse, if there's maybe Krauts coming after them, so they use the daylight. They march.
Come nightfall they stop—Steve could press on, his eyes pick up the finest traces of light, but the others are stumbling in the near-dark and it would be moronic to level a Hydra base with only minor injuries and then have someone break a fucking ankle in a rabbit hole walking home. Set up their bleak little cold camp—they still can't risk a fire—and eat cold rations and set up bivouacs and blankets and slap field dressings over their array of cuts and grazes and negotiate the watch.

Steve insists on taking first watch: the guys are all dead on their feet, and he's had about two hours of sleep in the last seventy-two—even hopped up on sorcery it's starting to hurt—but he's got a few more hours in the tank.

When the other Commandos are down and snoring, blanket-puddle huddled against the cold, Falsworth comes to him, stands at his side in the dark, gazes out into the black and the wilderness, smokes a cigarette with slow and contemplative drags. Steve had figured it would be Monty to come to him: solid head on his shoulders, older, career soldier, officer. Not part of the 107th, enough of a distance for him to be brutally honest.

"It was ugly," he says. "What we found in the labs. You'll see the photographs, but…"

He trails off, lights another cigarette. Steve keeps his trap shut and keeps watch. Monty says, "They must have been running tests—perhaps for a new weapon? Some of the test subjects were animals, pigs and the like, but they were testing on humans too. On people," and he shifts in place, and Steve can hear the enamel creak as he grinds his teeth together for a moment before speaking again. "There was a cold-store room, where they were stacking up the corpses for disposal. Must have been thirty bodies in there—men and women, naked. Ugly, ugly deaths."

Steve can picture it. He's never going to forget the isolation ward where he found Bucky: the metal exam tables with restraints, the drains set in the floor, the soaked-in stink of piss and chemicals and blood and cauterised flesh and fear. Christ Almighty, no wonder Bucky's walking around looking like he's got a belt set in his teeth, just waiting for someone to dig a bullet outta him.

Steve takes a deep breath. "You did well," he says. "You all did." He's got no idea if that's true—there’s been no time to debrief, and they’re still balls-deep in occupied territory. But Hell: they all made it out alive, so they've gotta done something right. He clears his throat. "Report on Sergeant Barnes," he says. The words taste like bile in his mouth; he's a traitor and a worm, but he needs this from unbiased eyes.

Falsworth lets a long breath out through his nose, flicks his cigarette. He's holding it cupped, keeping the ember hidden in the black of the night. "He was solid. Never faltered. He also killed every scientist we found in there. No attempt to interrogate, or to get their surrender; he cut them down with his knife, with their own scalpels and tools. Clean kills, very efficient."

Well. Steve takes a deep breath again. Uses Ulfadhir's lessons to check himself for tells: hands are steady, face is neutral, stance unwavering.

This is... He doesn't know what this is. They're all soldiers, not a man among them has clean hands, and he knew when he agreed to working missions like this that they'd only be getting dirtier, but—but he doesn't know how to feel about Bucky being an efficient close-range killer of non-combatants. Not that any of them were innocents, but—shit.

"Thank you, Monty," he says, and his voice is level. Falsworth nods and butts his smoke out, turns and crawls into the blanket nest. Leaves Steve with his thoughts and the watch and the silence.
Chapter 14

The contact has a truck full of crated machine parts, some very official looking paperwork, and a compartment between the cab and the rear that fits all of the Commandos if they're piled in like sardines. The smell in there is overwhelming after a day's driving, seven filthy soldiers sweating and farting in close proximity, so by the time they pile out of there on the far side of Allied lines, they're all half-crazed with the stench and the tension.

They can't see where they're going, locked in their box, and the SSR has vetted this guy but no one's incorruptible, no man is an island; they have to trust he'll get them back into Italy, hope for the best—and prepare for the worst. The first two hours of the drive is purely devoted to making contingency plans—for Hydra, for Nazis, for betrayal, for the truck breaking down or crashing. Then the talk rapidly slides downhill to girls.

They've taken a winding backroads route to avoid troop movements and official eyes, so they're back in Allied controlled territory but still miles from anywhere or anything. There's a platoon of GIs waiting to meet them—from the 34th—with a couple of trucks, some crates of supplies, a field medic setup. After over a week of cold rations and sleeping rough, this looks like the wildest luxury—proper tents and a fire, enough running water to wash, hot food and fresh eyes to keep the watch overnight.

Steve starts trying to organise the chaos—everyone out of the truck, allotted tents and supplies, seen by the medic, washed and fed—until he realises he's just getting in Bucky's way. Goes to the tent where they've got their radio set up and sends an encoded message back to SSR command, and then finds the lieutenant and gets caught up on the developments they've missed since they've been off the grid.

Not a lot has changed in nine days—millions of men moving back and forth over an imaginary drunken line across a continent means change comes slow and invisible, until it comes crushing and final. The lieutenant is just passing him some gossip about a general who may have received a telegraph from a British general with some piss-poor attitude woven into the subtext, while Steve looks attentive and gives less and less of a rat's ass with every passing minute, when Bucky comes over and presses a mess plate into his hands.

Chipped beef on toast and a mug of black coffee: Steve makes a sex noise. God, his standards have fallen.

"I'll let you get a hot meal on board, Captain," the lieutenant says, and gives him a salute. Steve manages to return it without dropping the food—he's got used to the Commandos, calling him Rogers or Cap or Hey, boss, so his salute's got some rust on the edges. As soon as the lieutenant has turned away Steve shovels some beef in his mouth and makes another sex noise, muffled this time. Bucky is smirking.

"Thank you," Steve says, as soon as his mouth is clear. Bucky looks good: there's some colour back in his face and he's clearly freshly scrubbed, his hair still wet from the river. "You eaten yet?" Steve asks, because part of him still wants Bucky wrapped in a blanket and safe from the world, but he'll settle for clean and uninjured and fed.

"Yes, Mom," Bucky says, giving him side-eye, which is fucking rich considering how much he used to shove food at Steve when he was little and sickly. Then Bucky's side-eye gets a little more pointed. "Can I make a suggestion, sir?"
Jesus, not sir again—but Buck’s got a quirk at the edge of his mouth. This is a set up, and it’s one
Steve’s prepared to walk straight into if it means keeping that razor-thin edge of a smile on Bucky’s
face. He shovels more food into his mouth and rolls his fork, continue.

"Can I suggest that your next tactical manoeuvre is down to the river? I think we'll all find our
morale improved if you put your soap ration to use."

Steve nods as if he's taking this suggestion very seriously, waits until his mouth is clear again, and
then says in the same polite tone of inquiry that Bucky's using, "You're an asshole, Barnes."

Bucky grins, looks away as his shoulders shake with silent laughter. Steve inhales more chipped beef
and studies him. He's still paler than Steve would like, still skinnier than Steve would like. He's still
efficiently killed a dozen unarmed non-combatants four Goddamn days ago. He's not okay, but then

But then in this war, who the fuck is.

"Buck," Steve says. Waits until Bucky is looking at him again. "You know—I just… Thank you,
okay? You could've gone home, or gone to any other unit, and instead you're here, in the Goddamn
thick of it, watching my back. So thank you, and…” Christ on a cracker. He can lie like a politician
and project charisma like a movie star but this honesty thing is hard fucking work. "You gotta know
I'm watching your six too, right? It goes both ways. So if you need... help, or time to lick your
wounds, or anything. I'm here."

Bucky watches him, lets him flail his way to the end, his pale eyes studious and calm. Then he flips
up one corner of his mouth in a brittle half-smile and says, "Sure thing, Rogers. Hey, I've got some
last details on the supplies to square away, I'll catch you later," and heads back towards the trucks,
and Steve has the mad urge to throw a wedge of toast at his retreating back, because—Goddamn,
would it kill him to—but then, Steve was always too proud to ask for help when he was bleeding out
too. Never stopped Bucky from helping just the same. Time to return the favour.

Bucky calls back over his shoulder, "Make sure you eat all that, Cap, I ain't carrying you if you
faint," and Steve chokes on laughter and frustration because do you really gotta get the last word
every time, pal, and also Steve hasn't fainted mid stride in literally years, for pity’s sake.

“As you were then, Sergeant Asshole,” Steve calls after him, saluting him with his toast, and then
catches a couple of the privates from the 34th looking mortified at him, blushes and jams the toast in
his mouth before he can disgrace himself any more.

He returns the plate to the mess for cleanup, grabs a bar of soap and towel and less disgusting
uniform from the supplies they’ve been allocated and heads down to the river. Morita and Dugan are
still here—they've all been bathing, eating and seeing the medic on rotation per Bucky's grand
design.

Once upon a time it would have been awkward, bathing with other fellas—naked skin was always a
charged thing, either sick-unto-dying or the purposeful unveiling that happens during sex. Then he'd
signed on to be a science experiment, and now—well, at one point a technician literally measured his
dick. He strips off and scrubs down, ducks his head under the surface of the water until the smut and
grime shifts from his hair.

"How are you not freezing your sack off?" Dugan asks from the riverbank. They're both towelling
off, dressing. The sun's gone down, a line of dark orange against the tree line, and the cook fire and
half-dozen lamps dotted around their camp shine through the trees like golden stars.
"I run hot," Steve says, stilted. He didn’t notice the night creeping in—his eyes make do with any amount of light—and he’s ended up the last guy standing around naked. It’s his lab rat days all over again. He slops up out of the water and starts towelling off, brisk and rough.

"Bet you used to tell all the chorus girls that," Dugan says, grinning, and Steve sucks in a breath, stares at the tree line, flails around in his head for—anything, what do you even say to that—

"Shit, Dum Dum, is that your idea of a line? I run hot? Think we’ve solved the mystery why none of those girlfriends stuck around for a second helping," Morita says, and Steve breathes out, hauls up his undershorts and trousers.

He can do shit-talk, the shared language of insults—makes up a good three-fourths of him and Bucky, with the other fourth composed of shared pain, yelling about the Dodgers, and scalding hot sex. But Bucky knew him when he was little and shrimpy, knows better than to give him shit about his track record with girls—so every time it comes up he flounders like a teenaged virgin.

Popular rumour has him fucking his way through the USO chorus line. Popular rumour is a Goddamn trash fire.

They squabble their way back through the trees to camp. Cooking smells are coming from the cook fire and the mess tent again and Steve's mouth floods. He's never eaten as much as he has to in his Cap-shape—the SSR brains attribute it to his enhanced metabolism, and he figures they're mostly right. Sorcery, not chemistry, but near enough for government work.

Any rate: it's a pain in his ass—for the last week and some he's been sucking down six or seven tubes a day of this disgusting food solution they cooked up for him, all fats and sugars and proteins, because the basic rations troops can carry in the field won't keep his souped-up miracle body going. Hot food is a gift from God and he's never going to complain about Army food again. Well, you know, not for the next few hours.

He drops off soap and towel and dirty uniform and joins the queue in the mess tent to get his second dinner. Takes his plate—the chipped beef has been reincarnated, now with added beans for extra gas—over to where the other Commandos are sitting next to the fire. Hesitates—because he's a captain and there're too many eyes here for him to get away with sitting on the ground at Bucky's feet like a dog.

One of the privates from the 34th spots him and leaps up to give him his seat on a log—and Steve finds himself sitting with them, learning their names and where they've all come from. It ain't what he wanted—he wanted to sit on the ground at Bucky's feet, like a dog—but Captain America is bigger than one guy's wants, and he can stand to be Captain America for a few hours more.

******

When Bucky comes into their tent that night, smelling of bathtub whiskey and cigarettes, Steve is sitting knelt up on his bedroll in his skivvies. He's in his little shape, all bones and giving his best doe eyes, and the neckline of his Cap-sized undershirt has slipped down to give a glimpse of one pink nipple. He's got a pot of Vaseline sitting on the bed next to him, in case his meaning wasn't blatant enough.

Bucky looks at him for a long time, his pupils spilling wide like pools of ink. Turns and clasps the
buttons of the tent flap firmly closed, and then stalks slow and liquid over to the bed and leans in to breathe in Steve's ear.

“You're going to have to be real quiet, Stevie.”

Steve gives him a half-smile. “Maybe you oughta put something in my mouth so I can't holler.”

He can hear Bucky's rapid flutter of breath at that. Buck leans back, enough so he can look Steve square in the eye as he reaches down and palms his cock through his pants. Steve can see it starting to harden and tent against the fabric, and he squirms a little in place. “You want something in your mouth, doll?” Bucky drawls, smile crooked and eyes hooded, a cat stalking prey. Steve is shaking as he nods, yes.

Bucky leans in, peels Steve's undershirt and shorts off—it’s slow, easy, mouth following hands to bite and kiss at Steve’s skin as he goes—collarbones, a lazy arch under his navel, down both thighs. Leaves Steve kneeling on the bed naked as a jaybird and then drops his fly just enough to get his cock out, and it's hard and proud and blushing dark and Steve sighs and squirms to grind down a little—one of his heels is pressed against his perineum, enough to give some pressure, take the edge off.

He grabs for Bucky's hips and leans in to mouth at his dick, greedy for it, and Bucky catches his hands and hauls them away, meshes their fingers together, holds 'em up either side of Steve’s head like he's surrendering. Rolls his hips forward, tip of his cock pressing to Steve’s lower lip, and Steve whines soft and takes his cock into his mouth.

He’s—he wants this, would hate this if it were anyone else—giving up everything, all control, the depth and the pace but this—he wants this, the salty human taste of Bucky rolling over his tongue like penny candy. He could take his hands back, or turn his face away, or get up off the bed and walk away, and he won’t. There’s no one else he’d trust with this—letting go of the steering wheel and letting his hands relax, mouth relax, falling into it like a warm bath.

Bucky fucks his mouth, real slow and lazy, long pulsing rolls of his hips, shallow enough Steve can breathe and the head of Bucky's dick's constantly rubbing against the flat of Steve's tongue, 'til his mouth is full of the salty-sweet of his pre-come. It's very quiet for the first few minutes, just the wet sounds of Steve's mouth working and the harsh controlled metronome of their breathing, and then Steve starts to give him a gentle suck every time his hips roll back and Bucky gives a little shuddering gasp and husks out, “Fuck, darlin’,” and then a few minutes—a few sucks—a few thrusts later he says, “Oh Christ, doll. Your mouth oughta be illegal. What you do to me, Lord.”

And the dam’s broken and he's off, mouth running a steady stream of adoring filth punctuated with gasps, and Steve grinds down on his heel and hums back around Bucky's cock. He's got spit down his chin, hands held up in a vice-tight grip, and he feels like a fucking holy icon.

And then the hip-rolls speed up—never too hard, he's so careful, and maybe someone's gotta be—and Bucky's saying, “Ahh, fuck, Stevie. You're killing me, darlin’—look at me,” and Steve's not sure when he let his eyes fall closed, devoted all of his attention to being a warm wet place for Bucky to fuck, but he pries his eyes open now and looks.

Bucky's staring down at him, and his eyes are blazing, pitch black with the thinnest rim of steel grey, and Steve starts to shake again but he can't look away.

“I'm gonna come, Stevie, I—oh sweet Christ—dealer’s choice, where do you want it—oh fuck,” as Steve doubles down, sucks harder, presses in like he's starving and Bucky's cock is ambrosia. His slow metronome rhythm stutters and his dick swells and pulses and he's spilling over Steve's tongue,
bitter and salty, biting down on his lower lip to strangle a moan.

Steve swallows and swallows, drinks in every pulse of him until Bucky rolls his hips back one last time. He pulls Steve's hands up and kisses each palm, drops to his knees and cups Steve's face in his hands and kisses him on the mouth. It's languid and salty with their sweat and come, mouths open and tongues pressing back and forth, and Steve's dizzy with sweetness and wanting and being wanted. He's so heated up he could catch fire.

Steve whimpers into the kiss—whimpers like a kicked dog, he's too heated up to stand on pride—and Bucky sits back, breathes, “It's okay, Stevie, I’ve got you.” Unbuttons his shirt—brisk, no teasing now—and throws shirt and undershirt to one side. He’s all lithe muscle, the dappling of tiny scars, sweat dewing on his sternum, dog tags shifting and clinking soft as he crawls forward onto the bedroll. Lies on his back with his knees up, grabs the jar of slick, and pats himself on the chest, centre of his collarbones. “C’mere.”

Steve kneels next to him, puts a hand where Bucky was patting, but: “No,” Bucky says, grabs him by the hips and hauls. “Up here, doll. Want all of you where I can reach you,” and now Steve's sitting straddling Bucky's chest, toes digging into the blanket under Bucky’s arms and knees right up over his shoulders. Bucky chocks a rolled towel behind his head and slicks up the fingers of his right hand and looks smug as a cat bathing in canary feathers.

“Perfect. God, you don't even know how good you look right now,” he growls, and then he's grabbing Steve's hips and pulling him forward, licking at the head of his cock, and his slippery right hand curls around him to press slick fingertips against his back door.

“Oh, Christ,” Steve gasps, throwing his head back, hands curling into claws in the blanket underneath them. Bucky breaks off from mouthing his dick, grins.

“Close, but no, still Bucky,” he answers, and then he's crooking one long finger up inside Steve's ass and Steve can feel his trigger callus rubbing against his ring and he has to clap his hands over his mouth to keep from yowling.

He’d put a silencing veil around the inside of the tent before Bucky came in—he’s horny, not stupid—but there’s no way he can explain that so he has to try and keep a lid on it regardless. Not easy when Bucky’s found his sweet spot unerringly, is smoothing his fingertip over it again and again real gentle, while his mouth keeps kitten-licking at the head of Steve’s cock. God Almighty, it’s so good, he’s so—

He's slow and deliberate as an ice age coming on, mouthing and licking and sucking just lightly at the very end of Steve's cock, pressing his fingers in long and deep and slow—stoking the fires in his belly into lazy coils of light and heat, ripping higher and higher—until Steve's rocking back and forth like a marionette on strings, rolling his hips forward into wet heat, back into that electric pressure and weight that’s pulling him apart from the inside.

He’s shaking like a leaf, his cock drooling a steady stream of pre-come because he's been on the edge of a terrible precipice for what feels like a century, both hands hard over his mouth to keep quiet. The snakes of fire are arcing right up his spine like liquid lightning, crackling and writhing and setting his Goddamn blood to flame, and they're writhing in his chest now like he's been flayed, so good it hurts: it’s the moment before he comes, before he releases some huge fuck-off spell, all heat and tension coiling up until he could shatter like china if someone touched him wrong.

And then Bucky's spare hand snakes up, grabs his right nipple and rolls it, and Steve breaks and sobs, “Mother of God, Buck, come on.”
“That's it,” Bucky purrs, humming the words into the crown of Steve’s dick. “That's it, doll. Music to my ears, when I got you saying nothin’ but nonsense and prayers and my name.” He pinches and tweaks, smooths his hand up to rest at Steve's throat. “What do you need, Stevie?”

“Sweetheart, please. Please.” It's like trying to talk in your sleep, coming out strangled, and there's a lick of fire running up from his chest to the base of his throat now. He's running with sweat. Grabs Bucky's hand where it's on his throat and presses in, stokes the flame.

“You're so good, darlin’, you’re aces, I swear. Tell me what you need and I'll do it, can't say no to a face like yours—”

“Fuck me, Barnes, put it in me already, Christ,” Steve growls, and the fire blazes and he has to throw his head back, it's like lightning licking right up to the base of his skull. “So help me God, don't make me tell you twice.” The head rush hits him and he's dizzy, half-blind with it, hot like he’s lit up like a stop light, but Bucky's shaking with silent laughter, pulling his fingers out of Steve's ass and grabbing him by the hips to push him backwards, back down his torso, until he can feel the tip of Bucky's cock nudging against his tailbone, wet and hard.

“I've got you,” Bucky pants, and they're both too Goddamn loud now, the veil is their only saving grace, and Steve can't even bring himself to care because yes, fuck yes, that's what he needs right now, more than air and light. Bucky's reaching around him to rub slick on his dick as Steve kneels up, shifts back, and then they're lining up like old hands and Steve sinks down and Bucky's cock splits him open, open, open, and it's sweetness and heat and fullness and completion.

Steve's mouth has lolled open. He's breathing like he's run a foot race, sweat a cool line down his spine. “Oh, sweetheart,” he says, senseless, and there's a straining note in his voice like he's dying, but—

“Yeah,” Bucky says, and that same note's in his voice so it must be going around. His hands are biting bruise-hard into Steve's hips. It's good, grounding, real. Those bruises belong to him.

The long series of explosions, all the running and shouting and keeping watch and flying bullets, all the war in his head has gone silent and still as the grave. Steve may not own himself anymore, but he’s got this. He wants to tell Bucky, but all that comes out is broken, stricken: “God. Oh God, Buck.”

“Yeah, doll,” Bucky says, and rolls his hips, gentle, and it sends sparks skittering up Steve's spine, and he makes a choked off noise and grinds his hips to chase those sparks, and that's such a good idea he does it again, easy little circles so Bucky's dick is nudging against his sweet spot with every pass.

“That's it, love,” Bucky says, rasps, and he's lying still as anything, just his hands rubbing slow and lazy up and down Steve's ribs and flanks. “God, you look fucking beautiful up there. That's it, that's good, you just take what you need—” and then his right hand comes over, grabs Steve's cock and rubs, pad of his thumb slippery over the slick of pre-come at the head. Steve moans, wordless, breathless.

And then as he fucks down, Bucky fucks up into him, one quick hard roll of his hips, and it shocks a yelp out of Steve, fire lancing up through him. He bites his lip to keep from keening, rolls his hips down harder to meet Bucky thrusting up and in and oh, this—they both know this rhythm, they both know this dance, hips and breath and heartbeats rolling into alignment.

Bucky fists his dick, wrings it base to tip, thumbs at the tip for more slick, slides back down. His cock rubs against every damn nerve ending Steve's got, stokes the fires in his belly higher and
higher, until the whole crooked line of his spine and every vein and vessel in his body is a writhing serpent of light and heat and pleasure-pain-ecstasy. He's making a long high wordless animal cry, even past the weight of his teeth in his lip. He’s—fuck, he’s gonna—

Reaches down and presses one hand flat to the bedroll, next to Bucky’s head—ground the power, send it down, give it somewhere to go, oh Christ please—

“Come on,” Bucky pants. “Need your sugar, Stevie,” and Steve arches, head back and eyes open, blind, and the edge of the precipice is right there—

—and then gone, flying, falling, tearing open and falling apart and striping his spunk up Bucky's chest. His ribs are flailed open—he’s spilling out in ribbons of light—his voice is fire, fire tearing out of his lungs and throat, and he can hear himself but the noises he's making aren't human—

—and then the storm of light and heat has passed through him and he's down, forehead to Bucky’s collarbone, shaking and twitching and gasping, and Bucky's hands are in his hair and he's dropping kisses on Steve's head, and past the vast ringing of the music in his ears he hears Bucky, breathless, urgent, “Stevie, love you, love you—”

And then Bucky's pulling out and drags Steve over, onto the bedroll on his side, and Steve’s nose is about a half-inch from where his hand was pressed: it’s a scorched black perfect print of his hand, down to the folds and lines of his skin. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, if he hadn't—hadn't grounded himself to the earth like a faulty appliance—would he have hurt Bucky? Burnt him like—

—and then the press of one callused thumb to his asshole, and Steve mewls and closes his eyes and rocks back—Buck curling over him and pushing his dick back inside, fucking into him quick and hard. Steve gasps, can't not, because it hurts, it's too much, but it's good, Christ it's so good, and he grabs one of Bucky's hand and meshes their fingers together, bites at Bucky's fingers and sobbs out little animal noises as Bucky fucks him, good and hard and deep and fast, until his rhythm stutters and stalls and then he moans, long and broken, against the back of Steve's neck.

Steve feels him stiffen, swell, pulse as deep inside as a body can get. He presses kisses to Bucky's calluses, shakes his way through the aftershocks, smiles.

*******

Return to North Italy, and to the base of operations for the 107th, the 34th, and for the Commandos for at least the next couple weeks. They debrief with Peggy and Phillips and Stark and the other intel analysts, show and tell with the photos from the labs—as fucking awful as promised, blood-streaked operating tables and stacked up rigid corpses with hideous wounds, look like they'd somehow burned alive from the gut out.

Bucky sits through it all, pale but steady, quietly chiming in with relevant details, lets Monty do most of the talking for Team Two. Steve draws the machine they'd found on the lowest level, diagraming it out over three sheets of paper, and Stark takes the drawings and starts to chew his moustache.

“What are you thinking over there?” Phillips asks.

“Well, I have six—no, that would be—seven theories. Leave it with me,” Stark says, and takes the drawing and his assistants off outta there without further ado.
It's a total of five hours, three in the meeting and another two filling out the after-action paperwork, even with the other Commandos helping with all the forms—Steve's not convinced their help is all that helpful, seeing how much time they're spending drawing on each other's pages and working increasingly tricky multi-lingual puns into the reports, but at least it ain't boring.

And then they file back out of the SSR's tent complex and into the sunshine, with seven days and sixteen hours before their next mission, three more hours of sunlight in the day, and a bottle of gin from Howard Stark.

The gin is gone by sundown, but Dernier has acquired a bottle of gut rot claiming to be bourbon which takes them into the night. There's a long and dirty game of poker, with everyone's chocolate and cigarette rations as the stakes, and then as that winds up and the bourbon is emptied somehow Gabe pulls a bottle of wine out of somewhere and Steve decides it's time to take his officer's stripes and be strategically elsewhere.

He notices as he walks back to his tent that the booze doesn't seem to have even touched him—he’s always been a lightweight, but he's been steadily putting it away all evening and he's not even giddy.

The next morning suggests the same hypothesis: he's fresh as an enormous blond daisy, no hangover whatsoever. The others do not escape so lucky.

The week is spent in mission prep—the next target is a factory in Belgium, and they're thinking it'll be a tough nut to crack—and in training, reviewing intelligence, reading letters from home, walking to and from the nearest village to flirt with the local girls and buy more booze, drinking the booze, gathering supplies and checking and rechecking their equipment, just plain catching up on hot food and sleep.

Jones teaches them all some German, with mixed results. Bucky spends most of an afternoon on the range with Steve, trying to lift Steve’s marksmanship beyond point-and-pray, with mixed results. Dugan flirts at one of the nurses at the med tent, with no results. Poker is played, at length, and rummy, and euchre, with fortunes in chocolate and tobacco changing hands. Steve tracks down everyone and anyone with unarmed combat training and gets them to teach him—he might only ever be a fair to middling shot, but he can run really fast and hit really hard and he's got no problem playing to his strengths.

He’s made it this far on his training from Ulfadhir, but everything he learned there was intended for his real body, his little body, and he knows he can be better, that he’s only touched the very edges of what his super soldier shape can do.

At nights he waits until the camp has fallen quiet, sweats and grits his teeth until he manages the shape-change into his smaller body, puts a seeming of himself as Cap in his bed and throws a veil over himself and slips out, into the darkness. He’d tucked his sorcery away in his back pocket like a forgotten ticket stub when he became Captain America, was so set on being what the Army needed—their superhuman, their perfect soldier—that he forgot about every other thing that made him up: the sorcerer, the artist, the fairy. He’s been blindfolded for eight months, and it’s time to take the blindfold off.

He practices borrowing, learns how to fly as owl and run as fox and rabbit. Practices his hexes against various weapons—rifles jam, machine guns warp and misfire—he hasn't tried hexing one of Hydra’s energy rifles, they don't have a spare he can practice on, but he's got a feeling the results will be spectacular. He crafts seemings and learns their songs so he can call them up quickly: he can seem to be Captain America, can seem to be a Hydra Sturmmann, a scientist in a white coat, a Nazi Leutnant. Practices veil-walking up to the soldiers standing watch in the small hours of the night, standing close enough to feel the warmth from their bodies, dizzy with the knowledge of how easy it
would be to kill them like this.

Now he understands the nature of the weapon Ulfadhir’s given him, he’s gonna hone it ‘til it shines clean as surgical steel.

Slips back into his tent and into his bed three or four hours before sunup. It’s not a whole lot of sleep, but as soon as he jumps back into his Cap shape he feels good again—like he’s slept twelve hours. It’s—sometimes he wonders. Something can’t come from nothing. Magic, this body, it all has a cost—and if he can’t see the cost yet it’s probably coming outta somewhere he can’t afford. But then—fuck it. He’s been asleep half his life up ‘til now.

On their last full day at camp, Peggy joins him in the SSR tent where he’s been going over their intel about the factory. Pulls up a camp stool next to his desk and sits, her legs primly crossed as she leans in and centres the report about the movement of trucks to and from the factory. “Do you see the pattern?”

“There's a rise and fall,” Steve says. “Trucks going in, and trucks going out—hauling product away? They roughly correlate—so they're using raw material to build whatever they're making. But the overall numbers rise and fall too—like there's surges in productivity and then it drops off again.”

“Exactly so,” Peggy says, and pulls another sheet of paper from the dossier under her arm. “Now, this—do you see the dates?”

It's a list of reported actions within a hundred mile radius of the Belgian factory. Peggy has helpfully starred the battles where Hydra are known or rumoured to have been involved. Steve looks at the dates, at the casualty counts and estimated numbers of prisoners taken. Another pattern.

“They're using POW labour at the factory,” he says, something curdling low and tight in his belly. “The production surges are happening immediately or shortly after the battles where prisoners are being taken.”

“The evidence suggests it,” Peggy agrees. “Like at Kreischberg.” Her dark eyes are clear and bright and fierce. She sits back, kicks her crossed leg a little. “Something else to factor into your strategy.”

“Thank you,” he says, and—quick flick south and then back up again—she's not wearing stockings, silk is almost impossible to come by anymore, but she's gone to the trouble of drawing a razor-straight seam line down the back of her calf to give the illusion.

He thinks of the pair of stockings from Ulfadhir stashed in the trunk of his belongings, and then he can feel his face starting to light up red like a fucking idiot so—quick, course correct: “I appreciate your help. Where did you learn to see patterns like that?” People love to talk about themselves, people love to be complimented, people will excuse almost any strange lapse if you make it about them—Ulfadhir taught him more than magic and knife work.

But Peggy's looking amused—there's a small crooked quirk around her mouth and something hooded in her gaze. She is a fucking spy, of course she spotted—but his bacon is saved just the same: she thinks he was staring at her legs. His idiotic blush is good for something after all.

“I was a code breaker for the War Office, before I was recruited for fieldwork,” she says, and then spins out the sanitised story of a failed engagement and her brother Michael and a letter of offer from the SOE. He listens and nods and watches her red nails flash as she gestures, sketching out a diamond band, an envelope. She's a bombshell, and at least twice as smart as he'll ever be, and he ain’t too clear why she's wasting time talking to him, but—but he could listen to that accent all day.
“A woman—an agent with a right hook like yours would be wasted at a desk,” he says as she wraps up, is rewarded with a flashing smile.

“And yet you haven't asked me about extra combat training,” she says. “You've brawled with half the men in this camp, but you didn't think to ask me?”

Christ, she's magnificent. “I figured your dance card was kind of full, but when you've got time to show me some tricks, I'm all yours,” he says, and—fuck. If this was—if he were anyone else, this would be flirting. This sure looks like flirting, but—but then. But then the silence has stretched for a half-second too long, and she's smiling but also studying him, wondering. “I'm sorry, Peggy,” he says.

She cocks her head a little to the side. “About my failed marriage? My full dance card?”

“About Michael,” he says, and she goes white. “Did he—was it the war?”

Her eyes are darting, restless as sparrows. She looks back to him at last, milk pale, her mouth pinched. “I don't remember telling that part,” she says, crisp. “Who shall I thank for sharing all the sordid details?”

“No, I just—” Jesus Christ. This is why he needs supervision, trying to talk to dames—real dames, not Ulfadhir in a dress. “I'm an orphan, is all,” he says. “I was nineteen when my Mam died. I know... Well, what that kinda grief looks like, even when it's gussied up.”

Her face softens again, slow, like a spring thaw. She reaches over, touches his hand where it's resting on the paperwork. “Oh, Captain Rogers. Yes, the war. He was killed at Dunkirk. I joined the SOE on the strength of it.” She studies his face for a long moment, then asks, “Have you no family left, then?”

“Closest thing I've got now is Bucky,” he says, and—and between her hand on his and the talk of dead beloveds his guard must be down, because suddenly she's studying his face real close like she's reading an interesting book, and—and he's got a stupid look on, all soft and pouty—for fuck's sakes, she's a spy, Rogers, get your shit together.

“I see,” she says softly. “How long have you been lovers?”

Fuck—

Steve goes still, goes to ice, pulls every flailing piece of himself in and down and shoves until he's cool and calm and diamond bright. If she's studying him for tells, he's giving her nothing. He feels like every cord of muscle and sinew in him has gone to razor wire, but he forces his face into his best baffled look.

Remembers practicing facial expressions in the bathroom mirror for Ulfadhir when he was twelve—it seemed so fucking stupid at the time, but it feels like he's done nothing but lie since he first scrawled his name on the non-disclosure agreements at Stark’s Expo.

“That's a Hell of a thing to ask,” he says, dropping a little extra Brooklyn into his vowels.

“Was I wrong?” she asks, nothing in her tone but curiosity. “Then we should all be so lucky, to have such a devoted friend.” She cocks her head to the side and smiles, a perfunctory curve that doesn't go anywhere near her eyes. “But I will say, I've been told more often than I care to count that I'm unfit to serve, by virtue of my gender. And I think it the rankest idiocy to judge a man's quality or caliber by the gender they prefer to bed behind closed doors.”
Steve gets up, turns away, walks over to the map strung up against the back of the tent and stares up at it, unseeing. They're alone in the SSR complex at this time in the afternoon, so it's quiet enough he can hear her heartbeat, pounding away liquid and quick. She looks cool as a cucumber but she's anxious, and suddenly the weight on him shifts, grows lighter, lifts away. He turns back to speak, but —

“At any rate,” she says, “if we drummed out every man who'd ever touched another fellow's unmentionables tomorrow, we'd lose a good third of our infantry on the spot,” and her tone's so fucking cheeky that it shocks an uncensored bark of laughter out of him before he claps a shaking hand over his mouth. She's grinning, looking smug as a well-fed shark.

“Agent Carter, I'm shocked,” he says, strangled past the mad laugh that's still trying to pour out of him.

“Then you've not been paying attention,” she answers.

He stills, breathes deep, looks at her. He can't hear her song in this body, but he can remember it clear enough to find her blindfolded on a city street. It's all bright tinkling piano and the hum of wind through tree branches and the hiss of radio broken by the patter of Morse, a strong steady heartbeat. Peggy Carter is a Hell of a woman, of a human being—he can trust her, as natural and obvious as sunrise and sunset.

“You weren't wrong,” he says.

“I didn't think I was,” she answers.

“I'd crawl over broken glass for that jerk.”

“You single-handedly invaded Austria for him,” she says, quirking her eyebrows. “As far as gestures of love go, that's quite flamboyant enough.”
Chapter 15

They cross the Channel and jump out of a plane thirty miles into Belgian airspace—it's as close as the pilot can get them without hitting radar—and cover the last forty miles to the factory on foot. Moving slow and careful, winding to avoid Nazis and major roads, it's three days and three nights on the hoof.

Steve spends the nights borrowing—fox, owl, vole—to scout ahead their route for the next day. He takes the first watch every night and weaves veils around their camp sites—he can't make them invisible, not seven soldiers, tents, equipment, weapons; it’s too big and too complex and everyone moves around, rolls over and snores and gets up to piss, so a totally opaque veil wouldn't work. Next best bet: he makes them uninteresting, dull as dishwater, so any eyes that land on them will slide on to the next thing.

They make the final approach at 0300, end of the third night and start of the fourth day. Pitch black darkness, and the guard posts are as lightly manned as they'll ever be. It's an ugly cluster of dark brick buildings, stark under bright search lights, watchtowers breaking up the tree line and blotting out patches of the clear night sky.

They've left the bulk of their gear at camp five miles back, just toting arms and ammo and basic medical supplies, which is all to the fucking good because Steve probably couldn't carry much more than the shield, even if he had to: he's shape-changed into his small self and thrown a seeming of big Cap over the top, and he's having concentrate on keeping his breath slow and even, sweat pooling at the small of his back as they crouch behind trees and brush and study the final approach.

Gabe and Bucky are both shedding rifles and packs, pulling out their favourite knives—the last stretch between them and the factory fence has eight guards, dotted through the tree line and staggered around the eastern approach to the complex. They need to be quick and smooth and near-silent, the sort of ugly efficient wet work that's never going to get blown up on the newsreels back home. Captain America can't do that sort of thing—not in his walking flag costume—but sneaky little shit Steve Rogers absolutely can.

Bucky and Gabe move out, and Steve fixes his seeming of Cap into place, throws a walking veil over himself, and slides out of the way. The seeming ripples and steadies. It's fucking weird, looking up at himself, at his Cap shape, standing there looking purposeful and pretty: it's a good seeming, if he’s gotta say so himself, breathing and blinking in a cycle. If anyone pokes it or tries to talk to it he's screwed, but they’re on a stealth approach and that shouldn’t happen, knock on wood.

He walks away under his veil, leaves Cap with the Commandos and the shield hidden behind a tree, pulls a knife from his harness and goes to work.

The first guard he finds has tucked his back to a tree to cut the wind as he works at lighting a cigarette. Even if Steve weren’t veiled this asshole wouldn't have seen him coming, and it's all he can do not to roll his eyes. His rifle is slung back over his shoulder, he's killing his night-vision staring straight at a flame—what a fucking putz.

Steve waits until he's got the cigarette lit, steps out from the tree and pokes his lighter back into his jacket pocket, and then Steve snugs in close as a lover and jams the point of his knife uphill through the divot at the base of his skull and into his brain stem.

The guy drops like a toy soldier abandoned at play, and Steve catches him enough to slow his fall—feels his veil start unravelling—eases him to the ground quiet as he can. He pulls his knife back out,
and—and the metal grates on bone and his mouth floods with spit, awful clammy cold pooling in his
gut.

This is hardly the first squid he’s killed, but this—the intimacy and unexpectedness of it—he
swallows, bites down on the inside of his cheek until he tastes blood, hauls the shreds of his veil back
together and shores it up and moves on to find the next guard.

They’ve plotted it so Gabe’s starting at the left and moving right, and Bucky’s starting at the right and
moving left, so Steve works in the middle, takes down another two guys in three minutes flat.

The urge to vomit eases back but—it’d be a lie to say he feels guilt. But maybe oughta feel guilty,
like—but then he remembers the numbers on the POW reports, that there’s British and American and
Canadian POWs on the other side of that fence being worked to fucking death, and he remembers
Ulfadhír, fingers biting into his jaw to hold him steady, how cold and thin his lips went when he
spoke: “In war, the cheaters win.”

Fuck guilt. He smears the blood from his hands onto the guard’s uniform—can’t let his grip start to
slide—and keeps moving.

The next guard he finds is standing almost against the chain link fence, facing out into the darkness.
There’s no cover for metres, good vantage in all directions, and Bucky or Gabe would have had a
Hell of a time trying to get at him before he could shout an alarm—but Steve can just walk up to him,
unseen and silent as the grave.

He angles in so he’s approaching from the guard’s right side, aiming to put his knife through his
carotid from the side: he’s a tall guy and the angle is awkward. Stops right next to him, does a slow
practice thrust to make sure he’s got the angle right, and then as he goes to make the kill—

— the guard turns his head, glancing to the left, and the knife tip slices into his neck but it’s a
glancing blow, misses everything vital—

— blood sheets out, and—“Son of a—” Steve hisses, flips his grip on the knife and jams it down
hard, into the soft skin just above the guard’s collarbone—

— and then he’s grabbing the guy’s shoulder with his left hand and swinging off the knife with his
right so he can climb him like a fucking tree, for Christ’s sake why is he so tall—left hand clamping
down hard as he can over the guard’s mouth as he sucks in a breath to shriek an alarm—

He’s biting down on Steve’s hand, pitching sideways, Steve throwing his whole weight on him, legs
around his waist like they’re swing dancing, like they’re fucking. They hit the ground in a heap of
limbs and—Christ, this is too loud—Steve grasps around in his head to find his tattered veil working
and stretches it, fast and messy, enough to smother the noise and flailing limbs.

The guard’s writhing, trying to throw him off, and Steve jams his hand harder into his mouth, pulls
the knife again with his right hand and pulls the guy’s jaw up with his left hand and—

— and slices his throat open, from just under his left ear until he hits the gristle of the trachea. Red
spurts, pulses wet into the soil, arterial and hot: he’s dead, the rest is just courtesy, keeping him quiet
until it’s all over.

Steve drops the knife and wraps his right hand over his left, covering the guy’s mouth—he’s trying to
call out, muffled past Steve’s hands and his shredded veil, trying to claw him off or throw him off—
weakening, weakening. He writhes, shoves, throws his elbows back—messy and close, Brooklyn
back alley dirty fighting—and his strength spurts bloody and red into the soil with every vicious
stupid desperate squeeze of his heart until he heaves and twitches and stills.

Steve grits his teeth and counts his breaths and waits, waits until he's sure the guard's not faking him out, until the flow of blood from his throat has dropped off from pulses to a weak trickle.

He's got to pry the guy's jaw open to get his hand out—and Christ, that fucking hurts, sweet Jesus—he’s bit down hard enough to strip skin from bone. It'll heal when he shifts over to his Cap shape, but fuck. He jams his left hand in his armpit, wipes the worst of the blood off the blade of his knife onto the guard's uniform and gets up—

Bucky's standing at the tree line, staring straight at him.

Fuck.

Quick check on his—nope. His veil is more holes than substance, and—and what does that look like from the outside? Is he hazy or fading in and out or—but no, Bucky’s staring right at him. Jesus Harold Christ.

He drops the veil—what’s left of it—and gives Bucky a nod. “Got him.”

Bucky shakes his head like he's had his bells rung, darts forward to grab Steve by the arm. Squeezes hard and stares down at his forearm, wild-eyed, and then hauls him back into the cover of the bushes at the tree line.

“Fuck’s sakes, Stevie, no,” Bucky hisses.

“You mean Captain Rogers, yes,” Steve answers. “I can do this, Buck. I won’t send anyone into danger if I’m not prepared to do the same.”

“But you—Christ, Steve, they made you into a super soldier and you’re fighting a war like a kid in your dad’s pajamas.”

Steve grits his teeth a little. Okay, so he can’t shrink the Cap suit when he changes shape, and he’s had to roll up the sleeves. It ain’t the most glamorous look, but—“Captain America is a big patriotic target, Buck, you know that. I’m sneaky, like this. They don’t see me coming.”

Bucky stares at him for a long moment, eyes darting across Steve’s face like he’s done something terrible or wonderful and Bucky’s trying to take it all in. Finally his eyes still and his jaw lolls open a little and an ugly grey-white blanches over his features. “Fuck,” he breathes, real soft.

“Buck?” Steve asks, because—Christ, he hasn’t looked this bad since Kreischberg, the isolation ward, the table.

“What the Hell—oh, fuck,” Bucky whispers, almost a moan.

“What’s wrong—” Steve starts, and then the soft music from the trees around them shifts, a new note chiming into the lilting tree song, and he whips his hand back from Bucky's grasp and claws into his head for the Cap-song—

—rips the illusion through and out so fast it feels like tearing a sinner through the eye of a needle, like he leaves chunks of it behind. It’s—it’s not much better than a poster, but it’ll do in the dark, and—and then the whisper-soft movement of boots on leaf litter, and he looks over just as Gabe slips near-silent around a tree to join them.

“Cap?” Gabe breathes, questions.
“All okay,” Steve says. “Thought I heard something, came to check it out. Barnes had the situation handled. Are we done here?”

Gabe hesitates, looks to Bucky—eyes closed and milk-pale like he’s been gut shot—and then back at Steve. If he can detect the bullshit spinning he elects not to call it out, just says: “Guards are down. We’ve got a clear window into the factory until shift change.”

“Then let’s move,” Steve says.

They head back to the other Commandos, and Steve—weaves behind some trees, veils, sends the Cap-seeming on ahead, and—on his knees in the leaf litter, gloves between his teeth to keep from screaming—change shape, stand up again as Captain America. Rolls down the sleeves of his uniform as he moves forward again, following the thunder of Buck and Gabe’s heartbeats to catch up.

He detours to grab his shield from the tree where he’s squirrelled it away, rejoins the others just as Bucky and Gabe get there, smooth as silk on a shoe shine.

Well, that was too Goddamn close—but it worked.

From there:

“It’s Captain fucking America,” one of the POWs says, and Steve catches him by the shoulder as he stumbles climbing out of the cage.

“Where are you from, son?” Steve asks, never mind that this guy’s older than he is. The other POWs from the cage are pouring out around them, snatching up weapons from the fallen Hydra guards and helping to get the other cages open and milling around like assholes—

“Yorkshire, sir,” the guy he’s holding answers, and Steve can see what’s left of his uniform jacket, grey with grease and fine metal shavings, can see the chevrons on his shoulders.

“We’re getting you back there, Corporal, so help me God. Are any of these men yours? The job’s only half done.”

And then:

“It’s done! It’s done!” from behind him—

—and even with more-than-human hearing it’s almost inaudible past the blaring alarms and gunfire, the shrieking crackle of energy rifles in close range, and Steve turns his head away from the soldiers they’ve got pinned down across the narrow brick courtyard.

The barracks is detached from the main body of the factory, and most of the squids are over there, and they’ve made a couple attempts to cross in force but they’re not responding well to being awake at 0400—there’s a lot of gunfire and pissed off German shouting but not much tactical thought outta them.

Behind him Morita’s just run up, gulping for breath.

“That’s the fire?” Steve asks brightly. His mother was a nurse, he knows from gallows humour.

“Lots of places on fire, actually,” Jim says, mouth almost to Steve’s ear so he can be heard. The POWs holding this door with Steve are loud as a howitzer at close range—they’ve got massive grudges and combat training and a bunch of guns looted from the fallen. This was always going to
be a Godawful mess. Jim’s saying, “The payloads are planted, Cap—”

“Okay,” Steve says, nods, turns to the corporal at his left. He’s snugged in behind Steve’s shield, shooting slow and deliberate, a sharpshooter rather than spray-and-pray.

“Corporal, we need to move,” Steve tells him, yells it in his ear, and he looks up, gives a half nod, cracks off one last shot—Steve sees a Sturmführer in half-uniform, half-sleepwear go down gut shot across the courtyard—and then starts bellowing orders at the men around him, pulling order out of the chaos, and Steve waves his shield and tries to direct the flow of traffic. The payloads are planted, they need to move—

And then:

They make it back to the ridge line before the first payload detonates, triggers the next and the next—Hydra are paranoid fucks, have set up the facility to self-destruct rather than be captured, so it doesn’t take much—a half-dozen small bombs in the right places—which triggers the factory’s explosive array, which triggers the next one, which—bada boom.

The noise is vast, like series of hard slaps to the face, exclamation marks written in the hand of God, and the heat washes over them in a long rippling wave, stirs the trees into furious rustling.

They straggle and stumble and limp on the four-and-some miles back to where the Commandos made their camp, hours earlier, and then stop and headcount and assess what the Hell is happening here.

They are one hundred and two men total, Commandos and POWs, with nine men lost either taking the factory or as they were withdrawing. Everyone’s able to walk, which is good because they can’t stop; most of the squids went to Hell with the factory—and good fucking riddance; report from the rear is there’s not much left, rubble and slag and a smoke stack, half-collapsed—but they’ve still got enough men on the ground here to be a solid pain in the ass.

So: headcount, lick wounds, drink water and chew on some dry rations and cobble together an ad-hoc chain of command, and then move out again.

Steve’s looking around, watching patterns starting to form in the chaos—men from the same unit or the same country finding each other and cohering into groups. There are a few corporals and sergeants dotted through the mix, but most of the POWs were privates and from the sounds of it that’s not an accident: Hydra killed the officers rather than leave anyone alive that might provide a nucleus for resistance. Their Goddamn arrogance: that only commissioned officers could lead, that the enlisted men would all be puppets without puppeteers.

Steve’s given three field promotions, all to men appointed by their peers: it’s consensus democracy in action. He’s also promoted the British corporal to sergeant, which is not even remotely legal but what the Hell.

“Sir?” the new sergeant asks—his name’s Smelt.

“I’m wearing the flag,” Steve answers. “If your superiors disagree, ask them if they want to argue with America.”

“Sir,” Sergeant Smelt agrees, with an exhausted thread of laughter in his voice.

So it’s madness but it’s coming together. Morita’s knocking up a sling for the fella with a dislocated shoulder. Bucky’s huddled with a couple of the brand new NCOs—he’s still white as a fucking ghost, but he’s getting on with the job, and—and what the Hell’s bit him, why is he—and Jones and
Monty are moving from group to group, distributing the packs and supplies they’ve humped in. Dugan is—

Dugan is at Steve’s elbow. His face is all black and white stripes of soot and dirt and sweat—he’s been keeping eyes out to the rear, towards the factory. “We need to move, Cap,” he says.

Steve nods. “Spread the word,” he says, and Dugan nods back.

It’s chaos, it’s a mess, but it’s working, and by sunrise they’re filing north and west, through forest and along back roads and over tiny farms, for the Channel and home.

******

It’s more or less a forced march to get everyone safely to the shore of the Channel, snatches of sleep in between long stretches of hauling ass, and thank Christ Hydra have been alienating Nazi command—no coordination between their forces means they’ve only gotta evade the squids—the Nazis aren’t after them, maybe don’t even know they’re here. So it takes eight days, but they get all hundred and two soldiers to the shore, where a couple of boats—they look an awful lot like local fishing trawlers, until you see all the saluting going on, or hear the English accents—are swinging in close to the coastline to pick them up.

On board they’ve got medics and medical supplies, rations and rum—there’s lot of excitement about the rum. They’re cheek by jowl, quarters tighter than a duck’s asshole to fit everyone aboard, and—and Steve hasn’t spoken to Bucky beyond reports and orders in almost nine days, hasn’t touched him for roughly a century.

He’s about ready to climb the rigging and cast himself into the sea, in a totally not-at-all dramatic fashion—he knows Buck’s furious, can tell by the set of his shoulders and his jaw, the line of his back, the solid way he’s staring at Steve’s ear when he reports in, but he’s still got zero fucking clue why Bucky’s so angry, what freaked him out so bad back at the factory.

The job’s not done. There is no time to be having big sad fairy feelings about his idiot best friend. He grits his teeth and sets his shoulders and does his fucking job.

They’ve been at sea for a day when the line of white appears in the horizon—the White Cliffs of Dover, just like in the books—and someone starts singing God Save the King, and then—well, over half of these POWs are Brits, and they’d been in there long enough to start giving up hope—and then all the Poms are singing it, bawling along in full throat, and Monty bursts into stoic British tears and joins in.

Steve claps him on the shoulder and gives Sergeant Smelt a nod and withdraws strategically to a distance where his more-than-human hearing won’t have to suffer that nonsense.

Finds Bucky, smoking at the starboard end of the trawler, alone and unoccupied for the first time in eight days.

“Buck? You got a minute?” Steve asks, easing his way along the deck like he’s approaching a feral animal he doesn’t wanna spook.

Bucky just looks at him, that ugly set back in his jaw. Takes a long draw on his cigarette and then flicks the butt over the railing, watching it disappear into the sea foam.
“Come on, Buck. What’s going on?” Steve asks. “I can’t fix what I don’t know is broke.”

Bucky gives a crazed bark of laughter, slams one hand into the metal railing and grips hard. “But you let some fucking scientist fix you, huh? Never mind you were gonna be safe and a thousand fucking miles away from the Krauts and their shells and Christing laser guns. Shit’s sake, Steve, I hadn’t even shipped out yet.”

Steve rocks back, grabs the railing too because his hands are shaking. “I—” he starts, stops.

This is—overdue and then some. Why is this just happening now—but then: “Christ, Buck. You know I would’ve done anything to get over here, start pulling my weight. I can’t even apologise, not like I mean it, cause they’da shovelled your dumb ass into an incinerator in Kreischberg if I hadn’t gone AWOL and—”

—and fuck me, but that’s an awful thing to say, and he’d suck the words out of the air if he could but he can’t. He can’t unring that bell. Bucky’s bled white.

“You—” he chokes out, and then he just makes a strangled animal noise, grabs Steve by the shoulder and gives him one hard shake and then rips his hand away like it’s burnt him.

“Fuck,” Bucky spits out, staring at his hand, and then he turns and walks away, throws himself down the stairs to below-decks and is gone, and all Steve can do is hang onto the railing and breathe for a while. His chest has gone tight as a vice—like asthma, like broken ribs—only this hurts a Hell of a lot more.

******

They return to the Army base in London in a convoy of trucks and cars, offload one hundred and two hungry, filthy and exhausted soldiers. Steve waits just long enough to see that the chaos is in hand—that people are coordinating food and medical attention and sending telegraphs and letters and none of it needs his attention—and then he goes to the SSR bunker and presents himself to Colonel Phillips.

Who gives him a long and jaundiced look, then says, “Captain Rogers, how long has it been since you slept?”

“Uhn,” Steve says, and he's still standing neatly in parade rest but he's having trouble thinking of the answer.

“I thought as much.” Phillips says. “You’re useful as teats on a boar hog like this—dismissed. Report back at 0845 for debrief.”

“Sir,” Steve says, and he’s still feeling like Bucky’s kicked his chest in, so he’s not even gonna try and argue the point. Takes the key and quickly sketched map one of the aides is giving him and goes—they’ve found him quarters in an actual boarding house off the base.

Four walls and a bed and a door that locks: it’d be perfect except for how the only person he wants to bed down with ain’t fucking talking to him, Jesus Christ—he needs a stiff drink, maybe a fist fight.

Up the stairs and out into the light of day, and he looks about for a Commando so he can tell them
they’re officially off duty but—“Captain Rogers,” someone is saying to his left, sounding very crisp and pissed off and how, how is someone else angry with him when he hasn’t even met them yet—

It’s a dame—shit, woman—nurse, her uniform all neat and white, coal black hair pinned up and back, holding a file folder cradled in her arms, and she’s almost as tall as him, and then he gets to the eyes and they’re clear and hard and grassy green. Oh.

“Close your mouth, Captain,” Ulfadhir says. “You will need more honey in there if you wish to catch flies. Also, you look like a half-wit.”

“Wasn’t expecting to meet you here,” Steve says.

“And yet how many times did I explain to you the importance of thinking flexibly, adapting swiftly, moving unpredictably? Did I waste the years I gave, teaching you the secrets, if you’ve forgotten the very core of reasoned thought? Come now, girl.”

“Please don’t call me that where people can overhear,” Steve says, stiff, eyes darting to—is anyone close enough to catch the edges of their weird fucking conversation—

“Of course,” Ulfadhir says, scoffs, eyes wide with faux sincerity. “Of course I’ve approached you in a public area to have this conversation without covering us both in a silencing veil.”

“We’re veiled?”

Her look is poisonous. “You’d know that if you weren’t blind, dumb, deaf and senseless, lumbering and bovine—”

“Okay,” Steve says, loud enough to break through the tirade. “Okay, I’m sensing that you’re unhappy with some of my life choices—so, you know, join the club. I hear there’s a newsletter.”

Ulfadhir stares at him for a long moment. Her mouth twists into an anguished line. “How could you throw it all away?” she asks at last, and there’s a note of something ragged in her voice that he’s never heard before.

“I didn’t,” Steve answers, and even though she’s told him they’re veiled he still steps closer and drops his voice, says: “I can still do workings. There’s just—there’s a few more steps involved.”

Her eyes harden, spine straightens. “Show me.”

******

The map leads them to a rooming house a few streets away from the Army base—they must be renting all their rooms to soldiers, officers, because the washing line he can see across the back alley is all uniform greens and whites. His room is on the top floor: four walls and a bed and a door that locks, a narrow half tub in the corner and hot running water.

Ulfadhir looks around regally and then drops the seeming—was it a seeming or a shape change? Steve didn’t touch her at any point, and he can’t hear the music so he honestly can’t tell one way or the other—and is himself again, tall and lean and dark hair loose, only he’s still wearing the nurse uniform.
Steve kicks his bag under the bed and sits down hard. Christ, he’s hurting and hungry and filthy like he’s got half the mud in Belgium caked up his legs, but Ulfadhir is looking even more intent and cat-like than usual—so this has gotta be important.

He pulls his boots off with two soft moans, pulls one of the disgusting food slurry tubes from his bag and rolls it between his hands until the cells split open—all the sugars and protein and fat are in different cells, can’t be mixed in advance because they’re not stable that way—as per the SSR whiz kid who designed these things. Chews the corner off and sucks some down—cold condensed sugar, with a tincture of fish oil. God have mercy.

Ulfadhir is sitting at the tiny desk, watching him with that terrible focus and seeming ready to wait until doomsday or until Steve can talk without snarling. Which—okay, let’s get this over with.

“What did you want to know?” Steve asks.

“You’re human, like this. Entirely,” Ulfadhir says. “Which means you’ve no more sense for magic than a goat does for engineering. How are you performing workings?”

“Are you telling me that I wasn’t human, before this?” Steve asks, and—and—shit. He’s always known he was… different, ergi, weird as Hell but—but thinking too hard about that, taking that to any kind of conclusion was—unhelpful.

In the last days before she died, his Mam was—unwell, raving—but she’d told Bucky that she’d put Joseph Rogers on Steve’s birth certificate because she didn’t know what else to put, and—Christ, Christ Almighty—

And then she’d trail off into tales from the old country, fairy folk and elves, the stories she’d told Steve when she was tucking him in at night before he got too damn grown up for ‘em. Oh God, oh Mother Mary—

“Try to keep up,” Ulfadhir says, taps his fingertips on the desk. “Of course not. Not entirely, anyway.”

Steve rubs at his forehead, combs his fingers into his hair and folds forward with his fingers nested crushing tight at the back of his head. Stays down there for a while, fixing on his breathing like he used to have to when his asthma got bad. “Christ,” he whispers, choked.

He can hear the big clock in the downstairs parlour ticking, the moan and hiss of water heating and moving behind the walls, sounds of traffic and radios playing and human voices outside. Inside the room all is quiet—not so much peaceful as waiting, the dreadful predatory patience of cats and raptors.

He sits up, clears his throat, looks to Ulfadhir: sitting at the desk, watching and still. Takes a deep breath. “Right,” Steve says, and—round of applause for this performance, voice coming out steady as a rock. “Sorcery.”

Ulfadhir cocks his head, listening. Steve says: “I—well. The magic is always there, right? It’s the bones of creation, it doesn’t… go away, just because I can’t hear it anymore. So I guess I—this body has eidetic memory. Anything I’ve done or been or heard or seen, I can remember. So I can remember what things sound like, how it ought to feel, and even though I can’t feel it now, I just… do that thing, exactly, and it works. Mostly. I use that to do a shape change, into my smaller body, and from there—I’m me again, I can do everything.”

Ulfadhir has straightened up as Steve is speaking, his eyes wild. “Show me,” he says. “Show me
what you've been doing.”

Steve takes a deep breath—fuck, he’s so tired, but he can do this one last thing. He folds his hands into the gestures of making and unmaking, pulls up the echo of song from his memory and starts to sing it, closing his eyes to chase scraps of sense memory, the ache in his spine after a day of work or the freezing cold of his feet on a winter morning, pressing them against Bucky’s shins at the breakfast table to make him yelp—

—and the terrible weight and sense of pressure starts to build, and a sweat breaks out under his collar —

“Stop,” Ulfadhir shouts. “Stop, let it go, now,” and Steve’s never heard him shout, not ever, not when Steve set the kitchen on fire, not when Steve put a throwing knife into his own hand. He lets it go and opens his eyes and Ulfadhir’s right there in front of him, grabbing his hands to hold them frozen mid-gesture.

They are still for a long moment, staring at each other, and Steve can see the white all around Ulfadhir’s eyes, and he’s bled paler than milk. Then: “You idiot girl!” Ulfadhir says. “Do you tire of living? Did you—how—what in the world—what in all the worlds and all the planes were you thinking?”

“Oh,” Steve says. “Bad idea? It’s worked okay so far.”

“You—I can’t—” and it’s another first, Ulfadhir stuck for words, dropping Steve’s hands to pace away, jam his hands into his hair. Then he whirls back to Steve, hands flying up to sketch in the air as he speaks.

“Imagine a surgeon,” he says. “One who is a master of his craft, one who has performed the same simple task a thousand times—removing a crippled finger, say, or cutting out an appendix.” He pauses for Steve’s nod, presses on: “Now imagine our surgeon is forced to perform his task without any of his senses. Blindfolded, deaf and dumb, insensate and numb. All he has to guide him is his skill, and the memory of all the appendices he’s removed before. What chance would you give his patient?”

Steve lets out a breath, and it’s shaky. “Not good,” he says.

“Now,” Ulfadhir says, “Imagine that our blindfolded surgeon is operating on himself.”


“I don’t know how you haven’t ripped yourself to pieces,” Ulfadhir says flatly.

“I—” Steve wets his lips, scrubs at his head. “Maybe… When I built this body, I designed it—human, but taken to the most extreme example—the strongest, the fastest, and—and part of that was healing. I can heal a broken bone in eight hours.” He’d learned that one the hard way, when a backdrop frame dropped on him in Chicago.

“Thus counteracting the damage done, your efforts to disembowel yourself with sorcery,” Ulfadhir says, his eyes going distant for a moment as he plots this out. Then he snaps back to focus again, narrows his eyes. “I never taught you how to perform shapeshifting spells, girl. Where did you learn that?”

“Well, I guess I put it together,” Steve says, and Ulfadhir raises an eyebrow like that’s a moronic answer so he tries again: “You taught me how to make seemings, of different people, and I saw you do shape changes a few times, a falcon or a cat. So I just kind of—sandwiched those together, in my
head. And it worked, so,” he concludes, shrugs.

Ulfadhir stares at him for a long moment, and then says almost to himself, “I can’t be sure whether you’re an idiot or a genius.”

“Does it have to be just one or the other?” Steve asks, and he’s tired enough that it comes out manic, and Ulfadhir grins for the first time today and then claps his hands.

“Shall we begin then?” he asks, and when Steve just stares at him he adds: “You almost found the answer, the work-around for this human problem of yours. The key to doing it without leaving out a few vital organs in the shift is to learn the making of anchors.”

******

The lesson takes almost five hours, ends in them sitting on the floor with their legs tangled together—Steve’s in his skivvies and his smaller body now, that was the first step: making the shape change with Ulfadhir holding his hands and humming along to the song to shepherd the working through safe. It’s different, much slower than he’s used to, but without the tearing pain. Just a long slow dull ache, like he remembers feeling in his bones some mornings, those brief and halcyon days of his mid-teens when he actually had a growth spurt.

So he gets small, and then Ulfadhir shows him anchors and has him make them, again and again, fixing spells to the teaspoons—they’re drinking tea, and Steve’s not even sure where it came from—everything is a haze of exhaustion and the music and working after working, pulling the fires through himself until he’s hollow as an old bone.

Until they are sitting on the floor, bare calves sticking together with sweat, and Ulfadhir talks him through one last working, the shape change to take himself from Cap down to Stevie, and when it is glowing bright and complete and whole inside his chest he holds his dog tags up with shaking hands and sings it into them.

Then he lies down on the wooden floor and shakes and lets his vision go to black for a while. It’s kind of restful.

He wakes—it’s probably only a few minutes later—to cold water dripping on his forehead and cheek. Cracks his eyes to see Ulfadhir standing over him—and his hair’s clipped military short and neat, and he’s wearing a very convincing seeming of a lieutenant’s uniform, creases razor sharp, and dropping water on him from a tea cup.

“You’re a monster,” Steve mumbles.

“Oh, your smile is thanks enough,” Ulfadhir sings. “No further gratitude is needed—I merely prevented you from flaying yourself with magic. What are such trifles between friends?”

“Thank you,” Steve says, muddy like he’s talking through a layer of cotton wool, blinking and starting to haul himself up. Ulfadhir gives him a smile that is roughly half hungry fox and half fond, puts out a hand to help him sit up, then roughly pets his hair before leaving off with a cuff to the back of the head.

“Try not to die a horrible death before I see you next,” he says.
“I actually can’t make any promises,” Steve says, and Ulfadhir smirks and turns and strides out the door, leaving it open, and the cooler air that rolls in is blissful enough that Steve closes his eyes and sighs but—

“Evening, Sergeant,” Ulfadhir is saying cheerfully, his voice bouncing back up the stairs, and oh for Christ’s sakes—

Look to the door. Bucky’s standing in the frame, frozen and staring at him.

Jesus Horatio Christ.

Steve has a momentary out-of-body experience, sees himself as Bucky must be seeing him—undressed and dishevelled, bed hair and sweaty and with the last smeary traces of soft pink lipstick on his mouth—he doesn’t have any girl clothes with him but Ulfadhir had insisted on some gesture toward womanhood before teaching him any more seidhr, so lipstick it was. Sitting on the floor with some fella leaving his room. He looks like a walking trash fire, only he probably can’t actually walk right now.

Mary, Mother of God, what a clusterfuck.

Steve can’t even look at Bucky’s face. Buries his face in his knees and—the noise that comes out of him isn’t human, isn’t a laugh or a sob but something in between.

He’s started and now he can’t stop, ugly noises falling out of him—whole body shaking—and he’s trying to tamp it down, swallow these hurt-animal sounds that are coming up like clots of blood from the base of his chest, but they keep coming and he’s choking on them.

And then the choking turns to a wheeze on his out-breaths and he’s—starts to laugh because he hasn’t had an asthma attack since high school so this is nostalgic, except for how is chest is closing up like a vice—

“Breathe, Stevie,” Bucky’s saying, and he’s crossed the room on silent feet while Steve was losing his shit, knelt down next to him, and his big hand is cool on the back of Steve’s neck. “Come on, slow it down. You got this, I got you. Slow breaths,” and Bucky’s folding around him, holding him sat up and leant forward in the tripod shape that gives his lungs the most room to move, one hand smoothing slow up and down his side like he’s petting a skittish dog.

Breathing gets easier. It takes a while, long enough that the wooden floor starts to hurt like Hell under his knees, long enough that his skin is stuck to Bucky’s with cold sweat—and he should say something, needs to—but everything’s fading at the edges, grey rolling in like fog off the Hudson on a cold night, and words are on the far side of that grey, and then—

Surfacing from the grey: Bucky’s hauled him up off the floor, is pouring him into bed, and the sheets are cold and crisp and feel so fucking good—he shouldn’t be—he’s still filthy from the road—but all he manages to get out is a dopey mumble and Bucky tells him, “Just shut your trap for once, Rogers,” and combs back his damp hair with his fingers, real soft like his Mam used to when he was sick, and the grey comes up and swallows him again—

Sleep, black and deep.
Wake slow and muzzy in the pre-dawn hours, and Steve almost moans at how good the clean sheets feel against his skin, the pleasure of sleeping on a real mattress.

He aches everywhere, every muscle and fibre and bone, the good clean ache of long exertion—and he stinks, there is nothing good or clean about how he smells—but it seems Bucky doesn’t mind because he’s over-the-covers spooning Steve, and—oh Lord. And that’s his cock, pressed to the curve of Steve’s ass and hard and grinding in, sleepy and dysrhythmic. Bucky’s face is smooshed against his shoulder blade, hot breath puffing on skin.

“Buck?” Steve slurs, and Bucky keens in reply, low and soft and thick with sleep.

Steve’s stupid dick is starting to sit up and beg—it’s Pavlovian at this point, just takes the slightest show of interest from one J.B. Barnes. He palms himself to make sure he’s not peeking out from his shorts, then reaches back to grab Bucky’s hip and stop the slow thrusting.

“Buck,” he says again, louder.

“Stevie,” Bucky mumbles, and then goes very still and quiet, tension running up the arm that’s slung over Steve’s hip like a wire pulling taut. He shifts back, slips off the bed and says, pitched low, “Washroom.” Pads from the room on near-silent bare feet.

Steve sighs, sits up and flips the blackout curtain up to look outside. Pre-dawn London is foggy and pale and ethereal, the houses all around pitch dark, breathlessly quiet. He can hear water running in the washroom down the hall. He lies down again, flips onto his belly so his dick will stop announcing itself—seriously, calm down—and fidgets with his dog tags.

He hasn’t prayed in a while, rubs the links of chain between finger and thumb like rosary beads, misses the—the peace. The feeling of certainty. He closes his eyes and sends a mental flare up to the Heavens—the oldest prayer, the most honest, help—and maybe he can find a church service this Sunday, if they’re still here anyway—and then Bucky is prowling back into the room.

He hesitates in the doorway for a breath, then goes to the desk, lifts the chair out into the middle of the room, sits down. Immediately jumps back up and pulls cigarettes and matches from the pocket of his jacket, draped neatly over the end of the bed. Sits down and lights up. Steve cracks the window open.

“So,” Bucky says, bending to grab a discarded tea cup from the floor and setting it balanced on the foot of the bed.

“So,” Steve says, like an asshole.

Bucky has a draw and ashes into the tea cup. “You wanted to talk, Rogers,” he says, flat as an ironing board.

Pete’s sake. Steve takes a deep breath, lets it out. “What are you doing here?”

“Making sure you don’t die of your own stupid. Per my responsibilities as sergeant,” Bucky says.

“With great fondness and respect, that’s bullshit,” Steve says. “I thought you were busy hating my guts.”
“I—Christ. I’m so fucking mad at you I could spit.” He has another draw, mutters as an aside, “Be nice if my johnson got that telegram.”


Bucky makes an inelegant snorting noise. “Shit, you think I don’t know that? I mean, I’ll admit—my first thought when I found some fella coming out of your boudoir, and you in your underthings was to—to wanna kick the shit outta him, piss all over you like you were my fucking territory or something.”

“That’s... a lot of shit and piss, Buck,” Steve says weakly. “Anyone would think you’re in the Army, with a mouth like that.”

“But—but that ain’t what we are, and you—I know what you look like when you’ve been well-fucked, Rogers. That wasn't it.” His eyes are dark, gaze very level. He sucks at his cigarette and flicks the ash again. “Which brings up some questions. Like why you’re little, when I know that’s classified all to Hell.” He leans in closer, lowers his voice even further. “He was SSR, wasn’t he? Doing some type of test, or a training exercise?”

Steve could kiss him. The best kind of lie: the one people come up with themselves. And it’s kissing cousins with the truth.

“Yeah, Buck,” he says. “Please, just—you can’t ask me more than that, okay?”

“See, that’s where we’ve got a problem,” Bucky says. “Cause I’m gonna keep asking. You can’t just—you were three-quarters dead when I got in here last night. How am I supposed to keep you outta trouble if I don’t know... where or how, or—or even why?”

Steve stops, looks down at his lap and takes a deep breath. Looks back up and—shit, he can’t do eye contact, he’s not that brave—fixes his gaze on the bridge of Bucky’s nose. “You asking as my sergeant, or—or as a friend?”

Bucky looks away, chews at his cigarette, butts it out in the tea cup and looks back at Steve. “Both, okay?” he says, rasps, and he’s flushing red and bleeding pale at the same time like it’s hurting him to push the words out. “Both. Damn you, Steve, I can’t get quit of you. It’s always gonna be both. It’s always—you and me, okay?”

So he’s still—thank Christ. Thank Mary and the Saints and all the little fishes. “Okay,” Steve says, and stops again, lets a shaking breath out and chews at the inside of his mouth to keep his face from unravelling into something stupid. Something bleeding out, something clawed open from the inside. God: he doesn’t deserve this. He’ll never be worthy of this.

“Okay,” he says again, and then: “So what’s going on in your head? You’ve been spitting furious with me since Belgium.”

Bucky folds forward, cups the back of his head with his big palms, stays down there for a while. When he start’s talking it’s inflectionless, quiet enough that Steve’s gotta strain to hear it.

“When—Belgium was when I knew it was real. When I knew you were—” He stops, scratches hard at his scalp and sits up again. Stares at Steve’s left ear, washed pale like a poster after weeks of sunlight and rain.

“When the squids had me on the table at Kreischberg, they gave me—just, a whole lotta drugs,” Bucky says, soft and dull. “I never knew why, what any of it was for, they didn’t—ask me about—anything, anything, just... I still got no idea what the Hell they wanted outta me. So I—I was outta
my Goddamn mind for most of it."

He meets Steve’s gaze for half a second, flinches away and stares at the bedspread. “And most of the time it was fucking awful—walls melting, teeth—like they were falling out. Burning, like I was on fire. Shadows, moving around and talking to me, about me. But some of it was kinda nice, you know? Sometimes—sometimes Mom was there. Sometimes you were there.” He stops, takes a breath, pulls another cigarette from the packet with shaking hands.

“So when you showed up, and—and you looked all… like in a funhouse mirror, muscled up like Hercules, and then next time I turned around you were—you again, and… my gorgeous little doll. And then you’d—flip back and forth. And… It was the Goddamn table all over again.”

“Oh, Buck,” Steve whispers. He’s got a fine tremor in his hands, acid crawling feel in the back of his throat like he’s gonna puke. He can’t stand to look at Bucky but he can’t look away. “Jesus, sweetheart, I… All this time?”

“Not all the fucking time, Stevie, Christ.” He twists the cigarette, absent, tucks it behind one ear. “I can do my fucking job, can’t I? Can set up a camp site and organise a watch roster and put a bullet in Dieter’s left eye socket from three hundred yards out. I’ve been fine. It was just you. I wasn’t always sure how real you were.”

Steve sits up, leans over to grab Bucky by his undershirt with both hands and haul him over onto the bed. Buries his face in Bucky’s shoulder and holds him hard. He could scream, he’s so—the geas, the fucking geas, he can’t say—anything, any Goddamn thing that would make any sense of it. Christ. “I’m here, Bucky. I’m really here. I swear to God.”

“I know that now,” Bucky says, sits back enough to look Steve in the face. “Why do you think I’ve been so pissed off? There you were, all of five-and-change with your sleeves rolled back, fighting a Kraut who’s twice your size with your fucking fingernails. I never would’ve dreamed up that, that’s all you.”

“I had a knife, Buck,” Steve says.

“You fucking idiot,” Bucky says fondly.

******

Come 0845, Steve and the rest of the Commandos are back in the SSR war room, fed and dressed and pressed, a pile of captured Hydra weapons mounded on the conference table.

Gabe’s got a folder with all the photos he’d got inside the factory—his fluency in German has made him their photographer by default, as the only guy on the team who can read all the documents and warning signs and instrument panels they’re coming across, can tell what’s important intel and what’s just—memos about not eating in the work areas, or whatever. Steve’s got his notebook with the list of names of fellas he’d given field promotions to, so he can make sure everyone’s getting their dues officially now that they’re all home and hosed.

He still feels a bit like a smouldering garbage fire, but—at least he’s had a couple hours of shuteye, a good breakfast and a bath and a suck job from his best guy, so his tactical situation is much improved, all things considered.
Debriefing goes all damn day, with a break in the middle to file out to the firing range and tool around with the Hydra weapons. Half a dozen targets are vaporised, and then a busted old car is pushed into the range and goes directly to Hell in a flaring ball of blue flame and shrieking metal, and Howard Stark enters a Goddamn altered state of—he’s so excited he can’t stand still, and he’s also mad as Hell because he’s still got no idea what’s powering these things, what that blue glow is or where it’s come from. His school of engineering seems to involve a lot of pacing up and down the range yelling.

The sun’s going down by the time they wrap up, emerge from the SSR bunker stretching and moaning and blinking bewildered eyes at the world outside.

The mess tent is still open, so the first stop is there, lukewarm food and scalding hot chicory coffee—there is an officer’s dining room set up someplace but Steve’s not even sure where it is and—and it would be weird eating there, anyway: he doesn’t really fit into the chain of command, what with how the Commandos are set apart from the rest of the US military, and some days it feels like they’re elite and some days it feels like they’re lepers but anyway: apart.

So they eat, and get caught up on the news,comings and goings and casualties, and then the lads are herding him back to their tiny tent city, and Steve pulls himself out of his post-debrief daze and recognises he’s being herded. “So what’s the plan of attack for tonight, gentlemen?”

Turns out they’d made plans to meet up with some of the lads from amongst the British POWs they’d brought home, local fellas who’d promised to introduce the Commandos to some likely pubs and likely dames. So there’s final preparations in order: boots getting a last polish and hair being combed into some kind of shape, Monty hauling out a tiny tin of wax to fix up his moustache, Dugan jeering at Bucky to keep his pretty face down so the rest of them stand a chance. Bucky’s grinning crooked and flipping a wink to Steve even as he jeers back.

And then they’re off, winding through the darkened streets of London in a slow and meandering procession, a bottle of wine being passed hand to hand up and down the line, and Dugan and Monty are already singing—the others need to be drunk before they’ll start in, but not those two, and they’ve taken an awful delight in teaching each other all the most disgusting songs from their respective military backgrounds.

Steve’s let himself drift to the back, still chewing over—he’d heard Phillips ranting to one of his aides about the quality of the intel they’re getting from anypplace east of Berlin, and—

—and he’s been using his sorcery in the field more, figuring out ways to put it to use with the Commandos, but—the things he can do, his veils and seemings, his training: there’s things he’s suited to, things he could do. Things only he could do—if he can just figure out a way to do it and stay under the radar, he can’t—but if he could… If he could.

“Hey,” Bucky says, dropping back to walk alongside him, and when Steve doesn’t answer—still hip-deep in the maybes, in the rising tide of terror that—he’s gotta do it, is the thing, it would be criminal not to, but—and Bucky hip checks him, harder than he ever would’ve before Steve was the size of a small building, hard enough Steve almost trips off the curb.

“You jerk,” Steve says, reflexive, finding his feet again.

“Hey, punk,” Bucky says, and gives him a grin. “You’ve been in your head all day. I can smell smoke, pal, don’t strain too hard. What’re you chewing over?”

“I was thinking…” Steve wets his lips, claws a hand through his hair. “About the best use of resources. About what it’s gonna take to win this war.” Bucky’s quiet, watching him, hands jammed
in his pockets. “What we’re doing is important—God only knows how important—but at the end of the day we’re only as good as the intelligence we’re working off, right?”

“Right. Bad intel means shitty planning, shitty decisions in the field. Loses battles, costs lives. But what’re you gonna do about it?”

“Well,” Steve says. “I mean. I can—you know I can be—” and he drops his voice right low, even though none of the Commandos are close enough to hear: “Smaller. Little and—sneaky,” and he goes to say invisible but he can’t push it out past the geas. Christ, he could choke Ulfadhir at moments like this, but—

“Agent Carter has contacts in networks all across Europe,” he says. “I bet she could use me—”

“Rogers, no,” Bucky cuts in, wild-eyed and hissing low. “What the Hell is wrong with you? It ain’t enough we’re pitting seven guys against the entire Nazi science division and their private fucking army, you wanna take up spying as a side hobby?”

“It’s important, Buck. Armies march on their intel. I can do this—”

“Doesn’t mean you should,” Bucky says. “Christ on a crutch, I can’t—that is a damn fool fucking idea.”

“You ain’t even heard the idea yet—” Steve starts, but Bucky’s already ripping the packet of cigarettes out of his top pocket and stalking off ahead, shoulders hunched, and as he’s passing Morita and Gabe and Dernier, Jim calls out, soft enough that normal human hearing probably wouldn’t have caught it from all the way back here—

“Not fighting with the missus, Sarge?”

And Steve almost stumbles off the fucking curb again because—Holy Christ, how could he know—how, when they’ve been so fucking careful—but Bucky’s just snarling back, “Go fuck yourself, Morita,” and that—it’s okay. Right?

It’s just teasing, just—it’s a joke, he doesn’t know. No one knows. Sweet Mother of God: he’s gotta dive into his breathing for a block or two, pull it out thick and deep until his hands steady. Jesus: they’ve gotta be so Goddamn careful. He hasn’t come this far to catch a blue discharge, he hasn’t. Not for him, and not for Bucky.

Assuming Bucky still—wants anything to do with him, anyway. Assuming Steve hasn’t just switched him right off again—Christ.

Steve’s always known there was an expiration date on this thing, but he figured it’d come when Buck found himself a girl to bring home to his Mam and sisters, not—not whatever this is. Not because Steve wants help in every way he can, wants to help win this thing in ways that only he can, and Bucky wants him safe.

As if anyone is safe with a war on. As if he’d be any safer in Brooklyn with dicky lungs and winter coming.

He watches Bucky: at the front now, like he usually is when they’re crossing forested terrain: sharp eyes and steady hands. London is dark—Blitz protocol—but Steve’s night vision is better than human, no matter what shape he’s wearing, and Bucky’s got his own little amber torch, the glowing cherry on the end of his cigarette. He looks—drawn, tired. Frustrated.

Even his clothes aren’t right—he’s always made some effort to look good, even when they were
broke as a joke and all he could do was re-stitch the seams of his Da’s old jacket, and now—coat hanging open and boots not polished, hair sitting every which way.

And most of that’s gotta come to rest on Steve—his fault: keeping Bucky up all night, making him think he was losing his marbles for the last couple months and change. Giving him one more fucking thing to have the horrors about, when they’re already neck-deep in—in Krauts, and laser rifles that make a man dissolve screaming into blue light, and Goddamn misery.

Mother have mercy, God help him. He’s fucked this up beyond repair.

******

At some ugly hour of the next morning—Steve still can’t catch a hangover, but the others fellas are hurting—they’re up and packed, piled into a couple of Humvees, and heading south and west for Cornwall. There’s a couple weeks before they can move against their next Hydra target, and there’s an SAS training site that’s been loaned to them for their exclusive use for the next two weeks.

It’s a drill sergeant’s wet dream: there’re obstacle courses, sure, tougher than any of the ones he’d seen in Basic, but there’s also miles of dense dark-green forest and marsh, pockmarked with foxholes and bombing craters and sniper nests, a rifle range that’s a half-mile long, building shells set aside for simulating urban assaults.

Everything is big and green—even the sky looks bigger somehow—and the air is cold and crisp and fragrant with dead leaves turning to mulch, marsh-mud, gunpowder. At the moment it also smells like hungover Commando: misery-sweat and second-hand booze and cigarettes.

An SAS lieutenant sticks around long enough to give them a quick tour before fucking off in a truck with a jaunty wave; then it’s just Commandos and open sky and two weeks to train and rest and figure this thing out.

They’re set up in the barracks, so it’s all big open communal spaces and listening to Jim snore and no privacy—which means it’s probably a couple days before Bucky notices that Steve’s avoiding him.

Or—shit. He’d like to think he’s taken the part of discretion, but that’s also known as being a fucking coward—he’s gotta find a way to fix what he’s broken in them but—but Steve can’t quit... *this*, all of this: being Cap and helping people, being the shield between this Godawful war and the rest of the world. Between Hydra, their ambitions, the ruined corpses of human test subjects, and—civilians, women and kids. Brooklyn and her streets and tenements.

This work they’re doing: it’s Goddamn ugly, however much the newsreels try to make it look glamorous, but it’s important. So he can’t quit, and he can’t walk away, and he can’t give it less than everything he’s got. And if Bucky can’t stand that—

And if he can’t stand seeing Bucky hurting like he is.

So, the coward’s path.

So it’s not until the fourth day that Bucky catches him alone.

He’s in the forest a short way from the rifle range—can hear the other fellas still there, the patter of their voices laughing and hurling insults and placing bets, the regular crack of gunfire. He’s—well,
having some alone time with his shiny metal best girl.

The first time he threw the shield it was a dumb mistake: smooth metal slipping right through his gloved fingertips as he brought the rim up to crush a squid’s jaw. It hit the roof, bounced off roof and walls and two machines and no fewer than three fucking Hydra mooks before he caught up with it, flying like nothing he’s seen. Like a missile, like a bullet, straight and true, only because of the vibranium it doesn’t lose speed on the rebound. He’s always been good at pool, and this is the same game. Just in three dimensions, and with Nazis and squids shooting at him.

So he’s playing, practicing, launching his shield at trees on different angles and getting a feel for how it bounces, for—could he catch it square on the rebound, or would that just take his fucking hand off? What if he moves with it, flows with the momentum—like what Ulfadhir taught him, how to use the big asshole’s speed and weight against him, only—and he’s squaring up, getting his stance right and finding the right spot to—take a breath. Let it out. Go—

*Throw* and *CLANG* and—oh shit—run and jump and—

—and hear a sucked-in hiccup of breath from right behind him and—

“Shit—” Steve gasps, mistimes his landing and turns the fall into a roll, comes up in a crouch covered in leaf litter. There’s another *clang* somewhere behind him, the shield bouncing again and shooting off into the distance, but—but Bucky. Who’s standing and watching him, his rifle hanging cock-angled from his shoulder by the strap.

“Buck,” Steve says, after a long pause, like some kind of fucking idiot.

“What the Hell are you doing?” Bucky asks.

“I—it’s not just a shield,” Steve says. “I mean it is, but it’s not just defensive—it’s a projectile. Because of the vibranium, how it bounces. I’m getting the hang of it, figure it’ll be useful in mid-range combat—”

“Okay, sure.” Bucky says. “Makes sense. Meanwhile, back on the farm—what the Hell are you doing?”

“Uh,” Steve says, like some kind of fucking idiot, because—because maybe they’re not talking about the shield.

“Don’t bullshit to me, Rogers,” Buck says, and he’s getting that tight look around his mouth that means he’s well on the way to being fucked off. “Or should I just stick with Captain? Since we’re so very formal? If you don’t—don’t want me leaving my shoes under your bed, if you don’t wanna… do this anymore. You can just say so. You don’t need to pull this fucking cold shoulder shtick.”

“I’m not—” Steve says helplessly, breaks off because he kind of is, but he isn’t, not really. “Buck, it ain’t about beds and shoes, I swear to God. I just—” He stops again. Bucky is staring at him, half turned like he’s ready to walk, hands working into fists and out again.

“I’m going to go to Agent Carter and show her what I can do,” Steve says. “Ask her to put me to work, give me an assignment. I can’t not—” and Bucky’s closing down, eyes and fists and mouth, turning his head away like it’s physically hurting him. “I’ve gotta do this, Buck. With what I can do—”

“You’re gonna get yourself killed, Steve—”

“There are guys out there getting killed *right now*, what right do I have to do less when I can—”
“Why’s it always gotta be you, you tiny enormous asshole?” Bucky snarls, ploughs a fist into a tree, and Steve—*Hell* with this. Snatches down the front of his shirt and hauls his dog tags out in one fist, because there’s a damn good reason.

“Cause I don’t think they’ve got anyone else who can do this,” Steve growls back, and then he rips the shapeshifting spell out of his tags and—there’s almost a crack in the air, he shrinks so fast, little Stevie again in an eye blink, and then—latches on with claws and teeth to the flow of the music, reefs it up and into the sloppiest veil he’s ever thrown together.

“It’s a pretty compelling argument, right?” he yells, and—and he’s being an asshole, and he *knows* he’s being an asshole but he can’t—people have been telling him his whole damn life that he can’t do—this, that, anything, *everything*, because of his lungs or his eyes or his crooked faltering heart, and Bucky’s never done it to him, never, and now—

—and Steve’s a freak, hidden in plain sight—his sorcery has *always* been take-it-to-the-grave secret, so he’s—Christ, he’s scared shitless, scared breathless, cold clawing horror in his gut that if he does this he’ll end up in a straight-jacket or in a zoo, on a table with scientists poking him to figure out how he works, like when he came out of the Vita Ray cradle but roughly a thousand times worse, only—

Only Bucky’s flinching back so hard he’s almost fallen, going straight past white into grey as a corpse, eyes closed, and his voice comes out thin and wobbly: “Oh, fuck.”

Oh, fuck: *Jesus Christ.* Steve drops the veil, tries to speak and chokes—stupid, stupid, he’s so fucking stupid. Bucky’s only just fucking told him he thought he was losing his mind and now Steve’s gone and done this to him, and it’s the first time Bucky’s seen it like this: in broad daylight and standing there right in front of him, a shape change and then a veil working like a one-two punch.

“Buck,” he manages to say, strangled.

Bucky’s turned away, jammed the heels of his hands into his eyes. “Jesus fucking *fuck,*” he moans, and then he’s gone, stalking back through the forest towards the rifle range.

“Bucky,” Steve calls after him, and it comes out wobbly, thin, and Bucky flinches again, so hard he almost goes into a tree, sure as Hell doesn’t stop or slow down or turn, and then he’s gone between the trees.

Steve can hear him for a long time after he’s out of sight—crashing graceless through bushes and leaf litter, his breathing ragged and punctuated by gasps.

*Fuck.* Lord Almighty—

Steve takes a deep breath, combs his hands into his hair until they’re nested together at the back of his neck, closes his eyes and bites his lip and folds forward and just—breathes, just breathes and keeps the wounded animal noise trying to pour out of his mouth under fucking control. God Almighty: how could he have been so stupid.

He stays down there for a long while, until the wounded animal noise in his gut chokes and dies, and when he opens his eyes and takes his teeth out of his lip and stands up, head back to gaze blindly up at the canopy, he can taste blood, feel stinging in his palms where he’s cut himself with his fingernails.

He’s a Goddamn train wreck, and a lying fraud, and it really ain’t news that—that there’s something
fundamentally wrong with him—because he hears the music, because he's an invert and ergi, because he poisons everything he touches with his personal freak show—

Stops. Takes another deep breath. Sends a thought up—don’t know if He wants to hear from fucking fairy perverts who lie their way into the military, but please, please, help—and then pulls together the shape change working and anchors it into his dog tags again, tucks them back into his shirt and pulls another working together, this time for his Cap body. Gets big, gets it together, and goes to find his shield.

*******

It’s a really Goddamn long two weeks.

As a unit—as Commandos—they soak it up, suck the marrow out of the time: shooting and wrestling, training with knives and hand-to-hand techniques, climbing trees and falling out of them and playing a day long game of hide and seek in the forest in the pouring rain—practising stealth manoeuvres and tracking in forested terrain, that is.

Monty teaches everyone to pick locks, Bucky shows them how to hot wire cars, Jim runs through basic field first aid, and everyone takes a turn at throwing Steve’s shield around.

Nights they talk and play cards and listen to the radio and smoke, shower shit on whoever attempted to cook that night. Everyone is safe and fed and the unit is really starting to jell together, to fit into place with each other, shoring up strengths and weaknesses and building a shared vocabulary of in jokes and insults.

So it’s good, it’s objectively plainly good, only Bucky isn’t meeting his eyes or talking to him outside of Hey or Pass the salt, so. So Steve’s got that ache in his jaw and chest like he remembers getting when his heart tried to quit on him.

He’s got pretty good at clapping on a smile and jogging forward when he’s bleeding out. He’s got work to do—they all do. Christ, he misses Buck—which is Goddamn stupid, he's right there—but it can't matter. It shouldn't matter. They've got work to do.
Warning for fairly gruesome injuries and gore in this one. I gave myself the heebie jeebies writing it, so: anyone with triggers around gun violence and wounding, read with care. If you're not sure how okay you'll be, I'll do a chapter summary at the end so you can go in advised of what to expect, or give it a pass.

They’re only back in London for a day and a half before they’re redeployed. New intelligence points to Hydra having some kind of doomsday machine most of the way complete in one of their core facilities in Germany—and they don’t have a way in, not that far behind the lines, not yet, but—

“—but they can’t complete the device without a significant quantity of plutonium, which they’ve purchased from a private contractor in Istanbul.” Peggy taps a second marker onto the map she’s referring to; Istanbul is a green cube, the factory one of the little flags they’ve been using to mark Hydra facilities. “We aren’t yet in a position to make a direct assault on the factory, but we prevent them from completing the device if we can keep this shipment from reaching them. It’s coming north, under heavy guard—”

—and that’s how the Commandos fetch up in the armpit of Yugoslavia, planning a seven man ambush on a convoy of armoured trucks and troop carriers. They have a whole lot of Dernier’s home-brew explosives and the terrain advantage—the road cuts through a narrow pass, winds through an ugly snarl of forest, like it was made for an ambush. Hydra has—well, armoured trucks and troops.

They’re on site a half day before the convoy is estimated to arrive, so they don’t have enough lead-time to plan anything too crafty: stop the trucks, bottleneck them front and rear, keep the troops contained or dead, destroy or seize the cargo.

Dernier spends a few furious hours portioning up the explosives into parcels—about the size for say, one armoured truck—with pull-pin detonators. Bucky shoulders his rifle and climbs a cliff to the south-west. Dugan, Monty and Jones pull out ropes and hand-axes and their most creative cusses and hack down a tree. Jim huddles over the radio. Steve runs up and down the stretch of road, keeping eyes out both ways, uses his shield to beat up the trees lining the road leading up to their choke point. Then they settle in and hide and wait.

It goes more or less to plan, to begin with anyway:

The lead truck pulls up and stops at the tree blocking the road. They’ve scattered branches and leaf litter around, so it looks at a quick glance like a tree downed in a storm rather than a blockade—won’t pass close inspection, but then it doesn’t need to. Steve is lying in the ditch, close enough to hear the tiny shifts in the truck’s suspension as the guy in the passenger side cracks his door and climbs out. Close enough that he’s keeping his breathing very soft and shallow under the matted
leaves and camouflage netting he’s buried in.

Christ, it would be nice to have a veil right now, but he hasn’t had time to prep one and he needs his throwing arm, can’t be small right now. If he can—two, the second truck pulling up, squeal of breaks and hiss of compressed air as it stops—if he can store a shape change working in an anchor then he could do the same with a veil or two, maybe? Then he could—three, the third truck grinding to a stop. Time to go to work.

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, coils everything tight like wire pulling taut, and then—

He uncoils, half-kneel half-crouched so he’s just over the lip of the ditch, mud-smeared shield braced in front with his left hand. Right hand—pull the pin with his teeth—and throw, neat and clean, the bomb skipping under the front truck and skidding to a stop against the far tire. Shouting—fuck, shots in his direction, two three four pinging off the shield, and he ducks back into the ditch, pulls the shield overhead like a legionary’s turtle formation. Three, four, five—

The explosion limns the world in red and white, a catastrophic mechanical roar like a dying beast and then—ringing silence, and the edge of the ditch where he’s crouched crumbles underfoot and drops him, stumbling, and he just manages to keep the shield overhead before—a jolt through his hands, arms, shoulders, truck engine and shards of armour dropping from the sky like Biblical rain.

Felt it, didn’t hear it—great, looks like he’s fighting this one without his ears.

Another heartbeat pause—no more shrapnel—okay, shield to the front and up, assessing—the front truck is ripped open, engine block and front cab in tatters, front four wheels scattered. Rear compartment door is open, spilling troops, but they’re reeling, directionless, half of ‘em bleeding or carrying someone else. Look to the rear truck—and it’s listing, four of its rearmost tires shot out one after another—Sergeant Barnes, shooting from a good three hundred yards out. He’s got the rearguard. Middle truck—

—is reversing hard, angle sharp like they’re planning to turn—no going forward, so they must be trying for back, but the road is narrow so the turn’s tight. Smash into the front grill of the end truck and then slam forward again, turning and almost into the ditch, and then reversing again, tires belching grey smoke.

Shit—okay—run up the bank and into the road, pull out his pistol and start firing. Steve’s still a middling shot but this is a big target, neat star-fractures appearing in the windshield, four five six, not cutting through the armoured glass but weakening it, hopefully, enough that he can do this—

The truck slams back into gear and hauls forward again, straight at him. Steve drops the gun and hefts his shield, puts his head down and runs straight at the truck, putting everything he’s got into it because he needs to be fast, he needs to be fast—

And then he’s close enough that his whole world is narrowed to the front grill of a twelve ton truck, close enough he can feel the heat off the engine, and he leaps, explosive, up and forward, shield first like he’s diving, clearing the bonnet and slicing through the windshield like a spear.

And then he’s in the cabin of the truck, sprawled in the centre of the bench seat and across half the dash and fuck, fuck, bleeding from—what, ballpark of twenty fucking glass lacerations. Perfect outcome. Great plan.

Coils his right leg and kicks the driver square in the neck. Swings his shield to the left and KOs the asshole in the passenger side. Gropes down into the centre with his right hand, finds the brake lever and hauls up hard. The truck lurches to a stop, hard, almost throws him back against the diamond-
sharp edges of the shattered windshield. And then—Jesus, God—truck stopped, drivers neutralised, problem solved.

He looks around—the driver’s dead, snapped neck, slumped to the side like a rag doll. Passenger alive but out cold and bleeding from a dozen cuts, more glass shards. Outside he can see Gabe and Monty and Dum Dum, guns up and rounding up nine of the survivors from the front troop carrier, getting them clustered on their knees with hands up. Situation kind of under control, from what he can see? Still can’t hear shit though—his ears are full like somewhere between a huge bell ringing and a shrieking kettle. What’s going on rearguard—

Steve sticks his head out the side window—the third truck is another troop carrier, still closed up from what he can see—Buck’s got a clean shot at the back door, and Steve can see a dark heap at the back of the truck—there’s no way outta there that doesn’t take them straight into sniper fire. So they’re closed up like a nun’s drawers—maybe working on strategy or planning a mass exodus, but—for the moment, contained.

And the guys in the truck cabin have locked up tight, and Frenchie is standing on the bonnet, holding one of his bombs pressed to the glass so they can see it very clearly. Driver and passenger are both blanched pasty-pale and hands up—they’ve seen what happened to truck one. The armour on these things will stand up to gunfire but not ordinance like this, and not at that kinda range.

Situation kind of under control there too? They’ve gotta keep moving fast, get everyone buttoned down before they can do the math and work out just how steep their numerical advantage is, but right now the Commandos have the momentum and if they keep moving with enough pace and attitude—

Steve pulls his head back into the truck and turns around in time to register wild grey-brown eyes and a pale face under a back uniform cap, the black hole of the barrel of a Luger pointed at his head, a panel into the back of the truck crooked open, and he’s got a half-second to process and put the pieces together, sway to the left and smack the gun down and away, and—

Searing heat-cold—Jesus—

Falling, gravity has switched directions, can’t—are my legs—

It’s his neck, he figures, sluggish as mud on a frost-bitten night. Something has happened, and the right side of his neck is cold-hot, like frozen metal is pressed to the skin, and he’s clapped a hand there like his body is trying to fill in the gaps where his brain’s left slack, and it’s cold cold cold but where his hand is feels hot and wet and pulsing. He’s—eyes are open, staring up, and there’s the roof of the truck, and there’s a fat stripe of red spattered up the wall like someone’s shaken excess paint from a brush with one long arc of their arm.

Oh shit, comes in a moment of clarity, and then it’s back into the grey mud—

Pale face appears overhead, eyes showing white all the way around, and the black eye of a gun stares down at him, and—oh—

Burst of red, and the pale face vanishes, bone matter and pink-grey and falling back, and then Dugan’s face is right above his, mouth open and framing words like he’s shouting but Steve’s ears are all shrieking alarm klaxons ringing, ringing, ringing.

Dugan looks pale, hollowed out, lines like he’s just aged a decade, and Steve tries to smile at him because it’s okay, he feels okay, and then—
—and now the world is shaking and Morita’s face is there, and Steve tries to say, “Jim,” because Jesus, someone’s hurt, one of his fellas: there’s blood on Jim’s face, fat misty drops like an arterial spray. “Who is it?” he tries to say, but—

Black—

“—holding this slippery fuck closed with my hand, do you understand?” he hears, Jim’s voice ragged and shaking, and the roar of a truck engine and bone-deep rumble of rubber meeting road and —hey, his ears are working.

Crack open eyes: grey metal far overhead, Jim’s face nice and close. Back of the truck, and they’re on the move. “I cannot move this hand. I need you to thread the suture. Christ’s sake,” he’s saying to —Steve rolls his eyes to the side, sees Monty clawing through Jim’s field medicine kit, fast and messy like he never is.

That’s two of them. Are the others—did they get the target? Did they—Bucky, they need to get Bucky—

“Hey,” he says, and he’s got to push it out past a choking tight weight on his throat, and then Jim yells and there’s the wet sound of blood hitting fabric at pressure and then the weight is back, pinching and holding and it’s fingers, it’s fingers, Jim has his hand in the meat of Steve’s neck.

“Cap,” Jim says, close enough to feel the heat of his breath, and there’s a flat terror in his voice, “You need to keep your Goddamn mouth shut.” And—

Black—

“Cap,” Jim’s shouting from very close, and Steve blinks, gasps, stares. He’s still wading through grey mud, still in the back of the truck, rumble of the engine vibrating up through his skull. “Don’t try to talk, okay? Blink if you’re following me,” Jim says, and Steve blinks.

“I need to cut into your neck where you’re wounded, okay? Open up enough so I can get this clamp in there, close off the artery,” and he holds up the bright metal clamp—looks like Mam’s sewing scissors, crossed with needle-nosed pliers. “If you were anyone else I’d give you morph but—so I need you to hold very still, can you do that?”

Christ Almighty. Ave Maria, gratia plena—Steve blinks again.

“Good man,” Monty says, sounding close and shaky—Steve rolls his gaze to the side, and it’s Monty crowded against his shoulder, Monty with a hand in the hole in Steve’s neck, pinching the bleeder closed. Gives Jim two hands to work with—he catches a flash of light off a surgical steel edge and then a bright cool line of pain flares against the background steady blaze of numb hot-cold from his wound, the sick awareness that there’s a gap, tissue missing, part of him gone. Steve sucks in a breath, bites his lip and—can’t move, can’t move—braces one foot against the floor of the truck and shoves into it, something to push into.

“Christ, what a Godawful—almost got it, just—” Jim’s muttering, low and manic and right next to Steve’s ear, and then there’s the click of metal against metal, and Jim snarls, “Got you, you slippery son of a bitch,” and then he’s shoving Monty’s hand away, grabbing wadded up bandaging and pressing it to Steve’s neck, and then—

Gravity goes sideways again and they’re sliding, and—scream of tires, howl of air brakes, hard stop —and the three of them hit the wall, the front of the compartment, Steve cushioned by Jim and
Monty, one combined breathless thud. Monty is wild eyed, gasping, caught Steve’s elbow in his gut—and fuck, Steve ain’t a light and dainty fella to be throwing elbows around.

Jim slams a blood-slick fist against the wall. “How ‘bout some warning, you dopey motherfucker,” he roars, and then he’s straight back to work, both hands in the wound and checking for further damage.

Dum Dum’s voice comes back, through the wall: “He just ran out at me, okay? All right back there?”

“We’re not dead yet,” Jim yells back, and then there’s a storm from the back of the truck, crazed pounding like a barrage of shells, fist meeting the metal door.

“Stevie,” Bucky screams through the door, and Steve convulses because Buck, sweetheart, are you okay are you okay, don’t sound like that, you’re killing me—

“Christ, let him in,” Jim says, and Monty climbs up to his feet, lurches across Steve and down to the rear of the truck, and there’s the clang of a big metal slide-lock cranking over and then a hollow metal boom as the door opens.

“All aboard that’s coming aboard,” Monty wheezes, and there’s a bang, hands and boots hitting the wooden floor of the truck bed, and then Bucky’s face is there, inches away, and he’s bug eyed and white as Goddamn snow, lip bleeding, tear in the front of his coat, dead leaves in his hair. But okay: Jesus, God, Mary, whoever’s listening—thank you.

“Oh, shit,” Bucky says, and his voice has gone flat, numb, thin. “Are you—can you fix it?”

Like he’s a car with a part that ain’t up to spec. Steve smiles, or tries to anyway, lifts his left hand and grabs Bucky by the jacket.

“Well, he’s missing a chunk of carotid artery,” Jim says, “And I’m trying to fix it. If everyone could just hold fucking still, that’d be great.”

Somewhere behind Bucky, a second pair of boots climbing up and clumping onto the truck bed, then a soft enquiry, “Comment est le capitaine?” Dernier. And Monty’s closing up the truck again, and Jim and Bucky are right here, and in the front Dugan, and Steve can hear the hum of the radio through the wall too, soft crackle of voices, Jones muttering over it. That’s everyone: six Commandos, present and accounted for, and no one’s badly hurt.

He manages a smile at Bucky, who sees it and double-takes and then makes a face at him, some ridiculous thing like he’s trying to scowl and smile at the same time.

“You fucking punk. Where do you get off, pulling shit like this?” Bucky rasps, grabs his hand where it’s tangled in the front of Bucky’s coat and squeezes it, hard, hard enough to ache in his bones, and the rumble of the engine groans and turns over, the truck in motion again, and Steve sighs and lets his eyes fall closed and everything go black.

*******

Time passes in bright shards of pain: Jim putting in sutures, packing the wound with bandages, pulling the bandage out and packing it again as the granulating tissue tries to grow up and through
the weave of the fabric. Soft muttered curses and sharp tugs, the ugly slithering pull of suture through flesh as Jim cuts the stitches and pulls them out less than an hour after they went in. “I don’t know what the Hell the Army gave him, but it sure is working overtime,” Jim murmurs.

“He’s healing?” Bucky asks, low and raw-sounding.

“I don’t—I can’t say for sure if he’s healing right, all the layers of fascia and tendons and—the nuts and bolts that ought to be in there. I can say the wound bed keeps filling in almost faster than I can keep up with it. I guess his body knows what it’s doing?”

Bucky makes a choked noise. “Little punk always knows what he’s doing. Doesn’t stop him doing somethin’ fucking stupid, but he does the stupid thing with eyes wide open.”

Jim huffs. “Sounds right,” he says. Beyond their voices Steve can hear the hum of the tires on the road, the bass purr of the truck engine. Monty and Frenchie somewhere at the back, playing rummy in an ugly bastard mix of English and French. Dugan singing softly to himself in the front, Jones shifting in his seat beside him. Means Steve can let himself float in the grey mud, in the glass shard-speckled haze of pain, bright at times and dark and throbbing at times.

Bucky’s hand is on his wrist, fingers closed hard over his pulse point—same way he always used to when he took his turn at Steve’s bedside, back when Steve was small and sick. It’s soothing, and it shouldn’t be—they’re in the back of a truck speeding a messy retreat from an ambush gone FUBAR. But that’s blood loss for you.

He wakes to the guttural rumble of Jim’s snoring, cracks his eyes open: darkness, lamplight. Bucky’s sitting cross-legged next to his head, worrying Steve’s rosary beads and chewing at his lower lip, washed out pale. There’re smears of dried blood brown on his fingers and in the lines of his palms. In the dark there’s a chorus of soft breathing and sighing, the other Commandos all out for the night.

Steve lifts a hand to his neck, finds wadded up bandages, tacky with drying blood. Bucky grabs his hand, deflects it away from the wound. “Still healing,” Bucky says, pitching his voice low.

Steve tries to wet his lips. He’s dry as a bone, tongue feeling like a bit of cured meat, and now he’s noticed it he can’t not notice it, the way his whole body is shrieking like his cells have been carved out hollow. Priorities: “Sitrep,” he mouths, careful just to use lips and mouth for it, to not—set his voice box to fluttering.

“We’re stopped in a barn about thirty miles over the border into Albania,” Bucky whispers. “It’s, uhh, 0300 on the 23rd, so you’ve been out of it for about fourteen hours. Jones has watch outside, I’m… We got the plutonium, so: here’s one in your eye, Hydra. And we’re heading—there’s an airstrip, maybe twenty miles south of here. Not heavily guarded, it’s too small for supply planes, but Stark thinks he can stick the landing, so. You got shot, you fucking idiot,” he says, voice getting thin towards the end, hands closing into ragged fists around the rosary beads.

“Remember that part,” Steve mouths, trying for a sheepish smile. It comes out wobbly, tattered at the edges. Second priority: “Water, Buck, please,” and Bucky snatches up his canteen, cracks the lid and holds it out. Steve’s hand is shaking when he takes it. Needs more concentration than it should to put it to his lips and get the smallest first sip out.

The water is warm, tastes of metal, and it hits his taste buds like ambrosia, his whole mouth lighting up like electricity. Swallows slow and tentative, but nothing bursts in his neck so he keeps going, drinks the whole canteen in tiny swigs, and at the end he still feels dry but less like he’s carved of petrified wood and boot leather.
Gives him the time to think about his next move. Which is obvious, now he’s not dying of catastrophic blood loss—if it works like he thinks it works. If he’s quick enough. He hasn’t tested the hard limits on this whole shapeshifting thing yet, just how much bleed over he’s got from one shape to the other, but—Hell: no time like the present.

“Buck,” he whispers. “I’m gonna try—can you help me?”

“What do you need?” Bucky asks, and Steve hesitates, closes his eyes, flattens the urge to howl with frustration. The fucking geas.

Okay. Okay: he can work around this. There’s got to be a work around. “What have I got stuck in my neck?” he asks.

“Wound packing,” Bucky says. “Set of clamps, on your artery—Morita wasn’t sure if the blood vessel was gonna heal at the same pace as the rest of you, and we can’t see real clear what’s going on in there anymore, so it’s stayed in there.”

Steve blinks affirmative, takes a deep breath, and tells Bucky his plan.

“What the fuck, Rogers,” Bucky says, and there’s something like anguish in his voice.

“Please, trust me? I can do this,” Steve says. “I only got shot in this neck, not—in the other neck, okay? So once I—do the thing, I’ll be fine,” and every time he gets too close to the truth his throat spasms and he’s gotta redirect, redirect, like a politician talking in circles around the problem. Fuck this geas. Next time he sees Ulfadhir he’s going to strangle him. Just a little. Just whenever he tries to talk.

Bucky stares at him for long moment, then says, “I can’t tell if you’re crazy as a sack of weasels, or I am.”

Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Steve reaches up, grabs Bucky by the nape of his neck and squeezes.

“Buck, I swear to God: you’re not cracking up. I know—” He chokes, stops, strangles the urge to laugh like a nut job at the understatement—“I know none of this makes a lick of sense and I wish to Christ I could explain it to you but I can’t. But I promise you’re not cracking up. This is real: you’re here, and I’m here, in a truck in a barn in the asshole of Albania. Please, Buck. I’m asking, but if I’ve gotta do this without a second set of hands I will—”

—and he lets go of Bucky and reaches for the wound on his neck, finds the handle of the artery clamps where they’re sticking out of the bandaging and grabs—

“No,” Bucky hisses, catching his hand and slapping it away. “Shit’s sake. Fine, Rogers, we’ll do it your way. Jesus. Did the serum enhance your obnoxiousness too?”

“Yes,” Steve lies agreeably. “You bet it did. Boots first, Buck, please.”

The plan goes: boots unlaced and off, parked next to his feet with the toes pointed up. Rolled up blanket Bucky’s been sitting on is unrolled and draped over Steve from neck to toes. Enough to provide the rough outline of height and build—for the rest, darkness, sleepy eyes, expectations. It’s not a perfect illusion, but it doesn’t need to be.

Bucky kneels up next to Steve’s shoulder again, takes a shaky breath. Rests gentle fingertips on the wound dressing—one hand on the bandages, one hand on the clamp. “Ready?” he whispers.

Steve has fished his dog tags out from the collar of his suit, is holding them cupped in his hand.
“Smooth and steady, Buck.”

“Right, tell the marksman about how you gotta have steady hands. Go screw yourself. Also, before we do this: if you die, and I’ve fucking killed your dumb ass, I’m gonna piss on your corpse.”

“Understood,” Steve says, taking a deep breath so he doesn’t start laughing. “Ready.”

“Three—two—mark,” Bucky breathes, and Steve holds his breath and Bucky grabs the packing and opens the clamp and pulls, smooth and steady, and the bright cold blaze of pain claws through Steve’s neck, up into his face and down his chest, every baby hair up on end as bloody new tissue is ripped from the wound bed. Bites his lip, hard enough to taste metal. Feels like everything pauses, like the wound itself is taking a deep breath, and then—

—and then he feels sticky wetness running down the side of his neck and Bucky hisses, “Shit,” and Steve throws a quick oh please let this work out to whoever is listening, closes his fist hard around his dog tags, changes his shape.

He’s gotta be quiet, gotta be so quiet, is in a truck full of twitchy sleeping soldiers that he doesn’t want to wake, so he drags the shape change out, slow as molasses on a winter’s morning, and it aches long and deep and down to his bones, shrinking and tightening and coiling inward on himself.

And then the music hits him like a brick wall, and the fires of making and unmaking pulse up from his belly into his palms, and his sigh is almost a moan. Brings up his right hand to feel his neck and smacks into Bucky’s hand already there, callused fingers pressed against his skin like—

“It’s gone,” Bucky whispers. “Stevie, it—holy Christ on a crutch.”

“Told you it’d work,” Steve says, with something like a wheeze in his voice because stick a fork in him, he’s done, out the other side of exhaustion and limp as overcooked spaghetti.

“You crazy cocksucker,” Bucky whispers, but he can’t stop touching, neck and shoulder and the side of Steve’s face like he needs to keep checking it’s real.

“Here,” Steve says, reaches up and grabs Bucky by the back of the neck again and pulls him down so they’re forehead to forehead. “Thanks, Buck. You—steady hands. You’re swell.”

********

He wakes with the dawn, shrill birdsong and Dernier muttering to himself as he gets up to piss. Jim is sleeping next to him, sitting slumped against the side of the truck. Steve is—he runs through the checklist—Cap-shaped again, whole and intact, hungry enough to eat one of his Irish grandmothers if she were cooked right, and Goddamn thirsty.

Thirsty enough that the checklist stops there, cold, he can’t think beyond that point, and he rolls over, tangles himself in the blankets—like a newborn foal, all legs and joints—crawls out and climbs up to stand leaning against the side of the truck.

Jim wakes, startles, says, “What the—Cap?”

“Tell me we’ve got water,” Steve rasps.
“Pump out in the yard,” Gabe mumbles from somewhere under a mound of blankets, and Steve lurches forward, totally graceless, to the back of the truck bed and half-falls out the back door.

Packed dirt underfoot, smell of rust and rotting wood—the barn hasn’t seen use in a while—stagger in a circle and then follow his nose toward daylight. He can hear Jim cussing and scrambling to follow him, but—outside. Yard. Pump.

The hand crank is rusted to Hell, old green paint peeling away in chunks. It’s still working though, and it only takes a half minute of pumping before water falls out of the spout, cold and mineral-tasting and clear, and he falls to his knees and sticks his head under it and drinks, mouth open and artless.

It’s cold enough his teeth ache, cold enough to send a spike of clean pain up through the roof of his mouth and into his brain, and he stops drinking and scrubs his face with his spare hand, cocks his head to put his neck under the flow and scratches at the caked-on sheet of dried blood until his fingernails come away clean, wets his hair and scrubs briefly—old blood and glass shards. Drinks again. Finally lets the pump go still and climbs up to his feet and looks around.

Trees. Old out buildings, as rotted and unloved as the barn. Fallow fields, clotted with wildflowers and bushy weeds. Commandos, staring at him like he’s grown a second head.

“You took a .22 through your carotid artery at close range,” Jim says.

“Less than a day ago,” Dugan adds.

“I got better. I—the serum,” Steve says, nonsensically. And okay, they’ve seen him heal quick before but—not this quick. Nothing like that ugly. It’s not humanly possible, but—but then Steve’s not human. “Sorry,” he adds.

There’s silence for a moment, and then:

“Right, then,” Monty says, throwing his hands up, and:

“It’s not even the serum,” Bucky says, over the back and turned away, keeping watch and smoking. “The asshole is just too stubborn to die.”

Steve’s not even sure where to start with that one—pot and kettle on the subject of stubborn assholes, Barnes—so instead: “Lot of standing around happening here. Don’t we have an airfield to take?”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter summary: the Commandos ambush a truck on a mission and Steve is shot in the neck. Wounding, catastrophic blood loss and immediate first aid is described fairly graphically (I'm a Registered Nurse, sooooo...). They get away, Morita looks after the injury. Bucky and Steve manage to Actually Talk (all centred around Steve's wounding, no actual feelings discussed), and it is very clear through the depth of Bucky's concern that he still cares about Steve, like, a lot. Steve uses his sorcery to shapeshift into his other body and immediately heal the wound, Bucky helping and witnessing all of the above (and perhaps getting a little closer to working out the truth about Steve).
Chapter 18

By midday, the Commandos are halfway across the Adriatic Sea, crammed into the back of a Twin Beech with the package—the plutonium itself is in a tiny crate, maybe a foot long and wide, once they rip it out of the huge lead-lined storage compartment in the truck.

“Is this safe?” Steve asks, as Jones is strapping the plutonium down in a storage rack in the plane. It looks very small and nude, the wooden crate unmarked.

“How? Is what safe?” Stark says, disingenuous, looking around from where he’s inspecting the sight on Bucky’s rifle.

“Howard. They weren’t transporting this stuff behind three layers of lead for no reason. I may have volunteered to let you people irradiate my balls, but these fellas haven’t,” Steve says.

“It’ll be fine,” Stark says, waving the whole line of questioning away. “For a short window of time, anyway. Just don’t, you know, sit on top of it. Or lick it.”

Mid afternoon they touch down in Naples. The package goes into the back of another truck—lead lined containment—and rolls out, Stark jumps straight into another plane with a jaunty wave, and the Commandos mill around in the shuffle until Dum Dum commandeers a couple of Jeeps and a Private on duty points them in the direction of the nearest Army base.

It’s a good hour’s drive; by the time they’ve showered and shaved and set up their tents into their own private kingdom within the base, the mess has started serving dinner and they join the line queuing for grub. Barley and vegetable soup served over greasy slabs of fried spam—God have mercy.

Steve hasn’t had a hot meal in two days, and with the way his metabolism turns over, with all the fighting and bleeding out and healing and shapeshifting he’s been doing, he needs the calories bad—can’t be picky. Even this is better than proteins and fats in a tube.

He’s just dumped his plate on the table where the other Commandos are spreading out when a WAC Private appears at his elbow, her salute crisp. Her lipstick is a sweet shell pink; all the WAC ladies he’s encountered have been made up, pressed and flawless, regardless of how close to the front they get—seem to take it as a point of pride.

He’s got enough insight to recognise the undertow in his belly is jealousy. Thirteen year old Steve is writhing in disbelief in the back of his head—he’d fought to stay out of dresses, fought to keep from being a giant fucking nancy, but—but every now and then he sees a flash of bright lip paint or the clean straight lines of stockings and he wants it. Misses it.

“Captain Rogers, sir,” she raps out, holding the salute steady until he gives her a nod. “Message from the radio room.” She passes him the folded strip of paper; he reads it over, cocks an eyebrow.

“How? From Agent Carter,” he tells the guys. “Orders. She’s getting here tomorrow, so we’ll have our debrief day after that. Meantime we’re at leisure, I guess.”

“I wouldn’t say no to that,” Monty says, cheerful. Dugan is gazing doe-eyed at the WAC—shit, Steve hasn’t dismissed her, he’s so used to the Commandos and their laissez-faire attempt at a chain of command.

“Thank you, Private. No reply,” he says, and she snaps off another salute sharp enough to shave
with and strides out of the tent. Dum Dum’s not the only one watching her go.

“Pete’s sake, guys. It hasn’t been that long,” Steve says, forking a lump of spam into his mouth. God Almighty: salt and grease and rendered fat. At least it’s hot. At least someone else cooked it.

“It’s been long enough,” Jim says, mouth pulled down in a faux-tragic look as he pokes at the vegetables on his plate.

“We don’t all have a war bride to keep us warm, Cap,” Dugan says.


“That would be a no, then,” Gabe says, and then he and Dernier have some complex low-voiced exchange in French that ends in Gabe reaching into a pocket and giving Dernier his pack of cigarettes.

“Lord, no, she’s too good for the likes of me,” Steve says, while they have their transaction—a bet? Were they betting on—for Heaven’s sake.

“So do you think he's not noticed his mug is on every second poster between here and Los Angeles?” Jim asks.

“He gets hit in the head an awful lot,” Bucky says, fork pointing at Steve’s head for emphasis. “He mighta forgotten.”

“Wanna place bets on how Peggy reacts when I tell her Dum Dum called her a war bride?” Steve asks, and Dugan flinches.

“My training doesn't cover the per rectum extraction of ladies shoes,” Jim says cheerfully. “Good luck with that, pal.”

“I’ve got no idea what you just said, but it doesn’t sound like my kind of party,” Dum Dum says.

“If Peggy Carter was the kind of woman who gave a rat’s about faces on posters, she wouldn’t be…” Steve runs out of words. Peggy’s faith in him is—he’ll never forget it, never be worthy of it, and she’s more deeply committed to the war effort than any woman has ever been to a husband, which only makes him respect her more. And then—Bucky.

Only God knows what’s happening there. Probably not even Him.

“Hopeless,” Monty says, rocking back on the bench and rolling his eyes away.

Oh. “Speaking of things I’ve forgotten,” Steve says. “When we debrief, who’s gonna cover the—are we calling it a retreat? Strategic withdrawal? I was out cold or staring up Jim’s nose for the whole thing.”

“Definitely a strategic withdrawal,” Monty says. “We achieved our objective. It was significantly messier than what we had planned, but no one is deducting points for style.”

“Maybe they should, though,” Jones says, and there’s a lull, cutlery noises and chewing noises falling silent all at once as they all look at him. “I mean, it’s pure luck, isn’t it? That it was Cap who caught a round with his neck, and not someone less… bulletproof.”

Jim grimaces, swallows the food in his mouth like it's sawdust. “Would’ve been messy. A wound like that—it's not survivable. Not normally,” he tacks on at the end, gives Steve an apologetic look,
and Steve just quirks his mouth in reply. He gets that he's not normal, that he never has been. It's not a news flash.

“Okay, but—all of us here, we've seen the worst of it, lived it,” Dum Dum says. “We came into this knowing there was zippo chance all of us get out the other side unscathed, right? It's a war.”

“But we can try and do better,” Jones says. “We won’t dodge every bullet, but we can learn from ‘em. Even if it’s nothing we did wrong, just lousy Goddamn luck—and the Lord knows there’s enough of that floating around—we can pull it apart and learn from it, try and do better next time.”

Gabe is so quiet most of the time it’s easy to forget that he’s roughly forty percent smarter than any of ‘em until he says something like that. “That’s what a debrief ought to be for,” Steve says quietly, poking the spam around on his plate. They’re attached to the SSR, so the focus of their debriefs has always been on pulling out every last scrap of useable intel, but that’s only a small part of what debriefing is intended for. Hey, look: he did learn something worth remembering in Basic.

“So,” Steve says. Puts his cutlery down and looks around the table. “Fellas. What’d we do right, where’d we screw up, and what can we do better?”

There’s a moment of quiet and some thoughtful chewing. “I thought it went well, until you were shot in the neck,” Monty says.

“If you could avoid getting shot next time, I think that’d make a big difference,” Jim agrees.

“How’d he get that close to you?” Dugan asks. “That cabin was tighter than a duck’s asshole, and you had powder burns on your neck.”


“Oui, cela peut arriver,” Dernier says, nodding with the serene look of a man who’s deafened himself with the tools of his trade more than once.

“Okay, so that’s the first thing that went wrong,” Jones says. “Cap’s fighting deaf as a post. We need to up our minimum safe distance from Dernier’s home-cooked explosives.”

“Wasn’t the first thing,” Bucky says, low and very clear, talking to his plate.

Talk splutters and stalls like a sick engine. There’s a long quiet moment, and then Steve sucks in a breath and punctures the stillness. “Buck?”

“That wasn’t the first thing to go wrong,” Bucky says. “We screwed up way before first contact. I was in the wrong place.”

Steve blinks. Wets his lips. “The cliff face with the rockfall—”

“Yes, Cap,” Bucky says, “The cliff face with the rockfall in the sou'-southwest. Right where you ordered me to be. I can follow orders just fine. They were the wrong orders. I was in the wrong place.”

He’s looking up from his plate now, rolling his shoulders back and squaring up like he’s bracing himself for a fight. Steve’s seen this mulish look before, pointed at only God knows how many bullies and assholes home in Brooklyn, but he can count the number of times it’s been pointed at him on one hand.

This is part two of this fight. Part one was on the ground in Yugoslavia as they were setting up their
ambush thirty-odd hours ago. Buck wanted to set himself up on a ledge a Hell of a lot further west and north, a Hell of a lot closer to the action—“Gives me more play, a better angle on the whole business. I’ll still be able to pin down the fellas in the rearmost truck but I can also keep eyes on the rest of the action, respond if anyone starts to get fresh.”

“Not enough cover,” Steve told him. “There’s only that handful of rocks, you’d stand out like dog balls. And it’s too close.” Close enough for the squids to return fire if they spotted him, which they would’ve.

Wasn’t a long fight—they didn’t have time to chew it over, hard deadline of two hours before the convoy came through—but then it looks like they weren’t finished fighting about it. More like Bucky’s put a bookmark in to save his place and picked up right where he left off.

“Buck, if you’d set up in the spot you wanted, you’d have been shot inside a minute flat,” Steve says.

“Huh. Is perfect foresight one of your powers now? You can’t know that, Rogers.”

“There was no cover—”

“We had camo netting. Didn’t need to be perfect, just enough so they’d drive in and not see the ambush until we pulled the pin,” Bucky says flatly.

“And then once the pin was pulled, you’d been shot,” Steve says, again, and the small still part of himself that Ulfadhir taught him to find is noticing just how much Brooklyn’s bleeding into his vowels right now but he can’t seem to wind it back.

“You can’t know that,” Bucky says again, index finger pressing to the table with each word like punctuation. “Fuck’s sake, getting shot’s always on the table. I wasn’t in any more danger than the fellas on the ground with you, and you didn’t insist they do their jobs from five hundred yards away.”

“But—” Steve starts, stops. Almost chokes on the breath in his mouth. Fuck, but that’s—not entirely untrue. Is he—

Christ.

He’s supposed to be a Captain, meant to think like a Captain, not like a—a best fucking girl. God Almighty.

“But you were the only one holding down the rearguard,” he manages to say, after a too-long pause.

“We could’ve penned those squids in all sortsa ways,” Bucky says. “You coulda held the truck door closed with one fucking hand.”

“Could’ve chained it shut,” Jim muses.

“Si nous attachions des explosifs aux chaînes…” Dernier says, and Jones nods fast, translates:

“Rig the chains with grenades. Now that’s a disincentive.”

“We could have just bombed both troop carriers to begin with,” Monty says. “It’s laudable to try and get their surrender, but not always practical.”

“Okay,” Steve says—and it’s taking all he’s got to not—start one of his stupid tics, rubbing at his
forehead or the back of his neck. This is what debriefing is for, this is the whole point of the exercise. They’re thinking the puzzle through, coming out with options for next time: this is a good thing, and he’s not going to turn this into a shitfight by getting defensive. Knows himself—okay, he only gets defensive when there’s something there to defend. “Okay, what else have we got?”

*******

Later they’re showered and shaved and back at their tent city, and Dernier has scared up a few bottles of wine that are passing around hand to hand. Dugan’s shuffling the cards—there’s been some intense debate but the game of the night is euchre. Monty presses a bottle into Steve’s hands and follows it up with an elbow to the ribs.

“Gents, I’ve had a thought. If we get the Captain drunk enough he might just lose count of the cards, and we’ll actually stand a snowball’s chance in Hell.”

“I like how you think,” Dugan says, toasting Monty with the bottle in his hand. “Drink up, Cap, you cheating son of a bitch.”

Steve doesn’t mean to count the cards—if he wanted to cheat, Ulfadhir has taught him a dozen ways easier than card-counting. But—well, his memory’s eidetic, and there isn’t an off-switch for it. He’s gotta make sure to throw five outta six hands when they play poker, try and keep it fair. “Sorry guys, I don’t think I can get drunk. My metabolism,” he says, having a swig of the wine anyway. It goes down ugly and sharp as shrapnel.

“Clearly you’re not trying hard enough,” Jim says. “Have another go.”

Steve shrugs, lifts the bottle to his mouth again. Meets Dernier’s eyes across the circle, who tosses him a lop-sided smile and lifts the bottle in his hand. “Santè,” Frenchie says, leaning across and holding his bottle out, and Steve leans in to meet him, nudes the bottles together.

“Sláinte,” Steve says, keeping the eye contact going—toasting in France is serious business and there are protocols to be observed—as he leans back and has another, longer swig.

“That’s more like it,” Jim says cheerfully.

They’re six hands deep and three quarters of the wine is gone when the toasts start getting sloppy: “To whatever mad scientist pumped the Cap full of patriotic steroids: we’d all be dead as dormice without ‘im,” Dugan says, hoisting the bottle up and drinking, and everyone else with a bottle in hand follows suit. Steve drinks, thinks of Erskine: his patriotic steroids didn’t do dick, but he bet everything on Steve, gave him a shot when no one else would, and Steve won’t ever forget that.

“To the medic,” Steve says, and raises the bottle in Morita’s direction. “Who saved my bacon with baling twine and skill and profanity,” and then they’re all toasting Jim and he’s flipping them off, lighting a cigarette and grinning crooked, and it goes around: Jones toasting Frenchie’s home-baked explosives and Dernier toasting Dum Dum’s lunatic driving—he’d been hanging onto the back of the truck as they made their strategic withdrawal in Yugoslavia, has a unique appreciation for how Dugan takes corners at speed.

And then Monty’s grabbing a bottle from Jones and hoisting it towards Bucky: “To our eyes on high, a madman with a rifle. May your powder be dry and your crosswinds be fair.”
“You know no one’s had to manually powder-load a rifle since the 1830s,” Jones says, teeth flashing white as he half-smiles, and Buck’s rolling his eyes and having a swig of wine.

“I can work with crosswinds,” he says. “Kids’ stuff. Just give me decent sight lines, that’s all I ask,” and there’s a twist to his lips, a particular line to the set of his shoulders, and he’s not looking at Steve—not looking at him, not for days and fucking days, not unless he’s fucking bleeding out—

“I’m real sorry I didn’t want your dumb ass shot on first contact, Barnes,” Steve says, crisp and cold as a north wind off the Atlantic. “My Goddamn mistake.”

“I ain’t volunteering to catch the next bullet,” Bucky snaps. “But I’ve got a job to do, and I’m the only one here with the skill and the training to do it, and if I don’t do it right not one of us is safe, so if you could help me out instead of getting in my way that’d be fucking great—”

“Oh, you hypocritical son of a bitch,” Steve says.

Bucky cuts off cold, blinks. The silence stretches—Steve’s aware of the other Commandos staring back and forth between them, half-frozen like they’ve blundered into the middle of a dogfight and they’re trying to stay still and quiet enough to get back out unbitten. Bucky blinks again, wets his lips, and then rocks back, uncoiling, shifting his weight like he’s recovering from a punch. “That ain’t the same,” he says.

“Cram it with walnuts, Barnes,” Steve says, thrusts the bottle in his hand into Monty’s chest and gets up and walks because if he stays any longer he’s probably gonna bite someone. Probably one J.B. Barnes, hypocritical son of a bitch.

******

Once he’s clear of sight he ducks behind a storage shed, hauls out his dog tags, gets small. Wraps himself in a veil, as tight as he can make it, kicks off his boots and rolls up his sleeves and pads out into the night on bare feet.

He passes the perimeter guard and picks up speed, loam crunching underfoot, deeper into trees and forest, away from people, from—witnesses, bystanders. Walks like he’s got someplace to be, like he’s trying to beat the rush hour traffic home, fast and far enough that when he stops his breath’s coming thick and wet as porridge.

 Stops. Breathes. The night air is cool on his skin, stars steady and pale between branches overhead.

Throws the first hex—it comes up and through like magma from the core of him, tears a half-scream out with it like he’s ripped a fingernail out at the root—and the tree to his right comes down, crown splitting away from the trunk in a shower of splinters like shrapnel, and—

Second hex opens up the earth, a clean straight cut four feet deep and ten feet long into soil and mulch, and then—

By the eighth hex he’s on his knees in the leaf litter, clammy cold and breathing hard. There’s—there’s a tree on fire. There’s a hole where a good-size rock used to be. Looks like a tiny tornado or a really big fucking toddler just came through and then vanished again, and—shit. This is not his finest moment.
He doesn’t feel better. He’s not satisfied—he’s not wired for satisfaction. But—but hollowed out is better than half-crazed, better than—saying something he can’t, doing something he shouldn’t. Spilling over secrets and lies and bullshit like vomit spilling up and through, making—a mess. A Godawful mess.

Drops his head and closes his fists and lets out a long breath, and if it shakes on the way out there's no one to see it but him. “Okay,” he says. “Okay.”

********

Morning, mess tent, fat and potato smell of hash frying; the line for food is almost out the door. Steve spots Gabe, Frenchie and Bucky at a table in the back, heads together—and he can see the moment Bucky spots him back: how he shifts back on the bench, squares his shoulders, the look on his face sliding to neutral like he’d fall into parade rest. Like he's studying him for tells in a fistfight.

Christ: they're a mess, the pair of them. They're a walking garbage fire.

Steve joins the line, trains his gaze on the cowlick of the fella in front of him, does a few cycles of counting off his breaths and—and Dugan slides in next to him, tipping an imaginary hat in greeting. “In a better humour this morning, Cap?”

“I’m fine, I just—coffee,” Steve says, and then: “Morning.”

Jim and Monty show up while Steve’s waiting on breakfast, and when he takes a deep breath and heads over to the table, plate piled high with toast and hash, Falsworth looks up bleary-eyed from where he's slumped across the tabletop and says, “Ahh, waitress—be a dear and fetch me a cup of tea?”

“I don’t like your chances, Monty,” Steve says, jamming a wedge of toast in his mouth and kneeling the bench seat to shift it—Jim and Gabe shift with it, unflinching—and parking himself down.

“Bugger,” Monty says, and puts his head down again; of all the fellas he's clearly hurting worst, too much wine and not enough sleep.

“Where the Hell were you all night?” Jim asks, cradling a mug of chicory coffee between his palms. “Understand that I didn't actually miss listening to your Godawful snoring—”

“Holy Christ, Jim,” Dugan says, choked with laughter—

“—my concern is purely that of a medic for his patient,” Morita soldiers on—

“—you are the loudest snorer in the whole fucking front,” Dum Dum continues, his grin crooked. “I've heard shells detonate at close range quieter than you.”

“Slept hanging from a tree by my heels, like a bat,” Steve says, mumbling around a mouthful of hash.

“I would believe that,” Monty says into the nest of his arms.

“I'm surrounded by children,” Jim says. “Listen, I just want to make sure you're not about to keel over, okay? I was putting sutures in your carotid artery two days ago. I've got a duty of care.”
“Sorry, Jim,” Steve says. “The truth is, I was sleeping under a warm pile of naked USO girls.”

Gabe chokes on his coffee. Dugan pounds the table with a fist, laughing, howls, “And where was my invitation, you creep?”

“I don't believe that,” Monty says to the table top.

“Forget I asked,” Jim says. “Jesus.”

********

Steve’s cocking his head and working to get the last bits of fur from under his jaw—the place where the hair growth changes direction—scraping slow and careful with the straight-edged blade.

He's still not used to having to shave so frequent: his little body grows hair so slow he’s only gotta shave maybe once a month if that, but if he’s wearing his Cap shape he’s gotta fix himself up every damn day or he starts looking like a mountain man. He's not got much practice, and he's slow and deliberate, checking and double-checking, and fellas have given him shit for it in the past—taking too long at the tiny cracked mirror, must like looking at himself. So he comes and has his shave and shower mid-morning, after the rush is over and the hot water is long since a memory, because he doesn't feel the cold anyway and he gets the shower block more or less to himself, except—

—except the door is swinging open behind him, and he shifts a little to catch the doorframe in a corner of his mirror, sees a flash of white shirt and dark hair, and then Dugan is saying, “See, it's like I was telling you—just in here,” and then Bucky is shoved into the room, staggering, and the door is hauled close with a bang.

“What the Hell?” Bucky says, and then looks around, sees Steve in his undershorts and towel, frozen at the mirror with soap all over his face. “Oh, for crying out loud,” Bucky says.

“Right, gentlemen,” Monty calls, muffled through wood and brick. Bucky gives the door a shove with one hand—no movement. Monty continues: “While I appreciate you've got childhood squabbles and other horseshit behind the pair of you, your schoolboy feud is starting to—”

Bucky throws his weight against the door, good and hard. It bounces in the frame, daylight flashing for half a heartbeat before it slams closed again, and there's a matched set of oofs from whoever's holding it on the other side.

“Fuck,” Bucky mutters, slaps the door with an open hand.

“As I was saying: your horseshit is hurting the effectiveness of this unit, and if neither of you can be the bigger man then I bloody will,” Monty calls, sounding winded.

“Falsworth, is this—are you serious?” Steve asks, smearing the soap off his chin with a towel.

“Would you rather I took my concerns up the chain of command?” Monty calls back. “If our Captain and our marksman cannot work together without tearing chunks off each other, it cripples our effectiveness, our morale, and our safety. I am deadly serious.”

“Pete’s sake,” Steve growls. Bucky hits the door again. Hey, look at that, they’ve found common ground—hating the Hell outta this.
“So you're in there 'til you finish punching each other or yelling at each other or whatever it takes,”
Jim calls—Christ, are they all out there? Steve cocks his head and listens: five heartbeats, five
patterns of breathing, lightly accelerated. Plus a couple of gawkers. Yes: they're all out there. It's
really come to this.

“Or I can go get the Padre, see if he can talk you through your marriage troubles,” Dugan calls, and
Steve rolls his eyes, Bucky slumping and dropping his head to rest it against the door.

“Look,” Bucky calls. “I just gotta ask—who’s the wife in this scenario?”

The answer comes back jumbled, laughter and everyone talking over each other, and Bucky’s rolling
his eyes and straightening up, turning to face Steve. Steve’s dumped his towel in the sink and is
hauling his t-shirt on, because if this has gotta happen he’s not doing it half-naked.

There’s a long silence. Steve steps into his trousers and hauls them up, buttons the fly. Brushes out
some creases over his hips.

“So,” Bucky says.

“Do you think they remember that I can kick a door through the bricks if I really wanted outta here?”
Steve asks.

“Look, they ain't that bright,” Bucky says.

“You helped me pick ‘em,” Steve points out. Shifts to stand with his back to the bricks, arms crossed
and one leg bent and tucked up. Takes a deep breath and looks up, at Bucky.

“Jesus, don’t remind me,” Bucky’s saying, scratching at his head, other arm up and across his chest,
looking everywhere else. “What a bunch of assholes.” He finally stills, crosses his arms, looks up
and meets Steve's eyes. He's pale, dark sinkholes under his eyes, skin pulled tight around the mouth
—frustrated, tired. Another something they got in common.

“So,” Steve says, and at the same time—

“So it has come to my attention that I may be a hypocritical son of a bitch,” Bucky says, and Steve
freezes, blinks. “It—look, it ain't really the same,” Bucky begins, and Steve jumps in:

“It's a matter of scale, Buck, that's all it is.” He rubs at his head, getting his ducks in a row, wets his
lips. “You take a risk that the other fellas don't when you go off alone and climb a hill or climb a tree,
watch all of our backs while no one’s watching yours. And you've done the math in your head and
figured the risk is worth it to keep the rest of us safe, because there's no one else who can do what
you do. Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Bucky says, soft, closing his eyes like it's hurting him to say it.

“So I'm pretty Goddamn sure no one else has got the skill set that I've got, Buck. I could walk into
any camp, any fortress, get out again without anyone seeing me. Get our guys the intelligence we
need that could change everything. Men die when we fight on shit orders, on lousy intelligence. It's
criminal if I don't do it.”

“I know. Shit, you think I don't know?” Bucky asks, and his hands are shaking when they come up
and nest together at the back of his neck. “Christ. I still don't fucking know I'm not losing my
Goddamn mind—how? How the fuck do you do it, Steve? Because I don't understand how what
you're talking about is even possible.”
“Buck,” Steve says, helpless. “Don’t ask me that. Please. I can’t tell you—how I do it, how it works—it just does, okay? I can do this.”

“That ain’t good enough,” Bucky says. “I can’t—Stevie, fuck.” He puts his hands over his face. “Fuck,” he says again, rasping, muffled by the meat of his palms, and then he pulls his hands away and meets Steve's eyes again. “You—you said you need to go and show Carter. Which means she doesn’t know, which means—the SSR don't have the first idea what the Hell it is you can do, do they?”

Steve bites his lip, shakes his head no. “I—I wasn't sure. If it'd be safe. If they wouldn’t—put me in a box and poke me to figure out how I work. I—what I am.”

“You—” Bucky starts, stops. Goes very still. Flicks his gaze over to the bricks and just breathes for a minutes, slow and still.

When he speaks again it’s quiet as despair. “This ain't anything to do with the serum, is it? You're just—you've always been…”

Steve closes his eyes. He's spent hours practicing different faces in the mirror but he's got no control over what his face is doing right now, and everything in his chest and throat is pulling tight tight tight, tighter than asthma, so hard and fast he might puke. Brings his hands up to cover his face because he can’t look at Bucky right now, can't let Bucky see him right now.

The silence stretches out. His hands are shaking. He can hear Bucky breathing, the terrible slow sniper breathing he sinks into just before he pulls the trigger and hits his mark a thousand yards away. He can hear the fellas outside, talking low amongst themselves. He can hear the groan and churn of water in the pipes under his feet. He bites on the inside of his cheek until he tastes blood, until his face stops convulsing. Takes a breath, drops his hands. Looks up.

Bucky is watching him, quiet and still. “When your Ma said your Dad wasn't from around here, she wasn't fucking around, was she?”

Steve makes a noise like a kicked dog—it slips out before he can choke it off. “I don't know what I am, Buck,” he says, soft, and his voice is shaking, and Bucky lets his arms unfold and drop, puts his hands into his pockets.

“Vulnerable, is what you are,” Bucky says. “If you do this. You catch a bullet through the neck when you’re—the other you—you won't survive it.”

“I know that,” Steve says. “And I've done the math, and I figure it's worth the risk.”

“Okay,” Bucky says, and nods. “So I'm just gonna have to watch your back.”

Steve stills, blinks. “Buck,” he croaks after a minute. “You don't have to—”

“How many times we gotta have this argument, Rogers?” Bucky asks, and there are lines around his eyes like he's trying not to laugh, or cry. “No, I'm not gonna sit back with my thumb in my ass while you martyr yourself. Someone needs to watch your six, and I don't trust any other fucker to do it.”

“Jesus Harold Christ,” Steve says, and closes his eyes again. “Okay, pal. You wanna play, I'll deal you in.”

“Then deal,” Bucky says. “We haven't hit the end of the line yet. Now, what's your plan of attack for approaching Agent Carter?”
Chapter 19

Evening, ink black sky and biting insects and the whine of the electric floodlights splitting the night into shards of darkness and light. They're walking past the mess tent when Bucky shoves him in the shoulder, hard, points him down behind the tent into thicker darkness, off the beaten track, and Steve goes where he's pointed, turns once they're both deep in shadow and asks, “Where—”

“Here,” Bucky says, and catches him by the wrist, hauls back to turn him all the way so they're facing each other, almost eye to eye—Steve's just a little taller than Bucky, in this body. His hand stays locked around Steve's wrist, and Steve instinctively looks around, makes sure there's no angle they can be seen from like this, never mind that it's just a hand on an arm. He hasn't come this far to cop a blue discharge over hand-holding.

“Here,” Bucky says again, and then, “Okay, show me.”

“Show—what?” Steve asks, mouth going dry.

“Show me your party tricks,” Bucky says. “I'm on board, you've got me for this crusade of yours, but if you can’t break it down, how it works—I’ve gotta know what you can do.”


He reaches up, finds his dog tags through the fabric of his uniform. Presses a hand over them, closes his eyes and—one more deep breath for luck—starts to shift.

He doesn't open his eyes again until he's finished the change, small and Stevie-shaped again, the hum of his magic warm and throbbing under his skin, night music welling up deep and stately as a waltz all around them. Bucky is staring at him, at the place where his hand is still around Steve's wrist—now he's smaller, Bucky's fingertips overlap. His other hand comes up, brushes against Steve's side, curving to press against the curl of ribs under flesh. He's a little wild-eyed, hand shifting to squeeze and then pull away, fisting and opening like he's touched something—strange. Unexpected.

Steve swallows hard, whispers, “I gotta—” and tugs gently at the hand still in Bucky's grasp, and Bucky blinks and lets him go, watches silently as Steve steps out of his boots—he can't walk in them like this, they slide half-off his feet—and rolls up the hems of his trousers, shrugs off his jacket, rolls up the sleeves.

He stacks his boots and jacket on top of a stack of crates and anchors a quick and dirty veil over 'em—the boots he dumped last night were stolen by the time he got back, which came as no kind of surprise—and then turns back to Bucky. “Ready?” he asks.

Bucky nods, wets his lips, and Steve takes a breath, says: “You gotta—sorry. You’ve gotta stay touching me so I can—weave you into it.” Holds still and waits for Bucky to—grab him by the shoulder, or—

Bucky reaches out and takes his hand—for real this time, like they're sweethearts stepping out to the cinema, and Steve blinks, is so fucking grateful that it's dark because he can feel his face heating up—Christ on a bike. This is—he doesn't know what this is. Bucky's not his sweetheart, is so Goddamn angry with him and for good fucking reason, and now the slightest contact and Steve's gonna, what, hump the man’s thigh like a dog? Get it together, Rogers.

“Ready,” Bucky rasps, and Steve reaches in, grabs a fistful of fire from the well in his belly, and
weaves a walking veil around the both of them.

Steve opens his eyes again. If he goes by what he can see, what Bucky is able to see, then nothing’s changed. He’s not human, though: can hear the hum of the veil, can feel the distant pull of magic slowly moving through his body to keep the working together. “We’re hidden now,” Steve tells Bucky. “Which means—well, come on.”

They walk back out from between the tents, out into the main thoroughfare. It’s twenty-one hundred, so camp is mostly quiet but not deserted, soldiers coming and going quietly from tent to tent, standing watch. They pass through unseen, holding hands like schoolgirls, and no one remarks or looks their way, and Bucky is on high alert, eyes darting in all directions like he’s bracing for the worst—and the veil is solid.

At the edge of the camp Steve leads the way over to one of the fellas standing watch—he’s tall, lean, pale eyes, cold chapping on his hands and around his mouth, one thumb working an absent design on the butt of his rifle as he stares out into the pitch-black of the forest. They stop in front of him, about three feet away—close enough he’d fall into them if he took a step forward.

“See?” Steve asks, and when there’s a long silence from Bucky—he’s staring at the guard, face fixed, pale, startled—Steve continues: “He can't see us, can't hear us—”

Bucky reaches out to touch and Steve grabs his hand and hauls it back inches from the guard’s shirt front.

“Touch is a deal breaker,” Steve says. “We got touched, brushed, bumped into, the whole thing goes to pieces. I've always got watch where I am, where everyone is going, try and keep a safe distance.”

“Roger that,” Bucky whispers, still staring at the guard, fixed like he's been mesmerised.

Steve glances down, registers he’s still got both of Bucky’s hands in his. Lets go of one and tugs again, leads them on in a big circuit—round the perimeter of the camp, past another five guys on guard and on until they get to the main drag out of camp, the big guard station there—half a dozen fellas with rifles, big spotlights. They stop under one of those spotlights, stand in the centre of a massive pool of phosphorescent white light, and Steve waves brightly at the guys at the guard post. No one reacts.

“See?” Steve asks.

“Holy shit,” Bucky whispers. “How—are you doing this?”

“Christ, Bucky,” Steve says, helplessly, because even if he understood all the theory—which he doesn’t, doesn’t have the right *sensory array* to get his head around it, no matter how many teeny tiny words Ulfadhir used to break it down for him—even if he could explain the theory he physically can’t: the *geas*.

That’s J.B. Barnes all over: how does it work, what makes it go, like the universe at large is an engine that can be understood once you know all the different moving parts. “Don’t ask me that. How—how do you play piano, play a piece of music?”

“Hell of a lot of practice?” Bucky answers, quirking an eyebrow at him. “I get what you’re saying, though. Like art, not science.”

“Yeah, practice,” Steve says. “And that’s—yeah, art. Not engineering. I know I can do it, but how it works—God Almighty. How does poetry work, or Surrealism, or love?”
Bucky twists his mouth a little, mutters: “Be fucked if I know.”

Christ, they’re a train wreck. Steve's done this to them. He fucking knew this was going to blow up in their faces one day, the landmine in the living room waiting for someone to trip over it, but he kept right on putting on lipstick and ladies shoes and letting Bucky screw him into next week because—because when they’re not a slow-burn forest fire, the sex is great? What a clever reason to completely fucking trash his oldest and best friendship. Good call, Rogers.

He lets out a breath, and it only has a little shudder in it. As you were, soldier.

“So I can hold this kind of—of thing in place for about three hours,” Steve says. “After that it kind of—frays at the edges, and people start to notice you.” And then Steve needs a quiet lie down with a cold washcloth on his forehead—magic exhaustion is worse than being hungover, and Lord knows he’s done plenty of both in his early twenties.

“Okay,” Bucky says. “That’s not a bad trick. What else have you got?”

Steve blinks, takes a deep breath. “Come on,” he says, grabs Bucky’s hand and tugs again, leads them off the road and into the forest.

Under the tree cover the night is black as pitch, and Steve sets a good clip, walking as quick and sure as he would on a city street. Bucky’s hanging tight to Steve’s hand, booted feet leaving the softest trail of crunches and rasps in their wake—he’s silent as the grave when he’s scouting but they’re moving quick now and it’s dark, too dark for human eyes.

Steve keeps it up, keeps them moving north until they're about ten minutes out from camp. Close enough to get back to help if Nazis pop up out of the darkness—unlikely, not impossible—and far enough away that if his veil goes to pieces they won’t be spotted. Knock on wood.

There's a clearing where a tree has fallen, is rotting gently into the soil, and it smells of wet wood and fungus and moss, the white scatter of star fire visible overhead. Steve makes a quick circle of the clearing, touching the trees that form the perimeter as he goes and fixing the veil working in place.

“Okay,” Steve says, and it's the first time either of them has spoken for—for a while, his voice sounding way too loud in the murky quiet. “I've attached the—the thing that was hiding us to those trees, so now this whole clearing is hidden.”

“Huh,” Bucky says, working his hands absently, and then he walks over to the perimeter of trees and through, turns around to look. Steve can see his pupils contract to pinpoints, the instinctive superstitious fear that rolls over him before—“Stevie?” Bucky asks, eyes darting, and Steve walks over, puts a hand to the nearest tree and reinforces the veil where it's started fraying as Buck passed through.

Bucky is staring his way—musta been able to see him for a second there, or at least see part of him, and Steve wonders what it looked like: if he was translucent like a ghost or flickering like a movie reel on the fritz, maybe. Jesus, he’s a freak show, no wonder—but then Bucky reaches out, groping blindly, forges forward through the veil and into the clearing again. His hand catches Steve’s, weaves his fingers in like he needs to make sure he’s really here.

“Okay, that—that works,” Bucky says, and his voice comes rasping, raw like he's been breathing smoke, like he’s been screaming. “What else is there?”

“I—” Steve starts, stops again. Smiles. “I can look like other people.” He steps back, into the centre of the clearing. Reaches down into his power and starts weaving.
He's got a few seemings really fixed in his memory, ones he can pull out at a moment's notice in the field, but he doesn't want to suddenly be a Nazi Leutnant or a Hydra Scharführer right now, not with Bucky as tattered at the edges as he is, so—so try a different tack. Weave in soft blonde curls, crisp uniform skirt and jacket, curves and button nose and wide plump mouth. Stand as Private Lorraine, the WAC who'd tongue-kissed him in the SSR bunker under London, mimicking her head tilt and self-assured smirk.

Bucky makes a strangled noise, eyes wild and darting again. Steps forward slowly. “Stevie?” he asks, sounding punched-out breathless.

“It's still me, Buck. It's just smoke and mirrors,” Steve says, stepping in, head back so his—her—face is bare to the starlight, and Bucky reaches in and runs his knuckles over Steve's cheekbone. The seeming shudders and starts to unravel, falling away from him bit by bit: cheek and chin and hair and shoulders and down until he's revealed, just Steve again, barefoot and rumpled in too-big clothes. “Touch—touching breaks it down, so I gotta stay out of grabbing range.”

“Yeah,” Bucky breathes. “What else?”

“I can—look through the eyes of some animals. Birds, rabbits, foxes. Use ‘em to scout ahead, or get an aerial view of terrain.”

“And what else?”

“I can light fires,” Steve whispers. “Can't steer ‘em once they're lit, though, and it's not like we ain't got matches, so that's not a lotta use.”

“What else?” Bucky breathes. He hasn't moved—neither of them has moved, so they're still standing killing close, close enough to start dancing, close enough Steve can feel the warmth off him pooling against the bare skin of his forearms and face.

“I can make lights. Lights other people can't see, so they won’t give away our position.”

“And?”

“And I can do this,” Steve says, and pulls one of the small knives from the sheath under his belt in the small of his back. Throws the knife neatly, end over end, so it sinks clean into the bark of a tree, and then—fistful of magic, pull and twist and—flicks his fingers in a beckoning gesture. The knife pulls free and spins back to him on the same trajectory, and he shifts and snatches it out of the air by the hilt.

Bucky watches, eyebrows up. Blinks as Steve catches the knife and gives something like the ghost of his old crooked half-smile. “You're shitting me. What else?”

And—and that's about the end of the list. “I can tell when people are lying,” Steve says, tucking the knife away in the hidden sheath. “Can pick locks. I can turn into this big ugly slab-of-beef super soldier.”

Bucky huffs, and the ghost-smile widens a fraction. “Hey, don't talk like that about my fella.”

Steve's breath catches. He pulls in, coiling himself in hard and tight like a diamond so he's covering all the places in his chest and gut where he's been bleeding out for the last month. Centres himself so he's still and quiet as ice. “Your fella?”

Bucky goes still, shifts slowly so he's staring past Steve, into the forest. “Hell, I don’t even know anymore,” he says, dull, quiet.
Steve closes his eyes and makes a little animal noise of—*fuck*, fucking *Christ*, why is this so—*This —*shit. This shouldn't oughta be some kind of Homeric saga, Buck. It was never—it's just blowing off steam, just—"

"No," Bucky snarls. "No it ain't. It's ain't *just* anything, for Chrissakes. We passed that stop on the line a long fucking time ago, and I shoulda got off but I didn't, and now—I've tried getting quit of you, and I can't." He takes Steve by the shoulders, holding him bruising hard, and he's staring straight into Steve's eyes, fierce, blazing. "If all this is for you is—just helping each other out, then—then that's fine, okay? I'll take my pride and stow it, stand as best man on your fucking wedding day. But you don't get to tell me—I'd make an honest woman of you if I could, do you understand me?"

Steve's gaping, frozen and shaking and light-headed like he's bleeding out, like he gets when his asthma is bad and all the breath's been stolen from his body. He's—Jesus.

He was wrong, he is wrong, he's—Jesus, Mary and Joseph, how does he even get through the day, being this wrong? Bucky is—

Every time Steve thinks he understands what they are to each other, the landscape shifts again.

"Christ, Buck," Steve says, and it's punched-out, breathless, helpless, and then he throws his arms around Bucky's neck and hauls his face down, rocks up on his toes to meet him in the middle and kisses him.

Bucky makes a choked off sound—it's not a moan and it's not a growl but it's both, freezes for half a heartbeat and then parts his lips and licks into Steve's mouth and groans deep and guttural like he's dying. Grabs Steve by the ass and lifts—and Steve kicks his legs out and hooks them around Bucky's hips, moaning in reply and pressing closer, closer, arms winding tight and feet hooking together above Bucky's ass, opening his mouth and giving as good as he's getting, tongue and spit and teeth nipping.

And Bucky's moving, walking them quick-march until Steve's sandwiched against a tree, and Bucky's squeezing his ass like it's ripe fruit and grinding in with his hips, a slow hard roll of his pelvis. It's—oh, sweet Christ—his cock is pressing right to Steve's, and it's long and swollen and hot enough to set his blood right to fucking fire straight through four layers of fabric. Steve's dick sits up and begs—he's never got hard so fast in his fucking life.

"Buck," Steve moans, hips twitching forward without any kinda orders from his upstairs brain.

Takes one hand from Bucky's neck and threads his fingers into his hair, kissing him and kissing him like he's trying to devour the guy from the mouth down. Bucky slides his hands down, deeper, grabbing at the meat of Steve's ass and pressing his blunt fingertips together right in the seat of his pants, right where his asshole is, and Steve hitches his hips again, the fire in his belly roiling and sparking.

"Please, please, yes, please," Steve mumbles against Bucky's lips, rolling his pelvis and feeling all the muscles in his ass relax and contract against the press of Bucky's hands. Buck rumbles low, digs in with his fingers, breaks the kiss.

"Ain't got any slick," he says. "I'm not gonna hurt you."

"Goddamn it," Steve pants, keeps rolling his hips. Jesus, he's this heated up just feeling Bucky's dick through their pants—if they ever get naked he might die on the spot. "You won't hurt me. Just—can't you just spit on it or something?"

"Fuck's sake, who are you going to bed with that's just using fucking spit? I'm gonna kick their ass,"
Bucky mutters, drops his head to bite a kiss into the side of Steve's neck. Steve writhes harder—
teeth, teeth, sweet Hell, yes—and then his brain catches up with his dick and he stops, grabs Bucky
by the hair and hauls him back up so they're eye to eye.

“No one,” he says, catching Bucky by the nape of his neck, both hands, deep eye contact. “There's
no one else, okay? You're it for me, a stór.”

Bucky stares at him, eyes darting like he's processing, and then he bites his lip and closes his eyes
and drops his head so they're forehead to forehead. “Hell,” he breathes. “I wanna do bad things to
you, darlin’.”

“Works for me,” Steve says. “Got a few ideas for you too.” He rolls his head to the side, finds that
spot where Bucky's jaw meets his neck, nips and mouths at it and grinds his hips in. Christ—he'll
swear before God there's a wet spot forming between the two of them, straight through four layers of
cloth. Can feel Bucky's pulse in his cock where it's pressed against his.

“Christ on a crutch,” Bucky mutters, head back like he's praying in earnest, and then he shifts his
weight back and lowers Steve until he untangles his legs and drops them down, stands on his own
two feet again. Bucky lifts his hand, ring and pinky finger extended, and presses the fingertips to
Steve's mouth. Steve grins, opens up, sucks those fingers in like they're penny candy. Takes 'em
deep and works his tongue like something out of a blue book, meeting Bucky's eyes. Steve's
blushing like a tomato, can't stop trying to smile even with half a hand in his mouth.

“That's it, doll,” Bucky rasps, low and smoky. “Get 'em good and wet.”

Steve pauses, rolls his tongue up Bucky's fingers until he spits them out. “Can I suck you off?”

Bucky makes an injured noise and twitches like someone's pinched him somewhere tender, drops his
head so it's on Steve's shoulder. “Jesus. Hold your horses, will you?”

“Missed you,” Steve says, simply, and then grabs Bucky's hand and goes back to giving it the best
suck job he's got.

Bucky rumbles low in reply, snugs in close enough to drop a kiss on Steve's temple and then press
his mouth into Steve's hair, drop his spare hand to Steve's pants and starts to—oh Lord, lightest brush
of fingertips, tracing 'round his dick through the fabric. Steve's hips snap forward into it and he's
gotta close his eyes and take a deep breath because he's too damn close to creaming his shorts like
he's thirteen. He can feel Bucky grinning, the press of his teeth on Steve's crown.

“Please, Buck,” Steve mumbles around a mouthful of fingers.

“I've got you,” Bucky says, steps back and withdraws both hands. Sheds his jacket and drops it to
the forest floor between them. Steps in again, stooping to kiss Steve, and Steve rocks into it, up on
his bare tiptoes, and then Bucky's hands are at his waist, tugging urgently at his fly. And then Steve's
trou are down to mid-thigh, and Bucky steps back again, flicks him a Hollywood wink, and drops to
his knees.

“Oh God, oh God,” Steve says, senseless, and Bucky's swallowing down the length of his cock, his
mouth blazing hot and wet and tight, and he's—fuck, he's got his nose pressed right to Steve's pubic
bone, and how does he even do that, oh Lord it's no wonder this is illegal because anything this good
—and he's got one hand anchoring Steve's hips and the other snaking around behind, one spit-wet
pinkie pressing against his asshole. Rocking in and out, just the very tip, and then just to the first
knuckle and then just a little more, a little deeper, stroking in, hot and hard. Steve's toes are curling
into the leaf litter.
“Oh Christ,” he gasps, and Bucky’s curling his finger, beckoning, and it’s not deep enough to hit his sweet spot but it’s so close that it’s just—edging him, brushing again that savage jolting pleasure but not quite, and the fires in Steve's belly are blazing up into his chest, coiling in lines of heat and light around his lungs and into his heart and surging, surging, lifting, swelling. “Sweetheart, Buck, please. I’m gonna—I won’t last, you gotta—”

—and he's half begging him to stop and half begging him to keep going, and Bucky gets the second message, works his finger in deeper and sucks until his cheeks hollow. Steve can see tongue and jaw working through his stubble and skin. His mouth is fucking sinful, is liquid heat pulling gasps and moans and stupid animal ecstasy through Steve like he's hollowed out. His hands are in Bucky's hair, grabbing by the handful and pulling, and he should stop but he's not—not steering anymore.

“Ahh,” he says, helpless, fingers and toes curling and spine arching and fire licking up into the very base of his skull and the night forest music is a vast chorus filling him and filling him, music and fire and sweet heat and life and—

—and some dying flicker of thought makes it through the hurricane—shit, fuck—one hand offa Bucky and clap it to the tree because if he short-circuits again he’ll—fucking Christ, God—

When he comes it's blinding, fire spilling from his eyes and pores like it's too much for his body to contain, tearing through him and out like a storm, thunder and lightning shredding the sky and rolling through, on and on, and he's blazing and tearing to pieces with it, like his very being is eroding with the sheer fucking violence of it, and then the storm passes—

—and he hears himself, his mouth, sobbing, “Oh,” and it's the last in a long string of ohs, and he's a mouth again, a body, arms and legs and a cock, one hand tangled in Bucky's dark hair, and there's bark in his hair from smashing his head back against the tree as he came. He pries his eyes open, looks down: Bucky's grinning, licking his lips, his hand cupped loosely around Steve's dick.

“Mary, Mother of God. You’re so fucking pretty when you lose your mind,” Bucky rasps, and then he's reaching forward with his spare hand, catching Steve around the hips and scooping forward. “C'mere, love,” he says, and Steve lets himself be manhandled, pulled down until he's knelt up on Bucky's jacket and Bucky's mirroring him, leaning in to kiss Steve on the mouth as sweet and tender as anything, tasting salty-sweet. And then there's blunt wet pressure at his back door again, and Steve hums and shifts to spread his legs a little—

It's Bucky—a finger, and it's slick but not cold, it's—

Oh Christ Almighty.

Bucky grins, brings his hand back and smears more of Steve's spend onto his fingers. “Hey, I found some slick,” he says.

“Are you really—” and yes, he's reaching around again to press two fingertips to Steve's asshole, wet, come rolling down onto his palm. “Jesus, Barnes. That's filthy.”

“You want I should stop?” Bucky cocks his head, raises his eyebrows, pushes his fingers in and twists. It's too much of a good thing, electricity sparking white up his spine and honey-heat pooling in the bowl of his pelvis, so good it hurts and if Bucky actually stops Steve might just fucking die—

“Hell no,” Steve groans, and he's blushing hot and red as a spotlight, dropping his head to bury it in Bucky's shoulder. “God, don't stop.”

Bucky shakes with silent laughter, presses his lips to the side of Steve's head. “That's it, Stevie,” he
rumbles into Steve's hair, “Christ, you're tight. So hot and tight and sweet for me. You're doing perfect, you're aces, that's it—spread those thighs and open up, I'll give you what you need—” and Steve quakes from head to toe and grabs for Bucky's fly. Finds it and opens up by touch, gets his trou shoved to mid-thigh and then goes back for his undershorts.

Bucky’s dick is hard enough to drive nails, hot and wet and leaping to meet his hand as he palms it through the cloth of his shorts—“Shit,” Bucky breathes, rough and fierce like it's been punched out of him, and his hips jolt forward against the weight of Steve's hand.

“Oh Christ,” Bucky moans into Steve's hair, and the twisting and scissoring of his fingers kicks up a gear, plunging deep into Steve's ass and pulsing and opening, opening. Steve hands shake as he gropes for the waistband and eases it down over the rise of Bucky's cock. It's—the heat in his gut is spiralling up his spine again, and here he was thinking he was done and dusted—there's a wildfire in his pelvis, licking up into his gut, stirring him, setting his hips to rolling again.

“Buck, please,” he mumbles into Bucky's shoulder, palms his cock, works the slick head with his thumb and then slowly inches his way down the shaft, and—

“Unh,” Bucky groans, hips jumping again, and then, “God, fuck. You ready, doll? Please tell me you're ready—”

“C’mon,” Steve slurs, hitches his hips for emphasis. “I was born ready, I've been ready for the last year, give it to me—”

The noise Bucky makes is low-pitched and like a wounded animal. He hauls his hand out—sudden cold and empty, empty, and Steve gasps—and then Bucky's kissing him hot and urgent—tearing away to grab Steve by the hair and shoulder and—and pushing him down, hands and knees with his ass in the air. Knee-walks around, lithe as a hunting cat, dropping kisses on Steve’s lower back and shoulder blade as he frames his body with his own, presses the length of his dick into the cleave of Steve's ass.

“Yes,” Steve hisses, emphatic, writhing to push back into his weight, “Yes, sweetheart, please, yes,” and Buck drops one hand down to—and that's the blunt head of his cock pressing—and yes, Christ, God, yes—

The stretch and burn is—it's so much, it's—and Steve drops his head, rests his forehead on his hands and bites his lip to strangle long keening moan that's welling up and through him like floodwater. “Jesus, Stevie,” Bucky breathes out, “Mother of God. Are you okay?” He doesn't let up, relentless, but it's slow, so slow, inch by inch, one hand on Steve's hip and the other up on the middle of his back, warm and heavy.

“It's been a while,” Steve grits out. “You ain't hurting me, I swear to God,” and it's only a little white lie: because it does hurt but he's lived with chronic illness most of his Goddamn life, and there are days when breathing hurts but that doesn't mean you stop.

And then Bucky's hips are pressing to the curve of his ass and Steve can feel every damn inch of him inside, like the end of him is lodged up near Steve's diaphragm. Bites his lip again to keep the whimper from spilling out. Bucky's moving, slow and gentle, the slightest rocking in and out pulse. “Okay?” he asks again, and his voice is ragged at the edges, the hand on Steve's back working in a slow circle likes he's soothing a spooked horse.

“I dare you,” Steve says, breathless, lifting his head up again and twisting to look over his shoulder, “to ask me if I'm okay one more Goddamn time.”
Bucky barks out a startled laugh, stills for a moment, and then pulls out slow and syrupy until only the head of him is inside—and slams home again, fast as a piston firing, hard enough to knock Steve forward onto his elbows.

“Fuck,” Steve snarls, and—oh God, the switch is flipped—it was honey and then it was burning pain and now it's fireworks, it's electricity, it's lightning, arcing up inside him like his whole body is dry tinder. “Jesus Christ, yes,” he growls, and shoves back, and he can just hear Bucky laughing breathlessly past the music pounding at him, night music and forest music, Steve music and Bucky music and the harmonic weaving-together that happens when they're fucking.

And then Bucky's anchoring two hands on Steve's hips, fucking into him hard and fast and sloppy, filling him up again and again, and every damn time the fire stokes up higher, flowing into veins and arteries and out from the central channels into his arms and legs and fingers and toes, running down the slope of his back and into his head, blazing like—

The last time he felt this full with the fires of making and unmaking was just before he went into the Vita Ray cradle, when Ulfadhir let his magic off its leash for the first time. Like it's spilling through his skin, like he's hollowed out of bones and thought and memory so the terrifying vastness of the fucking universe can flow through him. He's—its—

He's still there in a few places: his cheekbone, where it's pressed into Bucky's jacket. His hips, the tight press of hands. His ass, and Bucky's cock, stroking deep into him, the rhythm tattered as Buck drags himself closer to the edge—and Steve isn't gonna come again, no way in Hell, but he's still spiralling up and up, coiling tighter and tighter.

Somewhere, Bucky is panting out his usual stream-of-consciousness filth. Somewhere there are knees and elbows that belong to someone, starting to ache. Somewhere there are two soldiers fucking in a forest at night, but—but the music is bigger than the sky, louder than shelling. The heat and light is vast, pouring into him, through him, and he's an outline, an artwork incomplete: the suggestion of flesh edges and an insane supernova within.

And then—

It's not like borrowing. When he leaves his body to go borrowing he's still himself, condensed and coherent awareness, singular. This is:

This awareness is trees, many trees, a network of roots and branches, the sweet flow of water and sap through green-blood veins.

This awareness is rocks and leaf litter, mulch and soil, the writhing web of life: bugs and worms, nets of fungi in chattering communion.

This awareness is night birds, voles, a sleeping family of rabbits, a dozen forest mice.

This awareness is the movement of night air, exhaled from leaves and stirring slowly through the canopy.

This awareness is Bucky Barnes, reaching his orgasm with a jolt of clean pleasure that ripples through the web of greater awareness.

This awareness is more trees again, is gently flowing wider and wider, deeper and higher: glacial shift of rock layers underground, fluid interweaving of clouds meeting and merging, elegant and slow.

This awareness is soldiers standing watch, soldiers sleeping, quietly moving around, praying and
reading and drinking and fucking. This awareness is the singing of night air across tent canvas and
guy ropes.

This awareness is—

Ripple of distress. Of—fear: it's sharp, jagged, cutting away clarity, and this awareness contracts
towards it, away from clouds and sleeping soldiers, in and in towards—

Bucky. Buck, a stór, what's wrong—

“S’wrong?” Steve manages to get out, and… and. Mouths are hard. Shit, how do mouths work
again?

“Shit, Steve? Can you hear me, love? Christ on a bike—”

“Buck? I'm here,” Steve slurs, confused because where the Hell else would he be—

Oh. Oh, right. Shit.

Pries his eyes open. Bucky is knelt over him, wild-eyed and pale, and he's put Steve into the
recovery position on his side—like he'd learned to do way the Hell back when they were kids and
Steve still had seizures.

Oh, God. How long was he out for?

Steve lifts a hand, and it's wobbly but he steers it towards Bucky's face. Bucky catches it, cups it
between his big palms. “Stevie, are you—I—you said I wasn't hurting you,” he stops, starts, and the
last part falls out of him in a rush, ragged. Jesus Christ: Steve hasn’t seen Bucky cry since his Da
died, but he looks Goddamn close to it now. For pity’s sakes, Steve can't even have sex without it
turning into a freak show.

“You didn't hurt me,” Steve says, pulls Bucky's hands down to his mouth and pressing kisses to his
fingers. “You've never hurt me, I swear—” Not worse than Steve can stand, anyway, “—you just…
blew the top of my Goddamn head off.” He tries a sheepish smile—Christ Almighty, he feels higher
than God.

This is worse than being drunk. It’s taking everything he's got to make sure his words and
expressions and gestures are all lining up. What the Hell just happened? “I'm sorry, sweetheart.”

“Shit,” Bucky says again, slumps forward and puts his face in his hands for a moment, surfaces again
and grabs Steve's face, leans in and kisses him hard on the forehead. “Don't fucking do that to me,
okay? You're giving me grey hairs over here.”

“I'm gonna give you more grey hairs before we're done,” Steve says, and it spills out of him like gin
from a chipped tumbler, like blood from a burst artery. “I'm sorry, Buck. I know it scares the life
outta you, but I've gotta do it.”

“I know you do,” Bucky says, closing his eyes. “I know. You wouldn't be you if you weren't—this
—stubborn obnoxious piece of shit who's gotta save the world by lunchtime. I knew who you were
when I signed on for this.”

Steve gives him a smile, pulls him by the nape back down for another kiss. “Thank you,” he
whispers against Bucky's forehead—for coming along on his one-man crusade, for seeing the
entirety of Steve's freak show and still sticking with him, for seventeen years of loyalty that Steve can
only fucking aspire to be worthy of.
“Yeah, well,” Bucky says, sitting back and shrugging like it ain’t a thing, and then, “Come on, get your lazy ass up and moving, Rogers. You’ve got a date with a dame, and we gotta impress her.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There's a cluster of old buildings—some type of mechanical workshop and a few outbuildings—that this base was built around, and Peggy's been lodged in a room on the second level above the workshop floor. It's tiny and dark, smells gently of old rust and grease like it's soaked over the years into the wood and stone of this place, but it's private, and they need private. Finding it was the hard part: he can't just ask, not as a fella—there's no good reason for him to be asking where his female colleagues are sleeping—so he's gotta conjure up a WAC-shaped illusion and ask like that before anyone will give him usable intel.

From there it's a cakewalk: a veil, some lock picks and they're in, Bucky trailing behind with a finger hooked through Steve's belt loop to stay close, inside his walking veil.

Steve’s… he's halfway queasy, just—just knowing someone’s looking over his shoulder, seeing him, how sneaky and dishonest and fucking unnatural he is. But he's also—it ain't pride, but it's something. A warmth in his chest.

He's trained his whole life to do this, he's good at this, and he's using it like it was meant to be used, and—and Bucky is still right there, hand warm on Steve's skinny hip, watching him work. All the hard angles and thin lines are gone from his face, his body language. He's steady, as still as he gets right before he takes a shot.

Peggy's room is cold, dark, empty—she must be in the mess tent or the shower block, or attending her own debriefing maybe. There's a narrow desk jammed against one wall, a single bed against the other, and the rucksack and battered clothes chest with Peggy's gear in 'em have been piled on the floor at the end. Stacked papers with a notebook and a copy of *The Collected Sonnets of William Shakespeare* sit on the desk, along with a bottle of port—Peggy's clearly prioritised what she needed to unpack first.

"Shit," Bucky mutters, and—oh, right. Normal people don't see in the dark like Steve does. Grabs Bucky's hand and threads his song into the working as he casts a quick ghostlight, sending it up to pool just under the water-stained ceiling.

Bucky cranes his head back to watch the light, its sleepy shifting and pulsing, the cold green-white light striking shadows off his cheekbones and chin. “Holy Hell, Stevie,” he says.

“It's okay, only we can see it,” Steve says, steps around Buck in the narrow wedge of floor space and closes the door behind them, flips the lock over. Stops with his hand on the door and takes a breath. “Okay,” he says. “Here goes everything.”

“You ready for this?” Bucky asks, low-voiced, and Steve makes an inelegant snorting noise.

“Buck, I'm still… having palpitations just ‘cause you know, and you've known me my whole damn life,” Steve says, combing his fingers into his hair. “I don't know if I'll ever be ready for… But this is important. Too important to walk away from. And I do trust Peggy. She already knows about…” He trails off, waves a hand back and forth between the two of 'em.

Bucky raises his eyebrows, makes the hand wave gesture back, turns it into a cupped palm and a quick jerking movement, and then when Steve starts to smile he lifts his hand to his mouth, still
wrapped around an imaginary length, tucks his tongue into his cheek to make a bulge, head cocked in a look of innocent enquiry. Steve makes a strangled noise, buries his blushing face in his hands. “Christ, Buck.”

Peggy returns ten minutes later, dressed like she's been in the field: hair braided, leather jacket, trousers tucked into her boots, washed pale with exhaustion. Steve sees her make a quick visual scan of the room, eyes glancing off them where they sit veiled; then she closes the door and flips the lock, makes her way by touch to the side table and lights the lamp, floods the tiny room with soft amber light. She's standing close enough he can smell her, sweat and dirt and something kind of vanilla sweet.

Steve lets the veil over Bucky fall away, reveals him sitting over at the desk with a tin mess cup of Peggy's port in one hand. Buck reaches down and knocks lightly at the desk, like he's door-knocking, and Peggy half turns towards the door, catches him from the corner of her eye and—

Startles like a cat, jolting in her skin and hands curling into fists and yelling, “Oh—oh, bloody Nora.” She stills, one hand going up to the loose bits of hair falling out of their pins at her hairline. “Sergeant Barnes, you startled the life out of me. There had better be a damn good reason for this.”

“I’m sorry, Agent,” Bucky says, leans forward to rest his elbows on his knee, flicks his gaze down to the cup in his hands like it might have the answers. “I'd never—” He waves a hand to encompass the whole scene—the two of 'em, in her private quarters in the middle of the night. “Put you in an uncomfortable position, normally. But this had to be your eyes only.”

Peggy straightens, turns more to face him directly. “What have you learned?”

“First, I gotta ask. How did I get in here?” Bucky asks, and he's meeting her eyes again, and she's gone very still, every line in her face and body like razor wire. “Did you see me when you first came in? You had a look around, right?”

There's a heartbeat pause, and then Peggy cocks her head. “I must have missed you,” she says slowly. “The room was dark.”

“You normally miss details like that?” Bucky asks.

“I don't know where this is going, but I'd appreciate if it got there faster,” Peggy says, and there's a hard edge in her tone like she's not far off gritting her teeth.

“Okay, sure. Last question,” Bucky says. “You positive we're alone in here?”

“Quite positive,” Peggy says, “Barnes—” and then Steve drops the second veil, uncovers himself where he's sitting cross-legged on Peggy's bed, maybe half a foot from her elbow, and the strangled yelp of astonishment that comes out of her is unearthly.

“What—” she yells, and then: “Steve. How—how on Earth did you—” She stops, stares at him, looks over at Bucky and then back to him. He's wearing an illusion, making himself look Cap-sized—one nasty shock at a time, he figures—so she's making fierce eye contact with the illusion somewhere over his head. “How is it possible? Is it—did Howard? Or did you capture the technology from Hydra?”

“There's no technology involved, Agent Carter,” Steve says, and his voice comes thin but clear. “It's not a device, and it's not a drug, and it's not a trick. It's me.” He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes. “I'm sorry, Peggy. I'm so Goddamn sorry. I've been lying from the beginning.”

He shudders, squeezes his hands into fists, and lets the illusion fall away. Sits bared to her gaze, bare
feet and bony limbs and hard angular wrists where the cuffs on his too-large shirt are rolled back. Opens his eyes again.

She's gone white, mouth fallen open in what is probably one of the first totally honest and uncensored expressions he's ever seen on her face. Then she unfreezes, pulls the gun from her hip, and levels it at Bucky's forehead. “Start talking,” she snarls at Steve.

“Shit,” Bucky says, softly, gone very still. “She's got your number, Stevie.”

“I did invade Austria for your dumb ass,” Steve says; he's bled cold, sweat lighting an icy track down the length of his spine. A shot at this range will turn Bucky's brain into three pounds of grey-pink jelly. Jesus, he’s gotta get this right—

“Peggy, I swear to Christ I'll explain. I came here tonight to tell you the truth because—well, I ain't a spy, but I've never been normal either, and I've hidden in plain sight for twenty-four years and counting. And I hear that hiding in plain sight is a skill that you've got a use for, and it'd be criminal if I didn't—with what I can do, I mean.” He shuts up, bites his lip to keep from rambling more, and he's watching her, her eyes, shoulders, mouth, the hand with the gun—

She flicks on the safety, slides the gun back into the holster. Squares her stance so she's facing him head on. “Go on,” she says.

“Lord above,” Peggy says twenty minutes later, watching Steve slap out the flames he's just conjured up between his palms. “Jesus Christ and all the little fishes, I can't… Schmidt has gone to the kind of trouble and expense that bankrupts nations in his search for occult power, and you're just…” She waves a hand at him, his Steve-ness. Steve shrugs, makes a sheepish face. “Are there others like you?” Peggy asks.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” Steve says. “I figure there must be—I can't be the only one—but I've never met anyone else that can…” He trails off before the geas can choke him. “It's not like I can advertise, not if I don't wanna end up—in a nut house or a jail cell or a zoo, on a table bein’ poked and cut into, in a pine box. So it's always just been me.”

“The world is not ready for more than one of you, Rogers,” Bucky rumbles, pouring another couple fingers of port into his cup.

“And what is your part in this, Sergeant Barnes?” Peggy asks. “Do you have some shocking supernatural abilities to unveil?”

Bucky snorts. “There’s nothing special about me,” he says. “I'm here because God saw fit to give Steve occult power instead of sense, and someone's gotta keep him from doing anything stupid.”

“Buck,” Steve says, protests, and Bucky points a finger at him.

“Don't you start with me,” Bucky says. “You don't have a leg to stand on. Last time I left you unattended for more'n two minutes you volunteered to let the government irradiate your ba—behind.”

“So what are you proposing, Captain Rogers?” Peggy asks, shifting to sit perched with her butt on
the edge of the bedside table. Her eye contact is incisive, dissecting. Steve looks down, wets his lips, takes a breath.

“I figure there's no place in the world I can't walk into, if I put my mind to it,” Steve says. “And walk out again without a soul knowing I was there, which I guess is the important part. And I know how much it matters, getting current intelligence, accurate intelligence. So I guess I'm volunteering. Again.”

Peggy nods. She's keeping her face neutral but he can see the fire licking just under the surface, the tension in her shoulders like a racehorse eyeing off the track. “I'll need to see further demonstrations of what you can do,” she says. “Establish where your limitations are. But I do believe we can use you, Captain.”

“I've got conditions—” Steve begins; she's said we and all the hairs on his arms stand up at once—

“I expect you would,” Peggy says calmly.

“It can only be you,” Steve says. “I won't—I can't. No one else can know, Peggy. I trust you but for the rest… The more people who know means the more ways people can find out, and I still don't plan on ending up in a cage so science spooks can cut pieces offa me, try to find ways to weaponise what I do.”

“That will never happen in the SSR under my watch, nor Colonel Phillips—” Peggy says, fierce, rolling her weight forward, and Steve shakes his head, leans forward and meets her gaze.

“I trust you, Agent Carter. But I also remember Dr Erskine dying in a secured lab because his assassin walked in with Brandt's entourage. You gonna vouch for every scientist and spy and soldier and aide and lab technician and consulting expert and all their hangers-on and close personal friends —”

“All right,” Peggy says, pursing her lips and sitting back again. “Point made.”

“I'm sorry, Peggy,” Steve says. “I know that puts you in a Hell of a position, keeping secrets from your colleagues.”

She's pressing the side of her thumb to the red bow of her mouth, and her gaze has gone distant like she's doing the math in her head. “The reward is worth the risk,” she says after a heartbeat pause. “And I'm scarcely the first operative to have assets in the field whose identities they can't reveal.” She smiles, slow and lovely, showing the white of her teeth. It's wolfish, a baring of fangs. “We're going to make some stuffy old men very angry.”

“I'm sorry,” Steve says again.

“Oh, don't apologise, I find that refreshing,” Peggy says, and then cocks her head at him and smiles. “Shall we begin?”

******

The next day—

“Thank you, gentlemen. That will be all,” Peggy says, neatly placing her pen across the page of
scrawled shorthand, and the Commandos move as one, pushing back from the table, Dum Dum
snatching up his hat from where it's hung from his knee, and then over the scrape of chairs Peggy
adds, “Captain Rogers, Sergeant Barnes. I will need you to stay on.”

“Oh boy,” Jim breathes, and—

“Lord, the head matron is involved. You're in for it now,” Monty mutters to Bucky, and then they
file out and Peggy waits to a count of ten, gets up and flips over the lock on the door. Turns back and
flashes Steve a faux-saucy smile.

“Wouldn't you like to slip into something more comfortable?” Peggy asks, and Steve rolls his eyes,
shifts his seat out from the table, starts rolling up his sleeves.

“Years I spent, trying to find this mook a date,” Bucky says. “And I think that's still the closest he's
come yet to a lady trying it on.”

“I am not that beyond hope, Buck,” Steve says. “I've been with—uh,” he stops, looks over at Peggy,
presses his lips together. Can feel his face starting to light up red with his stupid schoolgirl blush.

“When did this happen?” Bucky asks, sitting forward and grinning. “You didn't say anything.”

“I'm not gonna kiss and tell, and anyway she was—uh, she preferred the company of ladies but her
date stood her up and we took pity on each other and this is not a story for mixed company, Barnes.”

“Oh, don't mind me, I'm sure,” Peggy says mildly, sitting at the table and crossing her legs.

“Somewhere in Brooklyn, my mother just got the urge to scrub a mouth out with soap, and she
doesn't know why,” Bucky says, and Steve rolls his eyes again and then closes them, takes a breath,
grabs his dog tags and makes the change.

Two hours later he's on the floor with a wet cloth over his eyes and a whole collection of bruises
blooming on his arms, hips, knees, chin.

“You have a totally different combat style like this,” Peggy says from somewhere overhead,
breathless. “Where did you receive your training?”

“Guh—” Steve says, before the *geas* chokes him off, and then, “No one.”

“You can really throw a punch,” Bucky says to Peggy. It comes out muffled—he's still rubbing at his
jaw where she's clipped him. He ducked, but not fast enough.

“Are you surprised?” Peggy asks.

“Guess I shouldn't be,” Bucky says. “Looks like Steve's got a type.”

“God, there's two of you now,” Steve says. “Why are there two of you now?” Christ on a bike, his
head hurts like a huge pair of hands is grabbing him by the temples and squeezing.

Two hours of veils, illusions, every stripe and flavour he's got in his arsenal and some extras Peggy
demanded, seeing how he can adapt on the fly: “Mae West, now, if you please.” And then combat,
first just Peggy and then her and Buck both coming at him, gauging his response to different
attackers, different styles. Calisthenics, pushups and jumping jacks, and then a lie down, please and
thank you. Christ, but he's done in.

“I can use you, Captain Rogers,” Peggy says, “I can certainly use you.” And Steve peels the cloth
off his face and cracks an eye open to stare up at her, standing over him with hands planted on her hips and that narrowed-down look of calculation on her face.

******

Here is the deal:

Training, and then yet more training—“You're good,” Peggy says, rubbing at her shoulder. “Honestly far better than you ought to be, with no formal tuition—” and Steve bites the inside of his cheek to keep from pulling a face. He’s found work-arounds for most of what the geas covers, but he can’t so much as hint at Ulfadhir’s existence. “But there's more I can teach you.”

He's to work on his veils—“Practice, see if you can build up your stamina, move more swiftly and stay unseen. We can't know until you're in the thick of it but you may need to be hidden for hours at a time. Days, if you're moving through tightly held or contested territory.”

And he's always gotta have a backup plan, in the shape of one J.B. Barnes, Sergeant—“If you're injured, or exhausted,” and Peggy waves a hand at him on the floor. He’s managed to sit up now, no longer spread-eagled like a baffled virgin on her wedding night. “You've a broader range of options like this, but you're a lot less durable.”

As Bucky's helping him up from the floor, Peggy is already pacing, fingers curled and tapping at her chin, eyes hard and fixed on a target only she can see. “I'll compile a list of high value targets that an invisible man might be sent to infiltrate,” she says, and then: “A final question, and I don't need your answer right away. How would you feel if some of your assignments were officers or operatives of value, rather than sources of intelligence?”

“Are you asking me if I’m prepared to kill in the course of my missions?”

“As the central goal of your mission,” Peggy says. “If I gave you the name of a general to assassinate, say, on the eve of a big push forward, to maximise chaos and confusion in the ranks of the enemy.”

“I'm a soldier, Peggy. I've got plenty of blood on my hands.”

“It's different,” she says firmly. “Please don't leap into this, because it is different. You'd be killing not to defend your own life, or your fellow soldiers, but in cold blood, perhaps while your target is defenceless. You’ll have sought them out for that sole purpose. It's an altogether different kind of animal.”

“She's not wrong, Stevie,” Bucky says, low, and Steve looks at him, blinks, but then—Bucky's a sniper. Most of the men he kills never see him coming. It ain't the same at all as the kind of killing they do on the ground, and there's something hollowed out and a little sick in Bucky's expression right now. Steve wants to—just, grab him by the face and press kisses over his eyelids and cheeks, like he can make it better. Like he can absolve him.

Christ, as if he could—it's been too damn long since he's seen the padre himself. This afternoon, for sure.

“Okay,” Steve says, resists the itch in his hands to grab onto Bucky and squeeze—not in front of Peggy. He looks back to her, meets her gaze again. “Okay, I'll think about it. Answer is still gonna
be yes, though. I'm not above getting my hands dirty.”

“Very well,” Peggy says, and then Steve unrolls his sleeves and trouser cuffs, takes a deep breath and pulls the Cap shape into the front of his mind. The song—it’s drifted, over the months since he first cobbled it together in his head. Sounds an awful lot like Star Spangled Man, now.

When they're leaving the SSR complex, one of Phillips’ aides leaps up from a desk to stop him, passes him a folder: maps, photographs, annotated testimony from a local contact. “I believe we have your next target, sir,” the aide says.

Buck’s looking over his shoulder: another factory, all ugly brickwork and smoke stacks. “No rest for the wicked, huh?”

******

The factory in France yields crate after crate of parts—the final assembly is happening somewhere else, so all they have is puzzle pieces—and intel for their next job—

—and Steve passes a night veil-walking through a French village, practices climbing into windows and picking locks—the only building with a lock on the door is the store, so he breaks in and locks up and breaks in again a half-dozen times. Climbs a drain-pipe and sits on a thatched roof, watching the stars, watching his breath come in plumes of white, until he gets his wind again, re-forms his veil, pushes on.

No one sees him. No one wakes.

His headache is blinding by the time he quits, but—he’s gone four hours total under a veil: he’s getting stronger. And he can push it out longer the next time, and the next—

And then a castle in Rhineland where Hydra are working on the creation of an aerosolised hallucinogen, among other fucking delights, and—

—it’s two weeks all up, sleeping rough, the preparation and then the assault, withdrawing again—and Steve spends those nights working: stretching out his standing veils, making ‘em larger and more complex—he couldn’t have done this six months ago, but now he’s managing to hide their whole camp for a good couple hours at a time, only broken when someone schleps out into the night to check their perimeter or piss. He’s getting stronger—

And then they're back on Allied soil, the central camp in Italy, and Steve spends a day knocking up veils and seemings and anchoring them into the knives in his bandolier, the two hidden in his belt, stashes a Cap-shapeshifting spell into the belt buckle of his uniform—metal holds magic better than cloth or leather, according to Ulfadhir. Quick deploy, so he can use ‘em if he’s big or little. Eats like a horse and sleeps like the dead and gets up again come moonrise, veil-walks around the camp. Three solid hours before he needs a break: he’s getting stronger.

One day is all they get before their next orders come: and five days later the Commandos are jumping from a boat to climb up the beach at Normandy.

It's some of the worst shit Steve's seen so far, a butcher's shop, and the brass won't risk Captain America in the front line—never mind that's what he was made for—so they get there after the worst of the push is over and done and the rocks of the shore are slick with blood and offal and shit. You
can't make it up the beach without stepping on someone—part of someone. They help clear out a couple of the last bunkers, and then there're a couple furious weeks of work securing the line, the miserable grind of cleanup—

And then, with the Godawful reek of mud and blood and salt water and unwashed massed bodies and shit really ground into every pore, that's when the next set of orders comes: and Steve could just about kiss the paper they're typed on, because he put the application in over a month ago but it's finally come through. Furlough: they've got two whole weeks off in London.

They've been on the move or in active combat for three months solid—the truck job, the Amiens factory, the Rhineland castle, Operation Overlord. They're due and well past due, and Steve's standards are at an all-time low: three hot meals in a day, four walls and a door that locks for two weeks sounds like nothing short of paradise.

*******

London, and Steve drops some of his piled-up hazard pay on a long coil of the finest wire, locks himself away in his room for a day and a night, weaving and re-weaving the come-here spell in layers and anchoring it in—he’s got no idea if this is gonna work, but—fuck it, it’s some wire and some downtime.

He wakes on the floor on the evening of the second day—aching everywhere, Jesus, he’s too old to be sleeping on wooden boards—and the wire has cut bloodless white lines into his hands and wrists where he’s been clinging to it, but—but it feels good, strong: he can sense the layered spell work in the metal without even touching it, like radiant heat off a stovetop.

Hits a hiccup when he realises he doesn’t have any wire cutters, until—change shape and stretch out, into his Cap-shape, and he uses his teeth to snip the wire, clean through, and then he’s halfway through sewing the shorter length of wire into the inside palm of his glove when he hears the softest metallic rasp of something fine sliding into the lock on his door, the click of a tumbler being nudged into place within the lock.

He half reaches for his shield, stops, listens closer: one heartbeat, slow and lazy. Smiles and sticks the needle through his glove for safe-keeping, and then gets up from the desk, near silent, crosses the room on bare feet to stand at the door and listen closer—small shifts in breathing, the wet sound of teeth meeting lip in a bite.

Steve opens the door. Bucky's on his knees, set of picks in his hands and staring into the space where the lock used to be. He rolls his eyes up, meets Steve's gaze. “Evening, doll,” he whispers, starting to fold the picks away.

“While you're down there,” Steve whispers back, and Buck eyes Steve’s groin in his sleep pants and grins, gets up and slips into the room. Steve closes the door behind him, slow and careful to make no sound—there are three other fellas with rooms on this floor, and one’s out on manoeuvres but that's still two too many officers to risk waking with queer shenanigans.

“Figured I'd get some practice in,” Bucky says, jamming the set of picks back into an inner pocket of his jacket. He steps in close to Steve, chest to chest and pelvis to pelvis, presses a lazy kiss to Steve's jaw and grabs a handful of ass—they’ve been chaste since they were deployed to Normandy, so this is—good. So fucking good. Steve rolls his hips, cocks his head to the side so Bucky's got room to
work.

“Awful late getting here,” Steve says, has a moment of—almost vertigo, a feeling of not-rightness, but then—he’s Cap-sized, not Stevie-sized, and it’s still—he still can’t believe it’s just—that Bucky just slides on in like there’s no difference, big or small, like it’s not even a blip on his radar. Bucky's just that little bit shorter than him when they’re like this, nosing into the curve where Steve's ear meets his neck—

Bucky huffs a laugh against his skin. “I had a secret rendezvous on the way here,” he says. “Real nice girl. Redhead.”

“Yeah?” Steve asks, slides his hands in under Bucky's jacket.

“Yeah,” Buck says. “SSR has all the prettiest spooks. Pocket, just above your left hand,” and Steve reaches into the pocket, finds the folded note, breaks off from groping to cross to the bedside candle, open the note and read.

“Oh,” he says after a minute, and it's a little breathless. “Oh, Peggy's here. Wants to meet and talk about—that other thing.”

“Your side job,” Bucky says, comes up behind Steve and rests his forehead against Steve's shoulder blade. There's quiet for a moment, Steve re-reading the note, and then Bucky slides his hands over Steve's hips, under the waistband of his trousers, cups his balls with one hand and neatly encircles the base of his cock with the other. Mouths wetly at the back of Steve's neck. Steve's breath catches.

“Thinking too much,” Bucky rumbles. “I can hear the gears squeaking. Come on, you got hours yet before she wants to meet,” and Steve rolls his eyes—of course Bucky's read the note—puts it down on the side table and pulls his undershirt off overhead and turns to face him, lets Bucky press him down with hands and mouth and hungry teeth onto the bed.

They're bare skin on bare skin and Bucky's looking up at Steve from between his legs, grinning mouth bruised red from eating him out, and Steve’s got both hands over his mouth to keep from hollering, and—“Holy Christ on a cracker, darlin’,” Bucky says, laughter in his voice, resting his head on Steve’s thigh like it’s a pillow, and then: "Hey, do you wanna put it in me?"

"What?" Steve asks, pushing up onto his elbows to watch his face, lip-read, because he's not half-deaf anymore, but he definitely might have misheard that anyway—

“You could, y’know. If you wanted to,” Bucky says, cupping Steve's hips in his hands and running his thumbs up and down the lines of his pelvic cut. "The noises you make—like a cat in heat or something, Lord Almighty. I wanna know what all the fuss is about.”

Steve stares at him like an asshole for a long moment. He’s—in his head, anyway, Bucky is—has always been the ladies’ man, marriage material, the... the normal one, slumming it with his fairy pal, but only as long as Steve's little and soft and girly enough to pass in the dark. Except he was wrong about that, and Bucky never thought he was anything but a fella, and seems to really enjoy sucking his dick besides, and there's nothing girly about either of them right now, and yet—

Bucky—J.B. Barnes, of Brooklyn and the 107th and late of the Howling Commandos—Bucky's queer as a three dollar fucking bill for him. It’s—fuck. They’re not gonna live long enough to be dishonourably discharged if anyone finds out, so they sure as shit haven’t been talking about it, but it still shouldn't have taken Steve this long to figure it out. Maybe they should have been drawing each other diagrams.
Steve sits up, pulls Bucky up to him, kisses him with a whole lot of tongue and reaches down to grab his dick and tug at it. It swells up firmer in his hand, slick at the tip as pre-come wells up with the movements of his hand, and Bucky hums into the kiss.

"Is that a yes?" he rasps, laughing, as they break off, and—

"Yeah," Steve says, kissing down his jaw and neck. "Yeah. Let's try that."

Bucky turns his head to bite at Steve's ear, grabs the jar of slick from the side table and pushes it into his hands. Then he steals a couple of the pillows and lies back, wedges one under his head and the other under his hips, parts his legs and brings his knees up and plants his feet, stares at Steve expectantly. His eyebrows are up, eyes a little narrowed, mouth pulled into a smirk: pure challenge. His cock is lying swollen and flushed against his abdomen.

He's—God, he's beautiful, and Steve's hands are shaking, grabbing Bucky's calves to anchor himself but otherwise just staring: flushed face and sex hair and the hard lines of his chest and belly and his gorgeous fucking cock and dark curls and the dusky pink pucker of his asshole, Holy Christ —

Bucky's laugh is low and soft. "You look like a starving man who just saw a tonne of horns and beef go by on the hoof."

"Hungry, and terrified, and crazed?" Steve asks.

"Yeah," Bucky says, gives him a lopsided grin.

Steve scoops some of the Vaseline out onto his trigger finger. "I got no idea what I'm doing here, Buck," he says.

"I managed to figure it out, you'll be fine," Bucky says. "Y'know they’re calling you a strategic genius, so… Besides, you've got plenty of experience."

"Yeah, from the other side," Steve says, and presses the pad of his slick finger against Bucky's perineum. Slides it down over the pucker of his hole, smearing the slick around as he goes. "You—you can't let me hurt you, okay? You'll tell me the second I do something wrong so I don't hurt you."

"Yeah, yeah, Stevie." Bucky's rolling his eyes, but then his face softens and his gaze goes a bit distant, like he's focussing in on what's happening below the belt. "I'll tell you, okay? Stick your finger in me, I won't break."

Steve sticks a finger in him, per orders, pushes it in slow and gentle, pulsing it in and out, twisting to massage him from the inside. "Huh," Bucky says, shifting to roll his hips, frowning like he's calculating range and angle of descent in his head, and Steve can't help but laugh.

"Not seeing the appeal?" he asks, twisting and rubbing and so, so careful. Pulls his finger out to get more slick on there and pushes it back in, a little more forceful now.

"I—uh—it's nice enough," Bucky says. Flips one arm up so his forearm is draped over his eyes, reaches down with the other hand to circle the base of his cock.

"Takes a minute," Steve says, leaning in to lap at the head of Bucky's dick, which perks up at the attention, drooling out a little pre-come and bouncing up towards his face. Bucky sucks in a rough breath, then bares his teeth in a grin.

"Gimme a couple," he answers, and the arm that's over his face lifts enough to show him two stiff
fingers and a firm jabbing-up motion. "We ain't got all night, Rogers."

"I didn't have anything else planned," Steve says, and he feels like it might be too soon but he starts teasing Bucky's rim with the tip of a second finger anyway.

"Yeah, I ain't making you late for your hot date with Carter in the morning," Bucky says. "She would know exactly why you were—uhh—running late, you might break the laws of physics every day but I'm pretty sure she can read minds—oh," and Steve's pushed that second finger home, twisting his wrist as he goes, crooking and straightening his fingers and pulsing in and out to massage the rim—sweet Christ he's tight—

"Uhh," Bucky says. "That's—that ain't bad. Can we—can we hold here—" and he's rocking his hips, squirming in place. Steve leans in, sucks the head of his dick into his mouth, gives it a good tonguing and lets it go with a wet pop, and: "Oh, shit. Yeah, that's okay, I guess. I'd let you do that again."

Steve laughs, says, "I feel like I ain't doing my job right if you're still able to give me this much backchat."

"You ever known me to not run my mouth when we're fucking? Try this," he says, shows Steve his fingers again, making scissors in the air.

"Yes, sir," Steve says, grinning, starts to scissor his fingers in there, and Bucky makes a little winded noise so Steve mouths at his cock again, sucks the length down and rolls his tongue against the underside, pulls back to suckle at the tip. It leaks a little more pre-come, sweet and salty, and he's—oh, Lord—aware of his own dick, swelling to harden against his belly. "Normally you're more in the vein of—um—obscene promises and pet names."

"Yeah, well. Normally I'm in the driver's seat," Bucky says, and he's a little breathless, and that roll in his hips has gotten stronger. He's looking for something, and Steve crooks his fingers and goes looking too—it's somewhere in the front here, if it's the same as it is for him, anyway.

Christ, he's getting hot and bothered, really wants to give his dick a rub but he wouldn't take his hands offa Buck right now if someone kicked in the door and demanded it at gunpoint.

"You're still in the driver's seat, Buck," Steve says, and Bucky lifts his forearm away and looks him in the eyes. "You're the fella with the plan, here. I'm following your orders."

Bucky's eyes widen, pupils spilling dark, and he wets his lips like—like a fox right before it jumps on a rabbit, oh Holy Christ that hungry predator look—and then Bucky brings a foot up, plants it on Steve’s shoulder to shove him back, sits up and scrambles forward, and Steve's got a lap full of him, kissing and biting and shoving until he's on his back and Bucky's over him, straddling him.

"As you were, then," Bucky says, and Steve's laughing as he reaches around and presses two fingers back home again, and Bucky jolts like he's been stabbed.

"Unh—what the Christ," he yelps, grabbing Steve's hair and fist, and Steve grins and brings his knees up, settles in.

"Magic button," he whispers, and flexes to press his fingertips there again, and Bucky jolts again, tugs at his hair.

"Holy fuck," Bucky says, “Holy fuck, holy—” and he's rolling his hips, pressing in and then flinching away like he can't decide what he wants. Steve wets his lips, grabs Bucky’s dick with his spare hand and gives it a slow stroke, and then pulls his fingers back enough that he can press home
with three of ‘em, slow. Bucky pulls at his hair, hard, and groans deep like it’s been pulled up from the centre of the earth.

Steve stops, fingers just inside, chews at his lip, waits. “Okay, Buck?”

“Fuck, just—hold here;” Bucky hisses, pulls his clawed hands outta Steve’s hair and drops forward, weight on one hand, shifting the angle, slapping Steve’s hand off his dick to stroke himself. He’s flushed, sweating, mouth open and brow down like he’s doing equations again, like he’s concentrating. And then he’s biting his lips and rocking back, taking Steve’s fingers deeper and—fuck. His asshole is tight, crushing tight, fluttering and grasping around Steve’s fingers.

“Sweetheart?” Steve asks, presses up slow and easy as Bucky presses back, and—

Bucky huffs, eyelids fluttering, laughs: “How do you make this look so easy, you tramp?” Steve barks laughter—Christ, okay: he’s okay—and pushes in deeper, feels his knuckles press against the rim. Stops. Bucky sighs, squirms, strokes his dick slow and thoughtful, and—“Okay,” he says at last. “Okay, gimme a bit of somethin’.”

Steve pulls his fingers back and slides them home again, takes it slow and easy, and Bucky growls and rocks back into it, mouth falling open—“Ahh, Christ,” he groans, and then—

Steve’s gotta shut his eyes, bite his lip and shut his eyes as he twists and scissors with his fingers, trying to remember what feels good when Bucky does this for him, and he can’t look because—just—if he looks, at the line of pre-come running down Bucky’s cock, at how the muscles of his abdomen and chest heave and contract as he writhes and fucks back against Steve’s hand—he’s going to lose his shit altogether. Blow his load all over nothing like a teenager. The noises Bucky’s making are bad enough, Holy Christ—

“Oh fuck,” Bucky gasps, and then: “Okay, I—gimme it, come on,” and Steve hauls his hand out and flails around on the bed until he finds the Vaseline, smears some on his dick. It’s—oh, oh fuck—the first time he's touched his dick since this started, and he’s so fucking hard, has gotta choke back a moan.

"Fucking Hell, is that for me?" Bucky says, and Steve looks up: he's knelt up tall, one hand on his dick and the other—oh, Lord—reaching through and up, pushing fingers up his ass. Watching Steve, eyes heavy-lidded. "Reckon it’ll fit?"

"Won't know unless we try," Steve says, and then: “I—would it be easier if I were… If I’m smaller?”

“Are you saying I’m not man enough to take your super dick?” Bucky asks, his grin wild, and then as Steve’s choking on laughter Bucky leans in, biting at Steve's lips and grabbing his cock to hold it on just the right angle and then—

And then there’s blazing sticky slick heat squeezing around his cock, and Steve's reduced to making animal noises and hanging onto Bucky's hips, bruising tight, trying to slow him down, but Bucky's chewing on his lower lip and making little strangled keening noises as he rocks his hips, eyes closed, sinking deeper, one hand planted on Steve's shoulder and the other on his hip, clamped just as bruise-deep. Until—

—until Buck throws his head back and just drops that last couple inches, and—and the sweet hot slide, the line of his throat all kiss-bruised and sweat-slick and unshaven, the broken groan that falls outta him—it’s too much, and Steve hears himself choke out, "Oh no, sweetheart, Jesus—" and then he’s coming, hips snapping up helplessly against the press of Bucky’s hand as he spends up inside
him, hot and slick.

"Holy fuck, darlin','" Bucky says, sounding drunk, sounding stunned.


"Don't you apologise, that was hot as Hell," Bucky laughs, grabs Steve's left nipple and tweaks it, rolls his hips.

"I just—gimme a minute, I'm good for another go," Steve says, shifting to press up and in. It's too tight and too hot and too much, his nerves are fucking jangling like an alarm klaxon going off, but he's not leaving Bucky in the lurch, no chance.

"I know you are," Bucky says, grinning. "Pretty sure the government didn't have this use in mind when they wanted someone with an enhanced metabolism," and then Steve rolls his hips up hard and Bucky yelps and throws his head back and goes with it, rocks up and rides it.

And oh fuck, it’s—it’s good, it’s so—he’s tender as new skin on a wound, it hurts but it’s good, the ache cut through with a building sweet pressure, so he plants his feet flat on the mattress and grabs onto the bed frame and watches Bucky fuck himself.

Buck settles into a rhythmic circular grind, opens his eyes to meet Steve's gaze. He looks punch-drunk, and his grey eyes are blazing. "Fuck, Stevie. That’s—okay, now—you gotta—" and he brings the flat of his hand down on Steve’s thigh, like he’s goading a horse, starts fucking down harder. “Gimme it, come on—"

Steve shudders and growls and gives it to him, thrusts up to meet him on the downswing, and it’s so fucking tight and slick, scalding hot, and—and he can hear the wood of the bed frame moaning and giving way under his hands, the rhythmic huff of breath punched outta both of ‘em as they line up, bodies and skin wet with sweat and spunk and it’s too good, it’s too—

Bucky sobs, plants one hand on Steve's chest over his heart and wraps the other around his own cock, and—

"Oh!" Bucky cries, and Steve's rhythm hiccups for a half second, but—“Don't you fucking stop, oh, oh, oh," his voice scraping out more and more ragged and broken, and oh shit, oh Christ, his asshole is pushing down and in on Steve's cock like a hot slick vice grip, and—

—and then Bucky's coming, white streaking up Steve's abdomen and right up to his tits, voiceless and head thrown back, one long line of pale skin and muscle wound tight as a wire. And then he sags forward, breathes shaky and gasping, buries his face against Steve's chest. "Oh, fuck," he moans, and it comes out blurry like he's been hit in the head.

Steve can scarcely breathe, he's so close to—blowing, or dying, one of the two. He concentrates on his breathing, makes each one count in the way that Ulfadhir and twenty-plus years of living with asthma taught him, and when he knows he's not going to fly to pieces he lets go of the bed frame and puts his arms over Bucky's back, feathers his fingers into his hair, asks, "Sweetheart? Are you okay?"

"I'm dead," Bucky mumbles. "You just killed me with your dick, and this is my ghost," and he's talking like he's Goddamn concussed but he's giving Steve backchat again. He's doing okay.

Steve curls forward enough to drop a kiss on the top of Bucky's head, and it shifts his hips enough to—Bucky makes a strangled noise of displeasure, bites Steve's tit, lifts his rear up enough that Steve's cock slides free. Flops down next to him on the mattress. They're a tangle of arms and legs, and the
bed looks like it's done a night of hard duty in a cat house. What the woman who runs this rooming house thinks of Steve after she's finished doing his laundry, he's not game to even think.

Steve kisses Bucky on the collarbone. Bucky hums and snugs himself in closer, stops when his knee bumps against Steve's dick—he’s still hard enough to drive nails, didn't come there in the end, and he shifts his hips back a bit, says, "Sorry."

Bucky slugs him in the shoulder, lazy. "Will you stop apologising for your super dick?" he says, reaches down to grab Steve's cock and fist it, gentle and slow and kind of perfect, and all of Steve's breath leaves him in a huff.

"You don't gotta," he whispers, blurry against the skin of Bucky's shoulder, and Bucky says:

"'Course I don't gotta. But why wouldn't I?"

Steve smiles, rolls his hips a little to match the slow rhythm of Bucky's hand. "I don't know. Seems kinda greedy of me."

Bucky makes a little choking noise, asks, "Stevie, you tryin’ to be more Catholic than the Pope?" and then they're both laughing. And Bucky plants kisses on his forehead and eyes and in his hair, strokes him long and lazy, and Steve rolls his hips and hangs onto Bucky, both hands, sighing and then panting and then gasping his name as he comes. And then quiet shared breath, and sleep.

********

They've got it down to an art form, sneaking Bucky out the back door of the rooming house in the mornings. He's down through the little victory garden and over the back fence and away just before the sun crosses the horizon, and Steve strips his sheets and throws the window open to air out the room, scrubs and shaves and dresses, eats in the dining room, toast and eggs and tea—the Army is paying extra for his board so he gets enough protein at breakfasts, which usually means eggs or sausages with mystery meat in them. So he's plenty early by the time he gets in to the Army base, time enough to catch up on some gossip and visit with some of the boys in the med tent before he meets Peggy in the SSR war room at 0900.

They’re in the locked down training room by 0905, he’s in his Stevie-body and undershirt by 0910, and by 0915 she’s got him in an arm bar, her legs over his shoulders and using her weight to grind his face into the padded floor.

“Do you yield?” she asks, breathless and cheerful—it’s the third time she’s asked, because he’s made a few attempts to get out of this thing, and he’s trying again now, lifting his hips to see if he can get onto his knees at least, but she just leans a little deeper into the arm bar. He gasps, taps his empty hand on the floor.

“Yield,” he says, and she releases him, uncoils her legs, pushes the hair back from his face and gives him a hand getting up.

Once upon a time he’d have been too proud to take her hand as he was climbing up off of the floor—he’s never had it in him to ask for help, to take help when it’s offered, but then this whole thing—the game of great houses, Ulfadhir would call it—it’s big enough to grind the petty right out of him. This is war, this is people’s lives, this is too important for him to fuck up. He’ll take her hand and be grateful for it.
“Right,” she says. “Shall we?” and then it’s back to the mat, and she talks him through the hold, where to apply leverage, where to grab—it takes a few tries before he gets the technique right, and each time she slithers free she taps him across the back of the head before she’ll explain what he’s done wrong.

If his hair wasn’t already a bird’s nest, it is by the time she gets free the fourth time. It feels a lot like Ulfadhir’s teaching style, honestly, so he’s hiding a smile as he climbs up from the mat.

“Your angle and grip were both adequate. As a textbook example it looked good, but in practice you couldn’t have held my grandmother like that, God rest her. There was no force behind it. I—” She pulls one of the pins from her hair and fixes back a curl that’s falling loose, eyes on the back wall. “I need you to stop acting like I’m spun sugar—you won’t learn a damn thing if you aren’t prepared to at least try and hurt me.”

Steve falters, rubs his forehead. “I—Peggy, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“And you won’t,” she says. “Because I know what I’m doing. But you’re wasting both our time if you’re not going to give this your best effort. I’d like to think that we respect one another—”

Steve straightens up, says, “Yes. Yeah, Peggy, I—of course I do. Let’s—we can do it your way.”

She smiles winningly. "Always the course of wisdom. Now: try to hurt me."

He puts her in the hold, legs across her shoulder and back, and this time as he grabs her arm he twists and reefs with the same force he’d use training with Bucky or Ulfadhir. She makes a noise somewhere between a cough and a grunt, then gives a peal of laughter and taps out on the mat. Her face is all fierce triumph as she lifts up from the ground.

"Better," she says firmly, smile bright as sunrise—and then lunging at him, all knees and elbows until he’s on his back and she’s got his arms pinned and her spare hand held to his throat like a knife blade. "Now," she says, “In this scenario—”

They go through five holds in total, break just after midday, and they’re covered in sweat and red marks where they’ve pulled and pinched and pinned each other. She’s up and re-pinning her hair with shaking hands. He’s drinking from his canteen and sitting sprawled on the mat, not sure if his legs will hold him yet.

"You're making progress, Captain Rogers," she says, brisk and a little breathless. “If your training in your—other skill set is progressing apace—”

“I'm a ghost,” Steve says. “They never see me coming.” He can veil-walk for four and a half hours now, can hold three seemings steady at once, can—

"How would you like a mission?" she says, cocking her head, and he—something that’s been pulled tight uncoils inside him, like a binding has fallen away, like a caged beast finding legs and sunlight.

“Yes, ma’am. When do we start?” he says.

Chapter End Notes

So, progress report:
This work, The Truth May Vary, is complete--I've written and edited the whole thing into submission. Will continue with the weekly posting schedule to buy myself time working on the next parts in the series.

Yes, it's gonna be a series. I have the second part of the series completely written, and am working on edits. The third part of the series--which covers the events of the first Avengers movie--I am writing at the moment. There's a lot of "what the fuck 21st century what the fUCK DA" going on, it's great fun :D

All this is to say: this story wraps up soon, but it's not the end. Not by a long shot. Also I'll be doing the thing to create a series outta this on AO3 soon--I'm still unfamiliar with the how-tos of posting, pray for me--so if you wanna keep going with the series you'll want to subscribe or bookmark or leave yourself a breadcrumb trail to that.

Thanks so much so everyone kudos-ing and commenting, I love your faces <3
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Their target is a radio relay station on the side of Grand Ballon in France. It's the highest point in the terrain for a long way in any direction, and a lot of the orders from Berlin to the front are probably going through there, but the Allies have never been able to get an operative close enough to find out.

A fishing boat gets Steve and Buck from Allied-occupied Italy up to the coast of France, where they hike inland and meet a Free French operative with a truck full of cows. It's a hot and smelly ride for most of three hours, and then they're out again on foot. Steve grabs his dog tags and shifts over into little Stevie, throws a walking veil over the both of them, and they're off up the mountain.

This is occupied territory: there are Nazis everywhere, patrolling in force and guarding transports and coming nerve-jangling close, so they can't go without the veil. But it's slow—God, it's such slow progress.

He's fitter and healthier and meaner than he's ever been in his life—since… He remembers being nineteen, his heart and then pneumonia like a one-two punch, Goddamn close to death and then—Ulfadhir, and an apple, or what fucking looked like an apple, and—and since then… But still and all, he's shrimpy. All the goodwill and determination in the world won't get his short ass up the side of a mountain any faster.

It's two days on foot before they get within striking range of the target.

Bucky makes his hide up an oak tree, swathed in camouflage netting, along with their packs of gear. Steve's leaving him with a standing veil—it's anchored to the netting, to his rifle, to the tree itself, he's very thorough—but if Steve's caught or killed the veil will go down so—so precautions. So layers of redundancy. If this goes belly up then—then at least Buck has a shot at getting outta here alive.

He steps back, looks up at the tree. He knows Bucky's up there—can hear his song, muffled by the veil, and the droning hum of the veil itself, but—he can't see a thing. It's been a long time since he was on the outside of a veil, so this is—different. Weird. It's a damn good veil.

"Stay outta trouble, okay? I'll be back," Steve tells the tree—spares a second to imagine how Buck's reacting to hearing that from him of all people, and then bites back a grin, pulls his best walking veil around himself and starts his final approach.

It's a tiny complex: three wooden cabins, one the radio room and the others barracks for the staff and troops guarding the place. Tucked into the slope of the mountain, trees and stone and dark earth and almost certainly snow-bound in winter, and—and the view is—Steve stops, just looks for a long moment.

God, if he only had pencil and paper, maybe a palette of water colours. He can see forever, feels like, forest and rivers and roads, the white and dark peaks and troughs of other mountains framing the horizon. Honestly, how the Hell does anyone get anything done around here, when all of that is just—there?

He pulls the tiny camera from his belt pouch, holds it up pointing at the horizon and clicks the button—it isn't gonna look right, this was designed to capture writing, paperwork, not the Hand of God.
laid upon the earth in the medium of forest and vast open sky, but he's gotta try and—capture it, remember it, this window of searing beauty in the midst of all the mud and shit of war. Then he reinforces his veil and steps out of the tree line, crosses the open ground and heads to the cabins.

Walks past half a dozen guards, sitting and standing and smoking, past three guys working on a truck, over to the cabin with the jury-rigged radio broadcast tower fixed to the roof. He does a slow circle around it, works out entry and exit points, peers in the narrow windows—three guys at work in there, two on headsets, one shuffling papers—oh, is that a code book? Yes, please.

Okay. Deep breath, reinforce the veil again—it's a nervous tic at this point, he's got enough insight to recognise that—and head back around to the front door of the cabin—

And—shit—

Opens as he reaches it, almost—

Christ. Christ, that's close, almost wears the fucking door in the face and—and that woulda been bad. Goodbye veil, hello Nazis—

—staggering back outta range and the edge of the door flies by about an inch past his nose.

Stumbles, keeps his feet and sways like a drunk to the side as one of the radio operators comes out, twirling a screwdriver between his fingers and calling out to one of the guards nearby.

Almost—fuck, that was Goddamn close.

The cabin door slams closed behind him—Steve too off balance to duck inside while it’s open, misses his window—and the guy saunters over to one of the guards, jams his screwdriver in a back pocket and pulls out a pack of cigarettes and a book of matches. They both light up, lean on the truck bumper bar and—looks like a passionate debate, so Steve stalks a little closer in case it's usable intel.

His German is still learner grade—he can follow a basic conversation, demand surrender, cuss someone out—and this is… Fussball. They're arguing about football. They support different teams? Some things are universal.

Steve sits down on the back bumper of the car next door, reinforces his veil for the millionth time, and waits.

It’s three cigarettes and half an hour of yelling about football before the radio guy is ready to go back inside. Steve ghosts in behind him, close enough he’s gotta hold his breath so he won’t give himself away with a puff of air against the guy’s collar, pivoting to twist around him as he turns and pushes the door closed again.

He’s inside: sweet Mother of God, he’s inside.

Steve pulls the camera out again, slides over to the desk where the paper-pusher is working, holds the camera out levelled at the scattered pages on the desk and clicks away, one by one.

Strangles the urge to flinch every time he hears the tiny shutter mechanism flick closed—it’s inside his veil so they won’t hear it, but it goes against every trace of animal instinct he’s got to just… stand there, right there. There’s a Nazi a foot away from him, close enough that if he turns unexpectedly or throws an arm out, Steve’s gonna be fucked beyond all recognition.

He’s holding everything tight as a wire, arms and abdomen and legs and breath, almost dizzy with it, and—
—and the guy doesn’t turn, doesn’t throw his arm out. Just keeps sorting pages and making annotations. He’s put his code book away—where? There’s a desk drawer with a lock on it, maybe there—and Steve keeps snapping the new pages as they come up. He can’t read what he’s photographing, not without leaning stupid close—his lousy fucking eyesight—so he’s just gotta hope to God he’s getting the good stuff.

The radio hums, mindless, electric, shrill. The guys at the radio take notes and make transmissions, coded phrases and German too dense for Steve to follow. He’s got all the stuff from the paper pusher’s desk—he thinks, he hopes—so he eases over to stand between the two operators, snaps their pages of notes over their shoulders as they work.

And work, and—and send and receive, take breaks, talk about what’s for dinner, and the radio drones on and on and—and Steve takes photos, holds very still, breathes as slow and deep as he can. The paper-pusher takes a stack of papers and goes into another room, clatters away at a typewriter for a couple of hours. The light shifts and falls and goes dark, and the paper pusher flips a lamp on. And then—

—and then the door creaks open and another guy comes in, jamming a cigarette butt back into the pack for later and mumbling, “Guten abend,” slopes over to stand—fucking Christ on a bike—

—more or less where Steve is standing, and he’s gotta paste himself against the work bench, his pulse liquid hammering in his ears—

—fuck, that was close.

And now Steve’s moved he’s—oh, Lord have mercy—he’s feeling his body again: sore as Hell, from toes to crown and the whole length of his crooked spine, and he’s hungry and thirsty and needing to pee.

The sun’s down, this is the evening shift taking over: he’s been in here at least six hours.

Christ. Bucky is going to murder him.

Steve grits his teeth, slowly stretches out his legs as the day shift hand over and shuffle out, leaving the night shift—it’s just the one guy, must be only emergency transmissions expected overnight. And then the door swings closed for the last time and it’s just the two of them.

Okay. One last thing, and then he’s gotta pull out. He can’t leave without the codes.

He needs into that locked drawer, and—and he’s stretched too thin to throw a veil over the desk, candle close to burning out: the stationary veil on Bucky and the walking veil over himself for six hours and counting. No, he can’t—not a black-out veil, anyway. But maybe more of a don’t-notice-this veil, an eyes-glaze-over kind of number? If he stretches for it—

He slips outta his corner, past the guy at the radio, over to the desk with the locked drawer. Puts his hands on the desk and grinds his teeth and reaches deep: one last veil, one more working, please God let me be big enough to carry just this much more. And—

Oh fuck—

His fucking head—Jesus Christ that hurts.

The music—it’s always there, the background purr and thrum of the world making itself moment by moment, but right now it’s—deafening, drowning, swelling up until it’s all he can hear, and his channels ache from his heart right down into the tips of his fingers, ache like bones healing but—but
he’s done it.

There’s a flimsy little veil, covering the surface and drawer of the desk. It’s fluttering like a moth ‘round a lantern, frail enough that he’ll lose it if he sneezes, but it’ll work. He’ll make it work.

The lock picks are in his belt pouch. He’s been cracking locks under Ulfadhir’s tuition since he was ten years old but his hands are shaking like a Goddamn leaf, and he can’t listen for the noises inside the lock past the roaring in his ears, and he almost drops the picks about five times before the lock in the drawer finally turns.

And—oh thank fucking Christ for that—the code book is on top. He slips it out, puts it on the desk, looks over at the radio operator: hasn’t noticed, kicking back with a paperback and chewing at the end of a pencil. So far, so good.

He changes the film in the camera—he’s got six tiny rolls of film in his other pouch now, ready for development—and pushes the code book into the pool of light that the desk lamp casts. No flash on this camera, for obvious reasons, but it makes working in the dark harder. Okay, just a few more photos and the job is done. Just a little longer.

Christ, but it hurts.

He’s gotta breathe real steady and deep to get his hands still enough for photography. Gotta lean against the desk, because his legs are starting to tremble. Gotta bite his lip and concentrate like Hell to keep track of what he’s doing. Just a few more—and last page. And done. Fourteen photos, fourteen pages of tightly-scripted codes. He’s done.

Camera into belt pouch. Code book into desk drawer. He should lock it again but he’s at his limits, will probably have a fucking stroke if he has to go another round with those picks. Hope to God they just shrug it off when they find it unlocked come morning, or blame each other for the mistake. Hope to God—

The veil on the desk splutters and dies as he pushes the drawer closed. There’s a quiet and clear wooden thump.

The radio operator looks up.

Steve freeze, reaches for the edges of his veil—it’s intact, he’s still hidden. So the guy’s looking straight past him, but he’s still looking, because that was definitely a thump in the empty cabin. Fuck, Christ, fuck.

Steve sends an alarm klaxon help in the direction of anyone who might be listening—God, Mother Mary, Saint Jude, the Devil Himself—and starts to aching-slow step back from the desk, cat-creep his way towards the middle of the room. The radio operator gets up, frowning, pushes his headset off. He’s staring down, towards the skirting boards or under the desks. “Ratte?” he says.

Steve breathes deep to keep from shaking, edges back, waits. Waits for his opportunity, for his moment. His pulse is a stuttery jackhammer, and he can feel his fingertips going numb.

“Wo bist du, dreckiges Tier?” the radio operator is muttering, still glaring down and around the edges of the room. He takes another step forward and then pulls up, snagged by the cable to the headset. He can’t leave his post.

Steve almost sighs with relief but then the guy’s turning facing towards the window and yelling out, “Eric! Komm mal her;” and Steve’s spine goes to ice and—
—and then there’s a guard sticking his head in the door, looking exasperated and asking: “Was ist denn? Warum brüllst du denn so rum?” and the radio operator starts ranting about the rat, he can hear it, some pig has been eating in here and now there’s rats again, and now there are two guards in here with them and that’s three guys hauling furniture around and moving unpredictably in a small fucking room, and Steve can’t wait—

—duck, weave, pivot, throw himself out into the little side room where the typewriter is set up and—thank Christ, thank Christ—between the laughing and ranting and furniture moving around, no one hears him open the back door and close it behind him again as he slips out into the night.

He makes it back into the trees before he has to stop, drop to his knees and put his head down and have—it’s not an asthma attack, and it’s not his heart like when he was eighteen, but it’s pretty bad just the same: everything fluttering and squeezing in his chest at once, and he can hear his out-breaths come keening between his gritted teeth.

He’s putting everything he’s got into—just breathing, just keep breathing and hold, fucking hold it together—stationary veil, walking veil—gotta stay hidden, keep Bucky safe. It’s okay if there’s nothing in the tank for his legs. If his hands and feet are numb and his ears are ringing and his eyes have smudged out, grey and hazy. It’s okay. It’ll pass.

He keeps telling himself that until it passes. Then he gets up, waits until the drunk sway stops, and goes to find Bucky.

*******

His eyes are still not working to spec, lots of grey fog, so he navigates by the music, and if he walks into a tree a few times that’s okay: no one can see him. When he starts hearing big band brass notes cutting through the vast chorus of tree-song he points himself that way and staggers on, finally stops when he can hear Bucky's song as clear as it’s gonna get past the muffled purr of his veil.

He looks up, squinting past the haze—trees, canopy, no sign of sniper or camo-netting, veil holding strong. Seven hours and counting now, and when he's less fucked Steve's gonna feel real proud about that. As it is—

As it is, Steve drops both of the veil workings at once, squints up at the canopy. “Hey, Buck. Little help—”

He's halfway down the tree before Steve can get the second syllable out, hits the ground running and grabs Steve up—arms, face, neck—demands, “Shit, Steve, are you—where are you hurt?”

“I'm not,” he says, and then because they have a long history of doing this dance: “I swear I’m not hurt, Buck. Just—done in. Think I’m—” He waves a hand, clumsy, a vaguely grandiose stage magician gesture, which is kind of important, maybe should've mentioned that first, Rogers: “Oh shit, Buck, I’m not—I can’t—we ain’t hidden.”

Bucky's eyes widen, narrow, mouth goes to a thin line as he straightens up and looks around fast, patrols or guards or hiding places, and then he looks up and back, at his hide. “Okay. We're going up.”

They climb the tree. Or Bucky climbs the tree, manhandles Steve up there with him, hauls and shoves his carcass up from branch to branch, and about all Steve can do is hang on and try not to
shake so damn hard. And then he's sprawling in Bucky's lap in the crook of the tree, and Bucky is shifting the camouflage netting around 'em, making sure they're swathed from all sides.

He chocks Steve’s head up, gives him sips of water from his canteen and slivers of block chocolate, and then he jams a strip of dehydrated meat into Steve's mouth and leans close, mouth right next to Steve's ear so they can talk while he's chewing away. “Here's what I'm thinking: it's dark as balls, and no one knows we're here."

“Yeah,” Steve whispers back.

“You're gonna rest, I'm gonna keep watch. Figure we're safe enough for a few hours up here, in the black of night. No fucker ever looks up.”

“Buck,” Steve starts, but Bucky keeps talking.

“Rogers, for once just shut the Hell up and nod your head, okay? You can’t walk, you can’t hide us. We’re going nowhere. We hide, I watch, you rest. I’ll wake you before sun up.”


“You—what are you apologising for?”

“I screwed the pooch,” Steve says. The jerky’s gone to tasteless slime in his mouth, but he’s never been able to retch quietly so he swallows hard.

“This pooch ain’t screwed yet,” Bucky says. “Get some sleep, ya stubborn little shit. We can strategise when your brain fires up again. Not like I’ve seen evidence you got much going on in there at the best of times—” and he’s lightly tapping his fingertips against the side of Steve’s head, so Steve turns and bites at them.

“Jerk,” Steve mutters, and drops his head back against Bucky’s shoulder. Everything smells of sweat and wool, tree bark, cordite—

“Punk,” Bucky answers.

*******

It takes them most of three days to hike back down to their pickup site—would’ve taken longer but they’re moving downhill most of the way, and even Stevie-shaped and halfway-to-crazy tired he can still roll downhill. They’re balls-deep in occupied territory so they move in fits and starts—Steve keeps up the veil long as he can, and then Buck finds them places to hide in between, and it works—it’s messy but it works.

At the pickup point they wait—up a tree again: Bucky is a sniper down to the basement level of his soul—for a couple of hours, until a little black car pulls up. The man in the driver’s seat climbs out and saunters over into the bushes to loudly piss; the young girl in the passenger side gets out, stretches her legs, sits lazily against the rear bumper and eats an apple. They’ve both left their doors wide open, and the rear bench seat is mounded up with blankets that smell gently of dust and horses.

Rumble of the car engine starting up again. It’s cozy with Steve and Bucky crammed in the back and lying flat—hot and close under the wool, and the bench isn’t wide enough for two so they’re all
“Are you okay in there?” the guy in the front asks, because there may have been some writhing, a grunt from Bucky when Steve's knee suddenly shifts into his abdomen with a bump in the road.

“All okay, thank you,” Steve answers. “On va bien.” He shifts enough to get his knee out of Bucky's guts, then flips up the edge of a blanket enough to peer out, see the guy’s face in the rear view mirror. “Merci beaucoup for doing this.”

“Ah,” the guy says, gestures like he's fending off the gratitude. “What did I do? Take my granddaughter for a drive in the countryside.”

“You're taking a risk for us, and we appreciate it,” Steve says. “You and your granddaughter.” She's twisted around in her seat, looking at—oh, at Bucky, where he’s peering out from under the blanket too. She looks about twelve, dark hair in braids and cinnamon eyes, studying Buck with a sort of frank appraisal that has Steve biting the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning.

“We are all resisting the occupiers in our own ways,” the driver says, and then to his granddaughter, “Arreter le toisant, vous aves trop de petits amis.”

Steve disappears back under the blanket. He can feel Bucky shaking with silent laughter, so he wets a finger and sticks it in his ear to give him something to giggle like a schoolgirl about. The resulting war is stealthy and silent and lasts for most of an hour.

It's two hours of slow and winding driving to the coast, to a strip of forest abutting a cliff and an unwatched stretch of coastline. They climb down the cliff and meet the tiny boat waiting for them at the bottom, are aboard a larger fishing boat by the end of the day, reach Sicily where Peggy and a plane are waiting for them two days after that.

There’s time for a shower and a hot meal, time to brush the worst of the mud from the road off their boots, time for Peggy to get all the film developed, and then they climb into the plane and are in the air, heading back to London. He and Bucky belt in slumped against each other; Peggy sits across from them, stack of photos in one hand and notebook in the other, pen held between white teeth, starting her analysis already.

She stops on one photo, smiles, passes it over to Steve—it’s the one he took on the side of the mountain, stone and forest and sky, and it came out—eerie, flat: streaks of light and dark, the distant mountains framing the horizon a wobbling line like they’re drawn on a backdrop by an uncertain hand.

It’s not the mountainside as he saw it, but it’s a strange kind of beautiful—landscape by Picasso. Bucky snorts, buries his face in Steve's shoulder, mutters, “You can take the boy outta art school…”

They sleep from Sicily to London.

******

There’s no official debrief, because the mission never officially happened.

Peggy takes the photos and disappears into the bowels of the SSR bunker. Steve and Bucky go back to the rooming house, screw around like they’re in training for the Olympics and then collapse and
sleep for another twelve hours, wake up only just in time to sneak Bucky out the back door before the house wakes up. They reconvene at the SSR bunker at midday to run through the intelligence and have their unofficial debrief for the mission that never happened.

Some of the stuff is useless, out of date already, but there’s a lot there that can be used and Peggy’s already started farming it out within the SSR and His Majesty’s Royal Military, and to her handful of contacts in the Free French and the Registrupravlenie.

“I have to dot it out piecemeal, of course, I can’t show anybody my full hand,” she says. “If anyone were to find out I have most of a day’s worth of transmissions they would start asking questions I certainly can’t answer. It makes them nervous enough that I can’t and won’t tell them where I got the pieces they are seeing.”

“That’s why they’re paying you the big bucks,” Bucky says.

“Yes, all this wealth and fabulous luxury,” Peggy says, waving her hands at the dingy meeting room they’re hidden in for this non-debriefing, the pickle sandwiches and weak tea they’re chewing their way through, her drawn-on stockings, the whole pock-marked bombed-out face of the city.

Steve rattles out the half-dozen ways he’d almost FUBARed the whole operation—wraps up with how he’d run outta steam in the middle of the job and had to be carried to safety like a swooning damsel—

“And yet,” Peggy cuts him off, “you achieved the impossible. Didn’t you? You crossed occupied territory, intercepted the enemy’s communications, and brought back enough actionable intelligence for a dozen operations across the European theatre. For your first operation, it was an extraordinary success. We knew going in that there is a limit on how many minor miracles you can perform in one day, and we planned for that. Barnes got you to safety—” and she looks to Bucky, who’s sitting there with his eyebrows quirked like he’s stifling a smirk, fidgeting with a pencil. “As designed. The system works.”

Steve sucks in a breath, grits his teeth, rubs at his forehead. Nods. Bucky neatly lob the pencil at him, bounces it off his forehead, and Steve snatches it up and faux-stabs him with it.

“Come down from the crucifix, Stevie,” Bucky says, as he fends off the pencil. “We need the wood.”

Steve chokes on a gasp at that, slaps the pencil down on the table and crosses himself. “James Buchanan Barnes,” he says, and he’s channelling their mothers so perfectly that Bucky’s grinning.

Steve’s gonna have to do so many rosaries tonight.

“To err is human, after all,” Peggy says. “We should focus less on apportioning the blame, and more on working out what we can do better next time.”

******

They wrap up at 1500, meander over to the cluster of tents that the Commandos are calling home. The fellas are still on furlough—it feels like a century but it’s only been ten days since Steve and Bucky left London—and their weapons and boots are suspiciously gleaming, and they’ve all got the pink-cheeked look that says they’re freshly shaved as of this morning.
“They were feral,” Bucky tells him on the way over. “It was a fucking disgrace. Frenchie’s started his own war in miniature with the boys from the 2nd Armored over poker winnings, and Dum Dum adopted a stray dog. We were only gone ten days, for Christ’s sakes.”

“You helped me pick ‘em out,” Steve points out, and Bucky snorts.

They’ve only been settled in for twenty minutes or so—sitting around in their own tiny island in the tent city, on a collection of camp stools and what appears to be a bench stolen from the mess—fucking feral—catching Steve and Bucky up on the gossip and ribbing them for details of the “press tour” they’ve just come back from—when one of Phillips’ aides runs up, salutes, gives Steve a typed up note.

“Please sir, sorry sir,” he says, breathless. “The colonel has requested you for an urgent briefing.”

Steve returns the salute, checks the note—COMMANDOS TO BE DEPLOYED TONIGHT, HIGH VALUE TARGET. CPT ROGERS TO REPORT FOR URGENT BRIEFING. SORRY BOYS HOLIDAY OVER—and passes it to Bucky. Turns to the aide and says, “Tell the colonel I’ll be right there,” and then back to the fellas.

“Hope no one has forgotten how to decamp in a hurry,” he tells them. “Shop’s open for business, I’ll go and get our orders—” and there’s a chorus of mixed grumbling with a surge of hunger running blood-hot underneath it—because they’ve been idle long enough, because these are wolves and not lap dogs.

He looks at Bucky, who gives him a nod in reply: he's got this, that little notch in his brow like he's already composing lists of jobs and supplies and gear. Steve nods back, touches his dog tags, goes to get their orders.

******

The target is a train, six cars crammed full of civilian captives—women, children—bound for a Hydra facility in Austria for experimental testing.

“You will have to intercept the train en route, the facility itself is too heavily guarded for any force we can get there in time. Hence why we're sending in your mad bastards,” Phillips says. “The timing will be tight—this is brand new intelligence Agent Carter was only able to bring forward today.”

Steve looks to Peggy, standing attentive to one side, and she flicks him a wink—yes, from the Grand Ballon mission.

The plane leaves at 2000, with the Commandos and their gear, enough explosives to take out a bridge and big chunk of train track, and the rough beginnings of a plan. Steve does his rosaries in the air somewhere over the English Channel.

Chapter End Notes

On German Dialogue, and the Horrors of Google Translate:

One of my beta readers speaks French and has been able to rescue me from the horror of
Google Translate I-can't-believe-it's-not-French in my writing so far, but I don't have a German-speaking beta, so if anyone notices any bizarre or clumsy shit in the German dialogue: a) I'm sorry for butchering your language; b) Google Translate is brilliant except for when it isn't; c) please correct me in the comments and I will endeavour to do better. xoxo

Edit to add: Thank you to Fannishfun for helping me fix the German dialogue. Appreciate it! <3
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They're busy.

There're the missions with the Commandos, hitting Hydra where it hurts—factories in Poland and Germany. Convoys transporting weapons and machine components through France and Austria and the north of Italy. Labs in castles in Sokovia and Czechoslovakia.

There are the main facilities Steve saw marked on the map back in Kreischberg, and then there are the budding cells, the ten man operations: hidden away inside a normal-looking unit in the main German army, or quietly and patiently human-testing poisons out of a cellar in Prague, or—they’re everywhere, is the thing. Cut off one head and two more shall *yada yada*—unless you make rebuilding too damn costly, in resources and lives.

So you gotta raze it down and salt the earth behind you. Steve spends weeks at a time with the reek of smoke in his hair.

And in between there are windows of downtime, pockets of furlough where the other fellas can rest, catch a breath—and Steve and Bucky can go to work on their other missions.

Steve infiltrates a Nazi command meeting in Munich, stands at the back of the conference room making notes in his hasty artist’s scrawl.

He hits another relay station in France and hexes the ever-loving Hell out of the whole radio array two hours before the British begin a flanking manoeuvre around a German artillery battery.

He copies letters and telegrams and code books, he drops a seeming of a half dozen Sherman tanks in the middle of a ruined village and sends two companies of Italians retreating straight into Allied arms, he—

He puts his knives to use.

The first time he kills on a mission—kills as his mission: Jesus, don’t pussyfoot around it. The first time he assassinates someone it’s a Nazi major and he puts his knife up into the guy’s brain through the divot at the base of his skull and then throws up, neatly, into the sink—he’s followed the guy into the bathroom and caught him with his pants down, the first time he’s been alone all day.

When he kills in the field it’s—well, it’s never glamorous. There’s always piss and shit and the meaty smell of torn flesh, the rank iron stench of spilled blood but this—the *silence* after, like all the air has gone out of the room, and the baffled soulless stare of the major’s eyes, stuck wide open, and the way blood and clear brain fluid are dribbling out to pool on the blue and white tile is all just—

He doesn’t throw up again after that first one. Does the math, the terrible fucking calculus of war: end this one life to spare hundreds more in the fighting. Remembers Ulfadhir, sitting on his living room floor a million lifetimes ago: “It will win you neither friends nor glory, but have no doubt—we are necessary.”

And Bucky is there: up trees and on rooftops, in the window of a building three streets away waiting and watching through his rifle scope.
He’s stealing cars and hot-wiring trucks, he's picking Steve up and physically carrying him away slung over Bucky’s shoulder like a sack of beans while Steve’s holding a veil and four seeming steady all at once and doesn’t have anything to spare making his legs go. He’s putting down a half dozen pursuers from two hundred yards out, one after another, clean head shots so they drop mid stride like the Hand of God has fallen upon them, when Steve’s veil goes to pieces as he’s leaving a meeting held at a hotel in Vienna. He’s a one-man exfiltration strategy, and—

And they’re tired: Christ, they’re both so Goddamn tired.

The price of keeping Steve’s secret, doing business off the books like this: their downtime is never really downtime. They’re lurching from target to target, from one end of the European theatre to the other, and somehow a year’s bled out like this, getting by on snatched windows of sleep in transport trucks and in planes and—

There’s a war on: they pull their weight, and then more weight again, because it matters, it’s the only thing that matters.

They’re busy, they’re tired, but that’s okay: they’re winning.

********

Until there's one base left.

They’ve pared Hydra down like an apple to its rotting core—and they can't find the fucking thing. Somewhere in the Alps, based on the movement of supply convoys, but that’s not a lot of help narrowing it down.

It’s Hydra’s last refuge, and also the centre of whatever hideous work they’ve been doing, and—and no one they’ve managed to capture, no one they’ve been able to squeeze intelligence outta before they chew on an cyanide tooth and take a dirt nap—no one can tell them what Hydra are working on, how far they are from deployment. In the couple years the Commandos have been chasing Hydra around the European theatre, they've seen cards but never the whole hand.

Something is moving, swelling up like an abscess just below the surface, just out of the corner of the eye. Something devouring and vast, destructive on a scale the world hasn’t seen before—and they can't fucking find it.

Which is why: “Placing bets that this is a trap?” Dugan asks.

“I know,” Steve says. “They’ve gotta know how bad we need this intel. But there’s no way around it now—we need this weasel, he’s been central in Hydra’s designs. We gotta face forward and go in anyway.”

“Here's hoping they're not expecting us to hit 'em from above,” Gabe says. He's got his gun pulled to bits, is cleaning and oiling the parts, all neatly laid out on a cloth between his feet.

Camp is a couple miles above sea level in the Austrian Alps. They left the last trees behind a day ago so they’ve set their tents against rocks to get some shelter, but it's going to be a Hellish cold night. At least they don’t have to worry about Nazis, in theory anyway: this territory is still technically disputed but the Russians have been pushing the Krauts back for the last six months.
They are winning. It's slow and bloody and grinding, hard to see sometimes because their unit is always in the very guts of things: behind enemy lines or in the flashpoints where one super soldier and the team of mad assholes following him can shift the balance, make the difference. Steve's tired—Christ, they all are. He's gotta keep reminding himself—this is what winning looks like.

“Cause you'd have to be insane, to hit ‘em from above. Right?” Bucky says, flat as an ironing board. He'd helped come up with this plan but that doesn't mean he’s gotta like it. “Like, suicidally fucking insane.”

“C’mon, Buck. This plan is at least twenty percent less suicidal than our last suicidally insane plan,” Steve says mildly. Bucky shoots him a flat look, turns away to hide the reluctant smirk twitching at the corner of his mouth.

“Je souhaite que nous avions des explosifs,” Dernier says, poking at the mystery meat in the pot over the fire. “Avant vers l’arrière. Je ne voudrais pas besoin de beaucoup.” They've thrown around the idea of bombing the train track, making it at least a stationary target, but they don't have enough gear to hand and there's no time to have it brought in. The window for this mission is tomorrow, is narrow, and they've only got this one shot at it.

The wind picks up in earnest as the sun sets, howling and cutting cold as razor blades. It's not snowing—Christ, they'll have to scrub the whole thing if it starts snowing—but the cold is bitter, the sky clear as glass, stars white and blazing in their millions like salt spilled over black cloth.

They'll fight to the death against Adolf and friends but no one’s got anything to prove, trying to tough it out against this fucking cold, so they've scrubbed up, set the watch roster and retreated into their tents not even an hour after nightfall. Steve can hear the others rustling around on all sides—muttered conversations and quiet laughter, the soft rasp of blanket and bedroll. They've set their tents up snugged together, trying to cut down the wind chill—

“Jesus Christ, Steve, stop brooding at the night and close the flap already, I'm freezing my nuts off,” Bucky says, from where he's setting up their bedrolls, hard against each other. No one’s gonna think it amiss if they get caught spooning on a night like this—Steve will bet his last chocolate bar they won't be the only ones, never mind that he and Buck tend to spoon for less than pure and dutiful reasons.

He closes the tent flap and buttons it. Turns back to his sergeant—best friend and fella and field support and sweetheart—and says, “Close your own flaps, Barnes.” Because why say it with flowers when you've got grade school insults.

“Maybe you oughta make me,” Bucky says.

“Maybe I'll jam something in there to keep you quiet,” Steve says, and then his brain catches up with his mouth and his fucking stupid blush starts to crawl up from his collarbones until he's glowing like a stoplight.

Bucky grins like it's Christmas morning. “That so? What did you have in mind?”

Steve starts to grin back, raises a finger to his lips in a hushing gesture. Crawls onto the bedroll closest to him and leans in close like he's going to whisper in Bucky's ear, and then he licks a broad wet swipe across his cheekbone and up into his hair line.

Bucky recoils and palms Steve in the face, shoving him back, and then—then it's war, rabbit-punches and shoves and grabbing for wrestling holds until they've flipped off the bedroll and into the canvas, bowing the whole tent outta shape and—
“What the fuck,” Steve hears, from right next to his head—and that's Jim, they've reefed the canvas out far enough that they're hard against the tent next door and almost into Morita’s lap. “You assholes.”

“I'm sorry,” Steve says, almost drowned out by Bucky dropping his face—he's ended up on top of the pile—into Steve's chest and howling with laughter.

“Jesus,” Dugan is complaining—same tent, but not being crushed, so what's he got to complain about, really—and from the other side comes Monty’s voice:

“What's happening?”

“I've got the biggest toddlers in the world brawling on top of me, trying to pull the tent down on our fucking heads,” Morita says, and now he's shoving and punching at the two of them through the layers of canvas and Steve throws an arm around Bucky and bodily lifts him up and off, sitting up to get out of the way. The tent canvas is all pulled out of shape but it's probably not gonna fall down. Probably.

“I'm really sorry,” Steve calls again.

“Go screw yourself, Brooklyn,” Jim answers.

“Back attcha, Fresno,” Bucky calls, grinning, and wriggling a little, and—oh.

And now he's got Bucky chest to chest, in his lap, staring down at him like a cat watching the mouse he's about to eat. It's dark but Steve's night vision is better than good, plenty good enough to see how Bucky's pupils are pooling open, wide and hypnotic.

“Hi,” Bucky mouths, silent.

“Hi,” Steve mouths back, and then Bucky dips his head and they're kissing, slow and lazy, and Steve can feel his pulse in his lips, radiant human warmth in his hands where they've come to rest on Bucky's hips.

And then Bucky's slipping him some tongue, and Steve's opening, sighing and opening and giving as good as he's getting, and it's perfect: Buck and his warm mouth, clever tongue, big hands clamped hard on Steve’s shoulders, lightest rasp of stubble where his beard is growing in after a couple days in the field. It's perfect, and Steve rocks forward, grabbing and pulling and trying to get Bucky closer —

But Bucky's pulling back, sliding off Steve's lap and giving him a wide-eyed faux-innocent look, waves his hand around like look at all of these assholes. Which—okay, so they're the meat in a tent sandwich. The other fellas are two sheets of canvas away. Making time is not a smart move.

Still. Still: there's a lot of blood heading for Steve’s dick that's gonna be disappointed.

Steve bites his lip, nods, folds his restless hands into fists and drops them into his lap. Bucky gives a lopsided smile—like he's not the same head case who just tongue-fucked Steve’s higher brain function away, right after almost throwing him through the side of their tent—and then he sheds his over shirt and trou, crawls into the thermal sleeping bag in undershirt and shorts and socks and settles in, casual.

The teasing sack of shit—like he ain't heated up too—Steve can hear the quick and liquid thud-skip of Bucky’s heart, the slight unsteadiness in his breathing.
Steve rubs at his forehead, pulls off his own shirt and leggings, crawls into the sleeping bag next door and lies down.

He's got half a second to settle in before Bucky's shifting, creeping across to snug himself hard against Steve's side, rest his head on Steve's shoulder like it's a pillow. Steve sighs, and his stupid dick perks up a little more—seems it's not getting his stand-down orders.

"Shut up and let me use you for your body heat, Rogers," Bucky says.

"I didn't say a word," Steve says.

"You don't gotta. That sigh was a three thousand word essay."

Steve sighs again, deeper and louder and more dramatic, and then turns his head so he's facing into Bucky's hair, breathing in his scent: soap and wood smoke and the wool of his coat, sweat and cordite, the dirt of the road and the unique human smell of one J.B. Barnes. He can still hear the other guys moving around them, rustling and muttering and farting and joking. Can hear the wind humming over tent canvas, licking sharp across the ice-slick ground. Can hear Bucky's breathing, slowing down and evening out.

He should change shape, get small and slip out borrowing, patrol the mountainside on wing and paw—but it's cold and he runs hot like this, so he can wait—just 'til Bucky's fast asleep, slip out then, maybe in a couple hours—

He wakes on shift change, the soft rumble of voices as Frenchie shakes Monty awake to take over the watch. Which means—Jesus, he's slept three hours. Can't remember the last time he's slept three whole hours at a stretch out in the field.

Bucky's spooned up against him, and he's gone the kind of coiled still that he gets when he's about to take a shot—awake, then. At some point his head's slipped from Steve's shoulder and ended up in his armpit, which has got to be fucking rank but not rank enough to get him to give up a super soldier hot water bottle.

Outside Steve can hear the rustle of sleeping bags, tent flaps shifting, quiet footsteps and then the soft clink of a lighter as Falsworth sparks up a cigarette. All quiet, everyone else asleep—deep and rhythmic breathing, and Jim's Godawful snoring from next door—

And then Bucky's on top of him, face inches away, hands planted on either side of Steve's head, legs—still trapped inside his sleeping bag—sloting between Steve's knees. He's staring, eyes wild and fixed, chewing at his bottom lip.

He leans in, until his lips are only a breath away from Steve's left ear, one hand coming up to rest on Steve's shoulder. When he speaks it's the barest whisper, soft as thought: "You think everyone's asleep?"

"Think so," Steve breathes back.

"Good," Bucky whispers, slides his hand down into Steve's sleeping bag to grab his cock. Steve gasps, arches, and Bucky hushes him, mouths hot and wet at Steve's neck, and Steve can feel Bucky's chest shaking with silent laughter—the teasing sack of shit.

Right, to Hell with this.

Steve grabs Bucky by the nape of his neck and smashes their mouths together, snakes down with his other hand into Buck's sleeping bag to return the favour. Bucky shudders and parts his lips and licks
into Steve's mouth, gives a soft rumble in his chest, and Steve’s got a hand on his dick through his shorts, can feel it plumping up fast through the fabric, the throb of his pulse under warm skin and cotton. Christ, and he's so hard already, his own cock jumping to attention in Bucky's hand—this is going to be brutal and messy, over too fast.

Bucky breaks the kiss, licks at Steve's lips in parting, ducks down again to nip at the line of tendon in Steve's neck, at the tender sweet patch of skin just behind his ear—

—and between snatches of teeth and tongue and lips he's talking, whisper-quiet enough that Steve wouldn't have caught a word of it without more-than-human hearing: ‘That’s it, darlin’. Doll. Christ—it's been too long. Feel so good—I wanna unwrap you like a present—’

—and they can't, they can't, not in the field, not when shit could hit the fan at any moment, but just then Steve wishes to Christ that they could: rip off every stitch of cloth between 'em and fuck around until they're both sore and sated. He bites his lip to keep from moaning, rolls his hips up into Bucky's fist, gets his own hand into Bucky’s shorts and works his dick, tight and hard.

“Oh my God, Buck,” Steve whispers, and it comes out shaky, and Bucky bites him, good and hard just under the ear, arches into his hand, and Steve almost shoots his load there and then, like he's a Goddamn teenager again.

“Fuck yeah, doll. That's it—Christ, I wanna fuck you. Wanna finger you open and feed you my cock and give it to you 'til you cry uncle.” Bucky's licking over the spot he's bitten, and it's sending white sparks of hurt-sweetness down Steve’s spine to pool with the sticky heat in his groin.

Steve turns his head so he's breathing in the smell of Bucky's hair again, strangles the whimper that's welling up from his chest, Bucky’s hand—he knows just what Steve likes, where to squeeze and where to twist, gathering slick and sweat from the head with his thumb and smearing it up and down to ease the way—it's just the right kind of pressure, the right kind of tight, and Steve's got the feeling of weight and heat building in his belly and balls that means he's gonna embarrass himself real soon.

“Oh, Christ, please,” he manages, and then he twists his head away and brings up his free hand, jams his forearm in his mouth and bites down so he can't moan like a Goddamn whore, Holy Mother it's too good.

“Come on, love, give it up for me. I've got you,” Bucky says, and even whispering his voice has got that rasping purr in it that makes Steve swell up in his shorts. “Soon as we've got a locked door and two minutes alone—you'll have to use that shield to pry me off you, darlin’—”

—and then Steve's snapping his hips up and biting down and coming, liquid heat spilling through him, out of him, and his whole body's pulsing with the throbbing of his dick and the tidal pull of pleasure that Bucky's milking out of him, his breath stuttering out in bursts of sweetness and sticky white. Until he sags back on the bedroll, sucks in controlled breaths through his nose, pries his eyes open in time to see Bucky pull his hand from the sleeping bag and start licking the spunk from his fingers.

“God Almighty,” Steve whispers brokenly. “You're killing me here.”

Bucky hums, raises an eyebrow, like he's got no idea what an inspiring sight he is, lips red and swollen with kissing, long callused fingers smeared with jizz, pupils spilled wide with the thinnest edge of wolf-grey.

Steve snaps, throws an arm around Bucky’s ribs and flips them so he's on top, knelt over him, and then tugs at Bucky's sleeping bag with hands made clumsy with want. “Gimme,” he whispers, and
Bucky's shaking with silent laughter and helping, lifting his hips so Steve can reef the sleeping bag
down to his thighs.

Buck's dick is up and tenting the front of his shorts, a wet smear on the fabric where he's starting to
leak, and Steve bites his lip so he doesn't whine like a dog at the sight of it, hikes the waistband
down enough so Bucky's cock springs free. It's shiny at the tip, flushed dark, throbbing in place with
his heartbeat, and it jumps in Steve's hand when he grabs it, fists the length slow and firm. Holds it
steady at the base and leans in to mouth at it.

Can't stop himself from humming at the taste, the salty-sweet of pre-come hitting his tongue like
candy.

Bucky's hand is combed into his hair, and his breath comes out shaky. “That's perfect,” Bucky
whispers. “That's so good, Jesus, how'd I get so lucky—” and Steve doesn't have the patience to
tease, can't get fancy with lips and tongue without making wet slurping noises. Sucks in a deep
breath and then goes down as far as he can, until he's got all but that last inch in his mouth, closes his
mouth around it and works his tongue against the underside and sucks as deep and hard as he can.

Bucky's hand closes convulsively in his hair, pulling, and he gives a breathless, “Unh,” like it's been
punched out of him, bites down on his lip, and then: “Fuck, that mouth of yours oughta be illegal—
can't believe how pretty you look with a mouth full of cock, Stevie.”

Steve can hold his breath for ten minutes in this body. He only needs six before Bucky's pulling his
hair, mouth shaping silent curses, muscles in his thighs and belly pulling taut as wire, and then he
sucks in a breath and goes silent, swells and pulses on Steve's tongue. Steve swallows and swallows
and gives a hum of satisfaction. He brings his spare hand down to palm his dick—it's perked up
again—and pulls back enough to finally rest his head on Bucky's thigh, sigh out a long-held breath.
Breathe in again.

“Jesus Christ,” Bucky wheezes softly. “Did you just—not breathe?”

“I got ten minutes before I need to,” Steve whispers, breathless and cheerful. “Tested exhaustively by
the whiz kids at the SSR back when I first changed.”

“You crazy asshole,” Bucky says. “It's a blowjob, not an endurance test.”

“Didn't hear any complaints at the time,” Steve breathes, and Bucky answers by sitting up, grabbing
Steve by the nape and pulling him up, slanting their mouths together and kissing him, deep and hard
and hungry. Drops his other hand into Steve's lap, where he's lazily rubbing his cock, and helps out.

It doesn't take long—he always gets so Goddamn heated up when he's sucking Bucky's dick,
watching him make those stupid gorgeous faces when he's losing it—and Bucky kisses him and
kisses him and kisses him until Steve has to shove his mouth into Bucky's shoulder to smother his
gasps, spills again, long and slow pulses of heat pulling through him like velvet rope.

“Oh God,” Steve whispers, broken.

“Pretty as a pinup,” Bucky answers, kissing him on the top of his head, and Steve makes a little noise
of protest like he does when they're finished and Bucky's still being a big sap, head butts him lazily.

Clean up is a few swabs with a rag and some water from Steve's canteen—he's got it tucked in the
sleeping bag with him so the water doesn’t freeze—and then they burrow back into their bedding
and curl up together like pill bugs. The night wind has picked up outside, a grim and humming drone
over the rocks and tents and guy lines, and the cold bites into bared skin now they're not too busy
thinking with their dicks to feel it.

“'To Hell with this wind,’” Steve mutters against Bucky's shoulder.

If the wind is too strong in the morning they'll have to scrub the mission. What they're doing is stupid enough, risky enough in dead calm; they won't pull it off with the wind throwing them around.

“'S'okay,’” Bucky murmurs. “'We'll come up with a new plan, if it's windy. We're full of plans, each more Godawful than the last.”

Steve snorts, bites him on the collarbone. “Go to sleep, Buck. Gotta be up early to catch our train.”

*******

The wind dies down, and they catch their train. It's their last shred of good luck spent, because after that everything goes FUBAR.

It was a trap. It was always gonna be a trap but they'd gone in anyway, and now—

Now the roar of the train engine is juddering up his spine and the air is thin and frozen and sucking, pulling at him tissue and bone through the fucking enormous hole in the side of the train car. He’s down, bell rung, direct fucking hit to the shield with a Hydra cannon and he’s scrabbling, ears shrill and screaming. He's dropped his shield, his gun, and nothing seems to want to work—not his brain or his ears or his arms or—

Everything is white-edged and blue and sparking, his eyes aching with it like that last blast seared right down the nerve into his brain. He can hear the high-pitched whine of the energy cannons charging again, the thump of footsteps on metal, and—and he's got nothing. He can't—past the shrieking of the wind and the layer of electric blue sparking in his synapses—he’s got nothing. Fuck, Jesus, what a stupid way to die—

And then there’s a clang, shield against metal, and the crack of bullets, and he rolls and blinks the sparks outta his eyes to look and—that’s Bucky, Steve can see the outline of his shoulders, blue of his coat, the round shape of the shield he's holding—and oh Christ, no, what's Bucky—

Shriek of Hydra cannons firing, another flare of light so bright it cuts through flesh and metal and bone and into the underpinnings of reality, and then his shield’s ringing like a bell and the—and Bucky—

He's gone. He's gone out the side of the car, he’s gone off the edge of the world, he’s—

The layer of static freezes, goes to ice, becomes utterly crystalline, and Steve's up on his feet and moving, smooth and silent, ice water in his veins and brain pan, muscle and tendon and coiled razor wire. He's got a knife in each hand and a good seven seconds before those cannons can recycle for another shot. This cocksucker is dead and doesn't know it yet. Last mistake, asshole.

He closes before the armoured squid can even turn his way, jams one knife into the mouth of a cannon as he lifts to point it at Steve's chest. It sparks and bursts—hand flashes numb—but then fuckface is screaming and lurching back with his arm on fire and Steve sways under his flailing arm and closes in again—
Other knife up—armour, plates, weakness, *there*—slicing up and in with all the strength in his arm, punching the blade point up through the gap under the helmet and into the goon’s throat. He twists, saws, reffs the blade out again. Gout of blood hits the floor, wet sound of liquid hitting metal—and then the goon’s down a second later, grabbing at his throat like he’s gonna stem the tide, heels drumming on the metal as he thrashes—

Draw back—kick his hand away from his throat and—stamp *down*. Like he's killing a roach in the stairwell back home. Butcher’s shop *crunch* of bone breaking. Sudden quiet.

Steve drops the knife and goes to the side of the train car, to the gaping wound in the metal where Bucky—

Bucky. Hanging onto a length of railing on the ripped open side of the car.

“Buck,” he hears himself yelling, past the sucking howl of the wind and the roar of blood pounding in his ears: he thought he was *dead*, he thought Bucky was *fucking dead*, oh *Jesus*—

The metal groans, shifts, and Bucky drops a couple inches. Their eyes lock: diamond pale grey, pupils contracted to pinpoints. Steve can hear the minute whining strain of metal bolts shearing under stress—

“Hang on,” Steve calls, like some kind of fucking idiot because what else is Bucky gonna do, and then he’s grabbing onto the ridges in the bowed-out metal and swinging out, boots planted in a fold in the metal, hanging his ass out over a snowy ravine. His hands are slipping—one’s slick with blood and the other's numb but—he’s just gotta make it to—less than five feet now. Bucky’s trying to get closer, shifting his hands along the metal bar he’s clinging to, close enough for Steve to see the streaks of blue in amongst the grey of his eyes.

“I've got you,” Steve says, lies, reaching, fingertips not quite brushing the very end of the metal bar where it's bolted to the side of the car, and—

“Stevie,” Bucky says, and it comes out like his throat is squeezed closed, like he’s choking, and—

There's a crunch.

Bolts shear. Metal tears. Gravity—

Bucky—

No. No. God, no: this wasn't the deal. It was *supposed to be me*.

Steve's hearing is enhanced, more than human. He can hear Bucky screaming the whole way down, until it cuts out sharp and sudden as a gunshot.

The train moans, deep and mechanical and clattering over icy tracks. The wind howls, cold and sleet-stained and grey. In the background is the hum of the Hydra soldier’s undamaged cannon whining away mindlessly.

He can hear his own heartbeat, respiration. He wishes to Christ that he couldn't. He wishes they'd be still.

Everything else is silent. He can't—not in this body—but he *knows* that a song he knows better than his own faltering heartbeat just cut out, brassy trumpet notes and the chatter of seagulls at the docks stopping cold like a record ripped from the turntable before the song was through.
Steve slams his forehead into the metal siding and closes his eyes and keens, and the noise that comes out of him is nothing like human: it's a wounded animal sound, it's ice cliffs groaning and shearing, it's the centre of things failing to hold. God: it was supposed to be him.

********

Jones captures Arnim Zola. Mission successful; one casualty.

God, this was not the deal.

Chapter End Notes

Posting a shade earlier than usual because I’m on the road over the next couple of days and may not have reception / time / emotional bandwidth.

So, uhh. Happy holidays? Have some anguish? *hides under soft furnishings*

Also I made the series thing happen, so now it's Officially A Series and you can subscribe or bookmark or send up a flare or set a psychic anchor or whatever your thing is to find the rest of the story as I start posting. Two chapters to go here...
Chapter 23

It takes three days to get down from the mountains to their rendezvous point, prisoner in tow—somewhere towards the fucking rear, because Steve can't look at him. They need this rat fink sack of shit for his intel; it will have been for nothing if Steve opens him up from chin to navel with one of his smallest knives, it will all have been for nothing and Bucky will have died for—

The prisoner stays to the rear.

They move by day: train, truck, hiking—and camp by night, and the nights Steve spends borrowing, flying as an owl, scanning afield at the base of the crevasse where the train passed, where the bridge arches overhead. He looks for—anything, for blood stains, a blue coat, a body. Finds nothing.

There's a river, narrow but deep and cold: maybe he fell there, disappeared into the icy current, and the water erased all trace of him. Snow has fallen: maybe he's covered, a soft white blanket. Steve doesn't hate that idea—it's better than picturing him smashed to bits on rock and ice, staring eyes exposed to the sky.

He marches, gives orders, eats, makes camp, flies in a borrowed owl shape, searches. Does not find. Does not sleep: he knows what's waiting for him in sleep, and he's in no hurry to get there.

This body has enhanced senses. This body has an eidetic memory. This body has Bucky Barnes falling to his death woven into its hair, carved into its bones, tattooed on the insides of its eyelids. *Fuck* sleep.

They meet Howard Stark’s plane at an airstrip in Italy, pile on board the plane with gear and weapons and prisoner, and Steve hears Howard asking, “Where's Barnes?” and the long and ugly silence that follows.

Keeps his eyes fixed forward, on the bag of gear and radio he's strapping down in the storage netting at the rear of the plane, and doesn't look around until after Monty’s stepped up and explained—softly, like Steve can't hear every Goddamn word at this range regardless—that the Sergeant won't be coming home from this one.

In London, Steve turns over the prisoner to Colonel Phillips, stands at attention and debriefs crisply and baldly and in as few words as possible. Stares at the wall-length map of the European theatre on the wall beyond and doesn't make eye contact at any point—in his peripheral gaze he can see Peggy is white-faced and very still, her red lips pursed down to a fine line, breathing slow and deliberate.

“My condolences, Captain Rogers,” Phillips says at the end, brisk but also a hair’s-width more sincere than the last time he'd offered Steve condolences for Bucky’s death—two years ago, after Azzano. “Barnes was an excellent soldier, and a good man, and I know he was a close friend to you and the other Commandos—”

—and he's talking in form-letter phrases, the ones he signs and sends off in bulk. It’s all Steve can do not to puke on the table between them. “Is there a personal message you'd like me to include in the letter home?”

“I'll write the letter, sir,” Steve says. “It's the least—Winnie Barnes had almost as much hand in raising me as my own Mam did. I'll write the letter.” His voice is still coming out steady but it feels a bit like he's talking from the bottom of a well, like he's impossibly distant, echoing, words folded back on themselves until they’re meaningless sound.
“Very well, Captain. Tomorrow. For now: get some rest, lick your wounds, have a stiff drink or seven. We'll start working on Zola, see what we can't pry out of him. Reconvene at 0800 tomorrow.”

“Sir,” Steve says, nods, continues to stare at the far wall like it's got all the answers.

“Dismissed.”

He goes back to the boarding house, sheds his uniform and leaves it on the floor in a heap, splashes water on his face and brushes his teeth. Looks around the room: the desk where Buck liked to sit and smoke, the bed where they'd cram eight limbs together in a space meant for four and lick sweat and spunk and the haze of war off each other.

His chest hurts like it did when he had his heart attack, only this body—this Goddamned walking steak sandwich of magic and muscle and bleeding raw nerves—won't ever betray him like that. Christ, he can't even get drunk like—

Unless he does it the other way.

His dog tags are warm from sitting against his skin. He makes the shape change, pulls out the fold of emergency cash he's got stuck under the mattress and slings one of his knife bandoliers over his shoulder. Conjures up a rough seeming, so it looks like he's wearing decent clothes—he's got the close-cut tactical garb that he wears for his jobs, still dirty from his last run, and then a couple pairs of shorts and undershirts in this size—so shorts and undershirt it is, with a sloppy illusion over the top.

Clothes—sort of—cash, weapons. Ready for anything.

Marches down the road until he finds a pub that's open and serving customers, where he veil walks behind the bar, grabs a bottle—whiskey, always Bucky's favourite—and leaves a wad of cash sitting in its place, walks out again and turns north.

The pub where they'd all got shit-faced on their first furlough in London—the night he'd recruited the Commandos—the whole street was bombed the week before they'd left on this last mission. Still standing, but choked with rubble and dust, half the roof near the entrance caved in. So the pub's condemned, empty, bleak and dark and fucking perfect to sit alone and mourn and try to get utterly blackout drunk.

He weaves his way past the piles of rubble, finds a table near the bar—he'd sat just there with Buck, two years or lifetimes ago—and pulls one of the knives from his bandolier. Stabs it neatly upright into the table and anchors a seeming there: himself in his Cap shape, looking pathetic. “I want to be alone,” he tells it; it parrots the words back, mindless, flat. Good enough, anyway. Enough to give him an early warning system.

The booth he goes to is tucked in the very back of the bar, out of sight-lines from the street entrance and dark as Hell. He tosses his belt of knives onto the table, sits, uncaps the bottle and toasts the seeming of himself, sitting dourly at guard in the front, and drinks a good slug. It goes down his throat like a cat slowly clawing her way down a trouser leg, sits in his belly bright and hot as a burning troop transport, and he feels it unspool into his bloodstream.

Hypothesis: he can still get drunk in this body.

Early results: promising.

He's been testing his hypothesis with bleak concentration for about an hour—and his chest still hurts like Hell, face is numb, guts are cold but skin flushed, nose is running, eyes burning—a Goddamn mess—when he hears his double drone out, “I want to be alone.”
Just enough time to whip out a hand and snatch the next knife from his bandolier, the one with his quick-deploy veil working anchored into it. He can pull a veil out of his ass in a heartbeat when he's on his game, but right now he's drunk and hurting and covered in snot and brick-dust and whiskey, so far past his sell-by date it's not even funny, so the quick-deploy veil is a winner.

He's veiled from sight and standing slowly, knife in his hand, looking to the entrance, at the figure working past the piles of rubble to come inside and—

Green coat, black hair and boots, clear green gaze snapping to his, finding him straight through the veil. Ulfadhir.

Steve sighs, drops the knife and drops the veil, sits down in the booth again and has another good swallow of booze.

He hasn't seen Ulfadhir in—it must be a year now. Newly liberated Paris, he'd had a couple days of furlough, and they'd spent a night of it breaking into the Louvre—without the use of veils, because where was the challenge otherwise. None of the art was there, it'd all been moved out before the Nazis moved in, but the building itself was still glorious.

They'd sat on the floor in the hall where the Venus de Milo should have been and drunk mead and talked about madness and genius and art and passion in the darkness, surrounded by rarified air and dust and empty spaces.

Nothing since then. Steve's been busy, between missions and transports and manoeuvres, the ones he does at the bidding of the US government and the ones no one knows about but him and Peggy and Buck. Paris was the last time he'd slept in the same place two nights in a row, come to think of it.

Ulfadhir is pale and a little wild around the eyes, mouth set thin and flat. He's got a couple of good-sized daggers sheathed on his belt—Steve thinks it's the first time he's seen him visibly armed—and is pulling a golden flask of something undoubtedly toxic from inside his coat as he crosses the room.

“I want to be alone,” the Cap seeming says again, plaintively, and Ulfadhir flicks his spare hand at it, scatters the illusion into shards of gold and blue that sink and fade into the floor like old confetti.

He whips a chair out from the table and sits, uncaps flask and has a swig. “I was expecting something a bit more apocalyptic,” he says.

“Sorry to have fallen short,” Steve says flatly.

“I think I prefer this to fishing you out of a mound of enemy corpses,” Ulfadhir says.

“This is not a coincidence, is it?” Steve asks.

“There are no coincidences, not in the games of the great houses and not in sorcery,” Ulfadhir says, and passes Steve the flask.

“You know, there are times in this war I could have really used you showing up out of nowhere, loaded for bear,” Steve says, and takes a slug of the booze in the flask. It's a little like swallowing ball lightning and he chokes, gasps. “What the Hell is this?”

“A shortcut,” Ulfadhir says.

“To what, vomiting? God Almighty. So why are you here—” Steve stops, narrows his eyes, parses it out slowly and carefully in his head. “You've put another spell on me.”
“Well done.”

“That would let you know when I… well, it can't be keyed to physical danger, or it would be jangling in your ear all the time.”

“The keystone of the working is despair,” Ulfadhir says. “It was intended to make me aware if you'd been captured, or were facing certain death, not…” He trails off, lets himself be seen looking Steve over: his reddened eyes and blotchy pallor and hunched shoulders and snot stains. He reaches across the table and takes the flask back. “For whom do we mourn?”

Steve's throat closes. He slams his eyes shut and swallows hard, closes his hands into fists. Tries to breathe: it's tight and choked and high in his chest, aching in his ribs. “Bucky,” he mouths, and then grits his teeth and drops his head to murder the injured animal keen trying to tear its way up from his sternum, shoulders shaking with it.

There's a long silence from the other side of the table. When he opens his eyes again he sees Ulfadhir taking a long swallow from the flask. Then he caps it and says: “I take it back. I would much rather the pile of corpses.”

Steve snorts, chokes, flips Ulfadhir off with one hand and takes a swig of whiskey with the other. “Go screw yourself,” he rasps after he's done.

“I'd rather not, if it's all the same,” Ulfadhir says. Steve puts his head down, rests it on his forearm. He's woozy, feeling like his head is swelling and flushing and glowing like the sun. Whatever the Hell is in that flask, it works fast.

“Christ,” Steve mutters against the wood grain of the table top, and then, “I fucked up.”

Silence again. Steve can hear the soft slosh of the flask. “My mess, my fault,” Steve says, and lifts his head so he can look Ulfadhir in the eye. “I was down and he was protecting me. It was supposed to be me.”

“It appears he didn't agree,” Ulfadhir says, very neutral and level. He's meeting Steve's gaze, as still and steady as he's ever seen him.

“I don't care,” Steve yells. “He wasn't supposed to—what good is all this—” and he throws up his hands, waving at himself, his body, his whole life and choices up 'til now, “—if I can wiggle my fingers and make reality bend over for me, or turn into Cap and—and punch a Goddamn tank unconscious, but I can't keep one asshole from dying?” He chokes on a moan, an ugly animal noise of pain, jams the heels of his palms against his face to stifle it.

It's a long time before the need to howl like a kicked dog passes, and then he takes his hands away, takes a breath in—and it’s wheezing, falls out again as a sob, and then whatever tattered bit of rope was holding him together gives way and he's sobbing, jamming his palms hard into his eye sockets like this is less fucking humiliating if no one can see the tears.

“It appears he didn't agree,” Ulfadhir says very neutral and level. He's meeting Steve's gaze, as still and steady as he's ever seen him.

“Fuck fate,” Steve snarls, and Ulfadhir huffs a short laugh and clinks his flask against Steve's bottle like it's a toast.

“Fuck fate,” he says, and drinks, and Steve drinks with him automatically. He's still leaking tears and
snot but at least he's not moaning like a sick cow anymore.

“As to the question of what to do now,” Ulfadhir says, “I think your path is clear.” Steve looks up, looks him in the eyes, clear and pale and green as sea glass. “You find the ones who took your heart from you, and you see to it their deaths come swift and terrible.”

Steve shudders, wets his lips. The jolt that runs through him is physical, a seizing tension in his muscle and bone, curls hands into fists.

He feels sometimes like he must have been born with both fists swinging, teeth bared and snarling, and—and becoming Cap took the edge off that, because suddenly he was big enough that the petty assholes he'd thrown himself at his whole life kind of fell away, and he was aware of becoming the kind of bully he'd always hated.

But this: this was something he could throw himself against, dash himself to pieces against, with all the violence and fury in his fucked up little soul.

“Arnim Zola,” Steve grinds out. “I can’t touch him, though; we need him for interrogation.”

“You won't always need him,” Ulfadhir says, cocking an eyebrow. “I know you can play a long game.”

And once Steve would have flinched at the thought of patiently waiting for a chance to kill somebody, but that was before he'd stood for four hours at the foot of an Italian generale’s bed waiting for his mistress to leave and then cut the guy’s throat open, carotid artery and jugular vein, clear and clean as an anatomy textbook. Before he'd silently followed a SS officer around for the best part of two days waiting on his chance to steal a copy of the codes the man was keeping in his breast pocket.

Now he knows waiting, knows the long game. Now the cold reaches all the way into his centre, his guts and lungs and sluggish heart.

He nods, slow.

“Is he a player, though, or merely a game piece?” Ulfadhir asks, and Steve sucks in a breath. That was core, in the game of great houses: to stay focused on the asshole at the top of the stack. You might have to fight, manoeuvre around, cut deals with the pawns, but you kept your fucking eyes on the guy who made the moves.

“Schmidt,” Steve rasps. “I was gunning for him anyway, but—” and he laughs, short and low and wet. “We couldn't find their last stronghold. That's why we needed Zola—find 'em, stop 'em. Put down Schmidt.” He grabs the whiskey and has another swallow—between that and whatever's in the flask he's going pleasantly numb from the brain stem down—and Ulfadhir reaches over, viper quick, catches his forearm and studies it.

“How long have you had these?” he asks, and Steve blinks, twists his arm away and peers down, at the soft pale skin of his wrist and forearm—the underside, where the ulna runs smooth beneath the flesh. He's got a line of brown and white markings running from wrist to elbow. Flight feathers. He pokes them, finds the skin smooth and flat, checks his other arm: matched set.

“Huh,” Steve says.

“Wings,” Ulfadhir says softly, looking baffled and curious. “Have you been flying as a bird?”

“Borrowing,” Steve says. “Owls, mostly, scouting ahead at night or looking—” and then he chokes,
stops, looking for Bucky, because seems like every fucking thing is gonna remind him, and every
time he’ll feel it like a good steel-toed boot in the ribcage—but Ulfadhir is grabbing his arm again to
have a closer look.

“How long?” he asks again.

“Don’t know,” Steve says. “Didn’t notice them until you started poking ‘em just now. Most times I'm
in this body it's dark, or I'm in the middle of doing somethin’ violent, so I'm not examining myself—
no, no,” because Ulfadhir has pulled one of his knives and is holding it like he's planning to slice in,
his expression gone distant with fascination.

Steve twists out of his hold again and Ulfadhir lowers the knife, looks him in the eye again like he's
just remembered that arm was attached to somebody.

“Any changed sensation?”

“No,” Steve answers. “It just feels like skin. What are they?”

Ulfadhir is silent for a moment, staring at the line of feathers, then he answers, slow, like he's still
putting the pieces together. “When one performs a great work of magic, it has a cost. Takes
something from you, leaves its mark embedded on you. You are less than you were for having done
it, or more. But this was no great working…”

He looks up, meets Steve's eyes again. “But then, you are mortal, and a shapeshifter. Your flesh and
bones are malleable. And the repetition…”

“So if I do a spell too often it'll start to show up on my skin?”

“It would seem that way,” Ulfadhir says, and grins. “Does that puncture your vanity?”

“I've got a laundry list of sins, but vanity ain't one of ‘em. Does this happen to other mortals who use
magic?”

“You overestimate my interest in mortals and their quirks.”

“And yet, you're here,” Steve says, and he's drunk enough, crazed enough, broken open and
bleeding out enough to keep going: “You know, I've been in Europe for a couple of years now.”

“Indeed,” Ulfadhir says, flat, poking the knife in his hand back into its sheath.

“Yeah. Picked up a lot of bits and pieces from the local languages. Like vader, from Germany.
Father. Pretty similar to the Icelandic faðir. Father.” Steve lets it sit for a moment, and the silence
stretches like taffy. Ulfadhir is watching him, gone very still, his face the kind of neutral that means
he's shut everything down hard.

Steve has another sip of whiskey and then puts the bottle down to one side. “For someone with no
interest in mortals you've sure been in my life an awful lot.”

Ulfadhir shifts, sitting back in his seat, and a slice of shadow falls over his face, hides his features a
little, which—there wasn't a patch of shadow there a second ago—

“You just conjured up a shadow so you can look mysterious, you melodramatic son of a bitch,”
Steve says, and he's somewhere between laughing and crying again. “Did you think I wouldn't
figure it out? You literally told me to call you Da.”
There's another long silence, and then Ulfadhir drops the shadow conjuring, sits forward again. “Don't speak that way about your grandmother,” he says blandly, has a long swallow from the gold flask before capping it again, pushing it back into a coat pocket and getting up to go.

“Really?” Steve asks, plants his palms on the table and half rises, wobbling, wanting to snarl because you can't say that and then just *leave*, what the Hell, you *total nut job*, and clearly Steve's penchant for drama runs in the family—

“We both have work to do,” Ulfadhir says, half turning with a crooked smile. “You have a shield brother to avenge. Also, you're about to receive a visitor,” and then he's veiled and gone, vanished, and Steve gapes for a full second at the spot where he used to be before his last words sink in—

—and he's scrabbling, grabbing for the knives on his bandolier—third one down has another quick-deploy veil in it, but he's fucked up and fumbling, the whole belt snaking off the table to hit the floor with a clunk, and he ducks to grab it and hits his head on the table, hard, hard enough to feel it past the cushioning layers of booze.

“Christ,” he yells, because Lord God Almighty *that hurt*, and then his groping fingertips brush the right knife and he whips the veil out and around him, invisible and safe. Straightens up, rubbing his head. Peggy is standing in the middle of the bar, staring in his direction, having clearly seen the whole fucking thing.

“Well,” she says. “I do hope your field manoeuvres are somewhat stealthier than that.”

Steve sighs, drops the veil. “In the field I'm not sauced as Hell, Peg,” he says.

“I should think not,” she says, crossing the room to him, her heels cracking out punctuation on the brick grit and dust of the floor. She comes around the table, stands at his elbow. “How much have you had to drink?”

“Not so much as I can’t feel it when I stove my head in on a hardwood table,” Steve says. “Enough that tomorrow morning isn’t gonna be fun.”

“This morning,” Peggy corrects. “It’s after midnight. Is there a reason you’re in your underclothes?”

“I don’t have any walking-around clothes that fit this shape. It’s okay, I was under a veil,” Steve says. “I needed to be little so I could get drunk.” He’s wobbling, gently folding sideways, so he sits down again—which ain’t polite, there’s a lady still standing, and he blinks at her and then lurches back to his feet.

“Well, mission accomplished, I think. Oh, sit,” Peggy says, catching him by the arm and sitting herself down and pouring Steve back into his seat again.

“Yeah, we did,” Steve says, and blinks hard. “We accomplished our mission. And it only—” He stops, grits his teeth and closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “Shit,” he whispers.

Peggy puts her hand on his. “I’m so sorry, Steve. I can't even imagine how you must be feeling right now.”

“Drunk,” Steve says. “And—and *useless*. I screwed it, Peg, I fouled the whole thing up, and now he's dead and it's on me.”

“Steve, it wasn’t your fault—”

“He was protecting me,” Steve says, jams the heel of a palm into his right eye to shove back the tears
forming again. “He was protecting me. He never would've been there if it wasn't for me.”

“Then he must have damn well thought you were worth it,” Peggy says, crisp, squeezing his hand hard.

“What good is it, being—what I am, carrying a shield with a big target on my chest, if it doesn’t—it was supposed to be me.”

Peggy shifts forward, enough that he looks up, meets her eyes. Cinnamon dark, with red staining the whites—she’s been weeping too. “Steve—dearest. What you are… you’re extraordinary, but you’re not omnipotent. You can't shoulder the blame for everything. Hydra must bear the greatest part of it, and James has his own part too—of course he does,” she says, pressing her fingertips over Steve’s mouth as he goes to protest. “Of course he does. He knew the risks better than most and chose to fight regardless, because he knew that the work we're doing is vital, and because he loved you.”

He can't stop the sob that comes out, folding forward, pressing his mouth to her hand where it's holding his. It’s gotta be snotty and foul but she isn't flinching, her other hand coming up to comb fingers into his hair. “The last choice he made in life was to give everything keeping you safe, Steve. Don't take that choice away from him.”

She’s pulling, and he's half in her lap, face in her chest and shaking to pieces, and she's combing his hair and petting him down the length of his spine and dropping kisses in his hair while he sheds snot and tears into her blouse like some kinda human car crash. It's coming up and through him like vomit, like magma pushing up through the earth, and it's all he can do to ride the storm of it until the worst has passed and he shifts, drops his forehead on her shoulder.

She smells of vanilla and gunpowder and port, and her song is strong and true, fluid piano chords and the hum of wind through tree branches and the hissing patter of Morse over a radio. She’s a better person—Christ, a better friend—than he deserves, but… But he's carved himself out hollow fighting this war on every front. The only person he's capable of wanting anymore is frozen meat and bone shards somewhere in the Austrian Alps.

“There, love,” she says softly, and he sighs.

Peggy shifts, presses her red lips to the crown of his head, murmurs into his hair: “Steve, I—this war won't wait for us. Arnim Zola cracked—he’s given us the location of the final base. But we have only a few days to move before his weapons are complete. Are you going to be able to fight? And not just to fight, but to lead?”

“Try and leave me behind,” Steve says, low and fierce. “Schmidt is mine. I won't stop until Hydra is dead, their fortresses thrown down, their Goddamn fields sown with salt.”

“That's very Old Testament,” Peggy says, sitting back, a hand on each bicep to frame him as she looks in his eyes. “And I can't say I blame you, but—but we need to focus on preventing the weapons being deployed, and we can't be distracted seeking revenge. Protect the living before we seek justice for the dead. So I'll ask again: can you be the Captain we need?”

Schmidt, the weapons: it’s all the same endgame. These weapons Hydra have been developing are the rotting fruits of Schmidt’s life’s work. He’ll be there, in the thick of it, Steve knows it in his bones, which means—Steve has no hesitation when he looks Peggy in the eye and says, “Agent Carter—Peg—I swear it.”
There's no time.

Schmidt’s last stronghold is on the border of Austria and Germany under about a million tonnes of mountain. His doomsday weapon—the Valkyrie; God, the hubris—will be complete in three days, and there's no fucking time—

If they had time they could finesse a way in. Get someone on the inside who can tell them strategic weak points, guard rotations, leave a Goddamn door unlocked, something.

If they had time they could besiege the place, bury it in thirty thousand soldiers, tanks and artillery arrays and all.

If they had time they could just bomb the whole mountainside to Hell—Howard Stark’s got a project in the works back State-side, and it's still top secret hush-hush but Steve is good at ferreting out secrets, and the feeling he's picking up from the scientists and techs is one of utter terror and wild excitement—so whatever this bomb does, it's clearly a doozy. But it's still at least four or five months away, and they don't have months.

They have three days. There is no fucking time.

What they do have is a rough sketch of the stronghold from Zola, a couple hundred American troops from the 70th Infantry on the ground in Germany and close enough to get to the stronghold in time, all the ordinance the SSR can shake loose, a couple planes, and a really stupid plan.

This plan—even if it works to spec, it’s gonna put him in the belly of the stronghold right when things start getting hairy, so: hip-deep in trigger-happy squids. There’s a good chance—if he catches a stray bullet from an unexpected angle, if the squids don’t take the bait when he drops it, if he can’t keep Schmidt talking long enough, if if if—there’s pretty good odds this’ll get him killed before he even gets that far. If he were a betting man—

But it might work—it should work, based on every best analysis of what makes Schmidt tick, and if it does—when it does, the next part of the plan is fighting his way through a stronghold full of trigger-happy squids. He's fucking on board for this: the end goal is Schmidt, big picture is Schmidt, but he’s—

He’s all static in the brain pan and down his spine. Cold like glacier ice cracking in his chest. Hungry like claws punching through tissue-paper flesh, and not for food—he keeps forgetting to eat, it's not a priority and the thought makes him fucking sick—he wants Hydra ground down to blood-stained ashes and dust, wants to blunt himself down to bone and sinew doing it.

In Brooklyn, Winnie Barnes and the girls will be waking up to the telegram telling ‘em—

Hip-deep in squids is exactly where he wants to be. There's nothing left in him but this: static, ice, hunger, the fight. He wants it done.

“It’s not like we can just knock on the front door,” Morita says, and Steve looks at the diagram and thinks about what he'd do if there was time, if he could run this like one of his other missions, veil-walk straight in, where he might go to create maximum chaos.

But then—he still can walk straight in. It's just a different flavour of lie. There's more than one way to skin a Nazi.
“That's exactly what we're gonna do,” Steve says.

********

And then he's on his knees and looking up at Schmidt, at the cracked and weeping red mess where his face used to be, at the black open mouth of the gun barrel levelled at his forehead, and he smiles so Schmidt can see it because he can hear the hum of the wind passing over the metal cables punched into the cliff face outside, the vibration of bodies coming down the wire at speed—

—and then the state room is full of flying glass shards and bullets and Commandos, and—

Monty's yelling, “Rogers,” and underhand throwing the shield in his direction, and Steve lifts his hand and drops his attention for half a heartbeat to the palm of his hand, the spot where the coil of spelled wire is stitched inside his glove, and he pulls—

—and the come-here spell rings like a church bell struck by lightning, jolt of the pull running up his arm—first time he'd done this the spell almost yanked him off his feet when he used it but he's got the swing of it now, knows how to brace so when he pulls the trigger, the shield comes to him instead of the other way around. He'd had to break into Stark’s engineering workshop to solder the second length of spelled wire around the rim of the shield, all the while not sure if it'd work or not but—

It works. By God, does it work.

The shield course-corrects in midair and smacks clean into his palm—he turns with it, takes the edge off the momentum—catch and run and go, following Schmidt deeper into the fortress.

It's a mess, squids everywhere and explosions going off somewhere behind him and machine gun fire and the scream of Hydra rifles cutting the air to scattered half-molecules and—a big one, and then the fellas from the 70th are spilling in the front door, diverting attention and drawing firepower and—Schmidt.

He's a red moving target in the distance, ducking around corners and half the time Steve can't even see him—this place is a maze, designed to resist invasion, all twists and double-backs—has gotta follow his trail by ear, by the burnt-blood and ozone smell of soldiers Schmidt’s fucking vaporising on his way through. And—

He's pinned down by a squid with powered armour and some more of those fucking flamethrowers when there’s the chatter of gunfire and then a blast, a wave of heat. He sticks his head out and—Peggy, not a hair out of place, and the way she's cradling the machine gun across her body makes him feel like he remembers feeling on his knees before an icon of Mother Mary when he was about eight.

“You're late,” Steve tries, and—

“I'd say my timing was perfect,” Peggy says, and then he's moving again—Schmidt, Schmidt is endgame—and she’s with him, gun steady at her hip and tucked behind his shield when return fire comes. They've trained together as much as he has with any of the Commandos: he doesn't have to think about where she'll be any more’n he’s gotta think about where his left hand is gonna be, and they’re pushing forward, pushing deeper, taking down whole squads, shield and fist and gun and knife and—
And then the bone-rattling roar of plane turbines is crushing the air from his chest, and—this is it, the weapons array Zola told them about. The *Valkyrie*. It's coming down to this.

It’s monstrous, an enormous sleek machine like a matt black blade with Schmidt somewhere inside, and they're racing down the length of the runway in some souped-up race car—Phillips driving, Peggy in the rear passenger side and half-standing, her hands in the straps of Steve's uniform, helping him up. If they're fast enough, if they catch the plane before the end of the runway, he's gonna need to jump, catch the plane and climb up.

He sure as Hell isn't missing this flight: he and Schmidt have a fucking appointment.

“Here, ready,” Peggy shouts, and Phillips lines the car up, the extended landing gear dead ahead. Steve squares himself, standing braced in the passenger seat of a speeding race car, one foot up on the doorframe and about to jump into the undercarriage of a flying Nazi death engine and then: “Steve,” Peggy calls, and he looks down, meets her gaze. She's fierce, dark eyes incandescent as burning phosphorus.

“Go get him,” she says, and then pulls him down by the shoulder strap to kiss him bruising hard, square in the middle of his forehead. Peggy—he can feel her warmth, smell her sweat and the wax of her lipstick, and her hand is clawed-tight into the meat of him where neck becomes shoulder.

God, she's—he doesn’t deserve this, her faith, her loyalty. And even with everything—the plane screaming overhead, the steady shattering hail of gunfire, the dour fucking veil of widowhood—he’s smiling because it's a benediction. A blessing, and a farewell.

Peggy knows him, knows *all* of him, and she's the only one left who does, and there's a desperate honesty in this. He's reflected in her gaze, warts and all, and there's still room for tenderness in there, here at the end of things.

“You know, I'd invade Austria for you,” he tells her.

She barks a laugh, and then she's looking up, shoving at him: “Now, go now,” and he twists and reaches up and jumps, fingertips catching on the rubber ridges of the wheel, pulling and lifting and climbing, up and up and in. Up the metal struts of the landing gear and into the belly of the plane.

The undercarriage is dark, a couple spotlights—must be almost black for human eyes. He uncoils, stands with his shield ready, cocks his head and listens—listens past the howl of the engines, the rattling metal hum of panels and bolts all singing in unison.

There are seven squids on the plane—Schmidt and six goons, each his own heartbeat, his own set of boots hitting metal. And everything whines with the Godawful shriek of Hydra weaponry, like it’s woven through the whole beast in veins and arteries of unearthly blue.

No one nearby.

He rolls his neck and takes a breath. Bends down and carefully places his shield on the metal catwalk next to him. Catches his right glove in his teeth and pulls it off, sheds the left and tucks them inside the shield. Toes off his boots and shoves up his sleeves. Finds his dog tags and holds fast, stamped letters digging into his palm.

Closes his eyes and shapeshifts.

Opens his eyes and smiles.
Steve is veiled when he cat-creeps down the metal catwalk into the belly of the Valkyrie and looks around: open space, catwalk ribs and bones, and planes—this thing is a mobile hangar, tiny war machines ready to drop from its gut like flies spawning from rotting meat. The bombers—they're tiny, smaller than a car, and each one's got the kind of payload that'll level a good-sized city, per Zola’s best estimation.

There are four squids in flight suits, making ready—adjusting masks, checking propellers. Everything is humming with the blue-song, the song he always hears around Hydra’s weapons—it’s alien and tuneless, broken by moans and creaks like the jagged edges of reality and unreality are grinding together—and it’s everywhere, coming off the bombers and out of the walls and floor, loud enough that his teeth ache with it.

He walks veiled into the middle of the hangar, slipping past a couple of the squid pilots making their pre-flight checks. Each tiny plane has a name painted across the nose. Chicago, he reads, New York.

Well then. That makes things real simple.

Steve closes his eyes, claws his hands, reaches deep. The fires of unmaking tear up from his belly and spool around his hands, burning and wild like it's stripping away skin and bone, and he bares his teeth and clenches his fists and holds, and then—

Lift, twist, shove. The hex rips into the two bombers closest to him, and the blue-song screams like a hawk striking. Reality tears, metal tears, sparks sheet out like a curtain of white fire, and then there’s a bang like a shell being fired and one of the planes drops two feet in its metal cradle, hangs lopsided. The other one—Hell, the second plane is on fire.

It's all happened in the space of a heartbeat, and the squids are still mid-flinch, recoiling, mindless animal reflex, pointing faces and bodies towards the threat. What they think is the threat, anyway: loud noises and fire and bright lights. Which means they're all looking away from Steve.

Which suits him just fine.

Steve rolls his shoulders, pulls the two knives from the sheathes on either hip, eyeballs the squids—they’re converging on the burning plane, moving to contain the flames—except the guy who's closest, whose sleeve is on fire and he's reeling, falling back and trying to slap out the flames.

Distracted, not a threat—main threat is the big guy yelling orders, “Holen Sie sich die Feuerlöscher—are you people deaf?—”

—so he's the guy Steve slips up behind. Steps on the back of his left knee, hard, jamming his boot into tendon and muscle, and grabs his jacket at the neck and hauls back. The guy staggers, starts to fall, and Steve's got a knife point up to meet him, sinks four inches of scalpel-sharp metal in through his left kidney.

His startled yell turns into a breathless howl of pain, and he's convulsing away, writhing and physical like a stuck pig, and Steve brings the other knife around, punches the blade into the side of his neck just under his right ear. Blood gouts out, fat arterial spray, thick and dark red. His scream cuts to silence.
And then the squid goes dead-weight more or less on top of him, lurching against Steve and he's falling back, staggering, and his veil is in fucking tatters and—reassess, evaluate—yeah, they can fucking see him, gaping for a heartbeat and then the two assholes who aren't on fire are both pulling sidearms and raising them.

He whips a hand to the bandolier across his chest, fingertips pressing to the flat of the topmost blade and—quick-deploy veil, throwing it out wild, and he's hidden again—

The squid on the right shoots him anyway.

He's firing blind, aim off, and the slug catches Steve in his right shoulder—close range enough to punch through Stark's fancy armoured fibres and bleed him. He rolls with it, turning and grabbing his shoulder with his other hand, and—fucking Christ that hurts, Mother of God, one huge ache biting into his shoulder and arm and chest, with a bright spot in the centre like he's on fucking fire—and somewhere his mouth is falling open, making a dumb animal noise, “Ahh,” followed a breath later by, “Son of a bitch.”

Steve squeezes at his shoulder—keep the blood on the inside, asshole—and looks up. His veil is still good and they're on high alert, looking around, guns up, and the jerk who was on fire is shaken and yelling, “Wie hat er verschwinden? Wie hat er das gemacht?” He's a noisy stupid distraction, which means he's going to be the last to die.

Right. First—the fire starter spell isn't the right shape for this but he doesn't have time to finesse it—jams the first three fingers of his left hand into the bullet hole and pushes heat in there, fast and ugly —

—Ave Maria, gratia plena—he's gotta bite his lip so he doesn't scream—oh God, oh Mam I'm sorry I've fucked it all up. The reek of burning skin hits his nose and he retches dry but—but it's worked: the wound is cauterised. Veil won't do him any good if he leaves blood spatter bread crumb trails everywhere.

Next: move—gotta be where they’re not expecting him to be, gotta keep moving. He hauls his fingers out of the wound, readies his knives again, stalks forward, rolls his spine to sway under one squid’s outstretched arm like they're dancing, and now he's in the centre of the hangar, in the centre of the rough grouping of soldiers. All three have their pistols out now and are sweeping the space, trying to get a bead on him, quiet and listening hard.

Steve rolls his right shoulder and—fuck, no, that's not happening. Sheathes the knife in his right hand and pulls his Browning instead. He's not as accurate with the gun but he doesn't need to be, not when all his targets are maybe ten feet away at the outside.

Take a deep breath, let it out with a sigh. Pull up just a little of the fire from his belly and then shunt it sideways, out of the channels and into muscle and bone—just enough to thread steel and stone into the tissue, enough to keep him standing, and it's a quick fix at best, stupid and dangerous because mortal flesh isn't designed for this.

He's gonna pay for this later. If there is a later. But who gives a shit: his hands are steady as he raises them, levels blade and barrel, takes his mark.

Breathes in. Breathes out.

Left arm coils, throws, the knife spinning clean, end over end. Right trigger finger squeezes tight. The recoil kicks up his arm, bites into his wounded shoulder hard enough to make him yelp even past the numbing steel in his veins and bones.
To his left, the squid staggers, catches at his throat, sinks like a marionette with the strings cut. He’s
groping at Steve’s knife where it’s sticking out of his neck, clean and sharp as an exclamation point,
blood spilling around the metal, the vivid red of arterial blood. To his right the squid jerks and steps
back hard, drops his pistol, both hands going to his gut—pity’s sake, Steve was aiming for his heart.

He strides over to squid one—down and drumming on the metal catwalk with the heels of his boots,
writhing, still breathing wet gasping breaths past the metal in his neck. Steve bends, grabs, pulls the
knife out swift, hears the rasp of metal against the cartilage in the squid’s windpipe. Blood spurts, hot
and wet, and the squid heaves and then goes rigid, drowning breaths cutting off cold, and in the quiet
Steve hears—

The mechanical hum of machinery waking up, and he whirls around, checking—his veil’s
unraveling around him, started going to pieces the second he touched the downed squid—but it’s
okay, no one’s looking his way. The third squid is—

He’s climbing into the cockpit of a bomber, flipping switches quick and urgent, the bomber’s cradle
grinding awake and starting to lower.

“Shit—” Steve snarls, whips his arm out and throws the knife—and the cockpit canopy drops closed,
blade hitting the glass point-first with a crunch and glancing away. He's running forward, veil falling
to pieces, jams his Browning back into the holster to free both hands so when he reaches the edge of
the catwalk he can catch the metal railing and jump, vault across in a tangle of elbows and knees and
trailing chunks of broken spell—

—and land on the nose of the bomber, on his hand and knees, clawing at the smooth metal for
purchase. Can feel the plane vibrating with life under him, the jerking movements of the cradle
lowering the plane into the open air. He looks up, and—the squid is maybe two feet in front of him,
frozen, mouth hanging open, and for a long stupid moment they just stare at each other through the
scarred glass of the cockpit canopy, and then Steve grins like a feral dog baring his teeth.

Lifts his hands, reaches deep into his guts for the fires of unmaking, and rips the ugly hex up and
through his body, into his clawed hands. Slams his hands down onto the smooth metal and lets the
hex tear into the plane like a layer of skin being flayed away.

Somewhere he can hear himself screaming. The metal-bright song of the bomber distorts, moans,
and then—

He’s dropping, it’s dropping, falling away, and he lunges, scrabbles mindless and desperate, catches
the very edge of one metal claw of the retracted cradle and hangs on for his fucking life. The bomber
drops like a rock, free fall, tumbling down through the cloud cover, and—fuck, he hopes he hasn’t
just dropped it on some innocent swathe of European countryside, even if the payload doesn’t
detonate that’s gonna do some damage—

“Jesus Christ,” he moans, and pulls up, heaving until he gets one elbow up and hooked onto the
metal frame, and then another elbow, biting his lip to keep from hollering because his right shoulder
—fucking Christ, it’s killing him. And then he drops his head and just breathes for a second, and
then—

The explosion from below is near-silent, shockwave ripping the cloud cover apart in a wave rolling
out from the centre like a concrete wall of blue fire and the Godawful alien shriek of the blue-song,
and Steve scrabbles, claws, hauls his ass up and wraps both arms around the machine housing where
the bomber’s cradle meets the catwalk, and then—

The blast catches up and—
—oh fuck, God—

—and the Valkyrie heaves, yaws wildly tail up and nose down like a toy in the hands of a furious child, metal bolts and plating howling with the strain, and Steve screams and hangs on, fuck’s sake, hangs on, and then it’s done, lingering echo of hate-crazed blue-song ringing in his head and—they’re levelling out again, hard, turbines howling—

There’s a series of meaty-sounding crunches. Steve peers up just—shit—black-clad legs and arms close enough to bite, close enough to feel fingertips clipping the top of his helmet and—and through the hatch and—

Falling into the blue.

Another squid down—there were seven for starters, and that’s four—

Someone’s moaning with pain, a dumb animal cry, and Steve looks up again. Two left in the hanger: one hanging onto the catwalk railing, wild-eyed—not one of the pilots from earlier, he’s only got his flight suit half on, and—and the guy Steve gut-shot thirty seconds or half a lifetime ago. He’s a broken heap of black against the rear wall of the hangar, hiccuping out a string of sobs and broken German cursing.

Christ, okay. Steve clamps down with his legs—Jesus God, don’t think too hard about the several miles of wide open air he’s got to look forward to if he falls, just—gropes for the bottom knife on his bandolier. Last of his quick-deploy veils, get hidden before anyone thinks to shoot him, again.

Claws his way up to the catwalk again, over the railing. The half-suited squid is staring at where Steve used to be, gun drawn, inching closer.

"Wo ist er..." he breathes out, and:

"Er ist unsichtbar," the guy on the floor sobs out. "Seine Hexerei."

Steve bites his lip, and then—

And then the squid lifts his gun and levels it roughly chest height and starts firing blind, patterns out a rough half-circle of shots around him, and—

 Fucking—Steve drops to his belly, gasping—blunt clap of gunfire and the ping and flatter of bullets ricocheting and falling and—shit, that was too close. Too Goddamn close. And this is taking too long: he’s been on a countdown from the second this thing left the runway. Time to—

Nine rounds and empty, and the guy stops, says, "Scheisse. Woran werde ich erkennen—" and Steve rears up onto his knees, draws a knife from his bandolier and throws it, overhand, one gentle movement, and—

The squid drops like a stone, Steve’s knife sticking out from his gut, brown and brass of the hilt like a splatter of blood on snow against the black of his uniform. Steve’s up and moving forward, draws his Browning from the hip holster as he prowls up the catwalk and—

The guy’s sitting up by the time Steve gets to him, propped against the catwalk railing, pulled the knife out and clapped a hand over the wound. His Luger is in his lap, and he’s fumbling in a pocket with his spare hand—Steve can hear the dull metal clink of bullets.

Drops his veil and levels his gun at the guy’s forehead. His hand’s shaking; can feel the wet heat running down his tit that means his fucking shoulder’s started bleeding again.
“Aufgeben,” Steve says, flat, and:

“Cut off one head—” the guys answers, starts to answer, and Steve shoots him, clean, efficient. Turns and starts down the catwalk again. One to go.

Last goon: he’s still on the floor at the back of the hangar, thrown there when the plane kicked in the shockwave, and—he’s still bleeding from his gut, and Steve can see the bright white of bone sticking out from his left thigh. Jesus, no wonder he ain’t giving Steve any trouble.

Steve staggers the length of the catwalk, counting the rounds left in his Browning as he goes. The squid looks up as he comes closer, claws his helmet and mask off. He’s—oh, Goddamn it. Looks younger than Steve, like he oughta be finishing high school. Dirty dishwater blond, and ghost fucking white with blood loss and pain.

“Hey,” Steve says. “Do us both a favour and surrender.”

The squid gasps. His teeth are red with blood. “No surrender, du Hurensohn,” he grits out, hands shaking as he fumbles at his belt—he’s lost his pistol—and pulls out a short knife, holds it levelled at Steve. Steve stares at him, holsters his gun again and reaches out and catches the squid by the wrist, pinches the nerve hard, catches the blade in his other hand as it drops.

“For Christ’s sake,” Steve says—he’s sick of it, he’s so fucking sick of it all—throws the knife across the hangar and pulls a roll of bandaging out of a belt pouch. He’s not gentle when he shoves the bandages into the kid’s gut, over the bullet hole.

“I accept your surrender,” Steve says. “Stop arguing and keep pressure there if you want to live. Drückst, okay?” He shoves again—the kid wheezes and then claps a hand there—and Steve turns and walks up the length of the catwalk, back towards the front of the plane.

Throws hexes at the remaining bombers as he goes past ‘em, and—one—they shit sparks—two—and groan, metal sheering, bolts popping—three, and he—

Staggers, almost goes down, catches the metal railing to his left and manages to slow the fall into something almost graceful. Lands on his knees, grating of the catwalk biting into bone. Jesus: he’s shaking, shaking like it’s the very guts of winter, like he’s almost having a fit. Aching—everywhere, muscle and bone. Head’s ringing like a struck bell, almost loud enough to drown out the music.

It’s—he’ll be okay. He has to be okay. Has to get this done. It’s just a lot, is all: a lot of blood, and a lot of the fire of unmaking, too fast.

He's writing checks that his body can't cash, but it doesn't fucking matter: it's just Schmidt left now. He's gotta get this done.

******

It's Captain America who enters the bleak metal cavern of the cockpit, shield on his forearm and uniform pin-straight. Strides into the middle of the space and looks around, studying, scanning for threats—and Schmidt side-steps from behind a steel buttress with the laser rifle already shrieking at his hip, the red ruin of his face twisted into a smirk that shows fangs, and—

Schmidt fires, the Hydra rifle fires, cuts through the air with electric white-blue light, and Cap pivots
fluidly, catches the first shot with his shield—so the second shot catches him square in the right hip, tears a hole clean through him, belly and pelvis.

An unenhanced human dissolves within seconds—Cap takes a bit longer, cells healing the damage as it goes but losing the battle, blue light eating him away a chunk at a time, muscle and bone and fibre fraying and shrivelling. The sound he makes is fucking unearthly, a clear and anguished scream of horror.

Until the third bolt catches him in the chest, rips open his sternum, clear pink lung tissue and the white filaments of his ribcage blazing with blue light and flying apart, molecule by molecule, and the agonised scream cuts to silence. The shield rings like a silver bell when it hits the flight deck and rolls. There's a red mist rolling down onto the deck, fine and struck through with sparks of blue fire, wet noises as limbs and what's left of the torso part ways—

It's fucking gruesome, is what it is. Technicolor, Godawful, all the ghoulish detail Steve can imagine. Keeps Schmidt looking at the centre of the room: means he's not looking anyplace else, not turning his enhanced senses to any other part of the room. Like, say, the left edge of the room as Steve veil-walks his way up and through. Or over at the flight control panel now, where Steve's standing.

Leaning, okay—not so much standing as leaning—this flamboyant illusion is working just like a charm, just like he'd hoped, but it's big and messy with a lot of moving parts and he's running on fumes now.

“So ends Captain America,” Schmidt says, and—does he not realise he's the only shithead left standing? Who is he monologuing to? Steve closes his eyes, takes a breath. Digs his fingertips into the control panel and dives deep, deep, deep.

The well of unmaking rises to meet him. It's liquid metal and rock tearing up through solid earth. The light at the end of this tunnel is a train, and when it hits him—

He's screaming as he pulls the last hex through his body, groin and gut and chest and shoulders, arms, hands, shoves it into the flight controls, and—

—there's a bang, low and crackling, and the Valkyrie lurches—

Sweet Jesus, he's hurting. It's like he's broken every rib, every bone in his arms and hands, mouth flooding copper-metal and sticky where he's bleeding, bit straight through his lip—and his knees are folding like a cheap camp table, sick grey blooming in lazy creeping starbursts across his vision.

“Was war”— Schmidt starts, stops, and Steve lifts his head—like he's moving through molasses—and squints to see past the grey patches.

Sees his illusion falling to pieces, ribbons of coloured light sloughing off and dispersing as they fall, sees Schmidt standing next to it, staring and wild-eyed.

Sees Schmidt turn from the illusion and look to the front of the plane, to the control panel. Sees his eyes widen, mouth fall open in a feral nut-job expression of unhinged fucking rage.

Steve's veil is down, fraying and falling away like the illusion. He's on his knees, got just enough in the tank to keep breathing in and out. He's out of tricks.

Well. Almost.

“You,” Schmidt screams, half-lifts the laser rifle like he means to—and stops, because he's crazy but he's gotta recognise there's no shot he can take from there that won't take out the whole front of the
plane. Hurls the rifle to one side and strides forward, hauling the Hydra pistol from his hip holster as he comes, and Steve takes a breath and ducks his head, lets his hand drift up to his thigh—

“You wretched *wenig untermensch,*” Schmidt snarls, and he’s close enough Steve can see his reflection in the black of Schmidt’s boots, can smell the ozone and oil of the gun as Schmidt levels it at his bent head—*now.*

Lift his fingers half an inch, so his knuckle brushes the metal buckle of his belt. The quick release spell unfurls into his hand in a bloom of warmth, like passing his fingers over a candle flame, rolls down his arm and drops into his belly, and it’s effortless to let it swell and open as it drops, let it bloom and spill and—

It’s fire lancing into muscle and bone, lightning quick, cloth and leather and metal groaning around him as he shapeshifts—

—and he’s uncoiling snake-fast, big square hand coming up to catch the muzzle of Schmidt’s gun and squeeze down until the metal distorts under his fingers. He’s standing, taller than Schmidt now and folding the barrel of the gun back in his hand, close enough they could be dancing, close enough to see the total fucking confusion on Schmidt’s slimy red face.

“Captain America—” Schmidt begins, and Steve hauls back with his spare hand and punches him square in the face. He’s shaking so hard he almost falls again, muscle fibres twitching with the kind of hysterical last-ditch energy that kicks in right before you fall down, can’t feel his fingers or his toes anymore—and it doesn’t matter, it can’t matter, because this is it.

Final inning. End of the line.

Schmidt reels, throws his destroyed gun into Steve's face and closes in swinging, and Steve blocks with his forearm and—Jesus, the bone almost gives way, heat-pain rippling up into his elbow and down into his hand.

Fuck—it's been almost two years since Kreichsberg, and his head remembers but his body has forgotten how *fucking strong* Schmidt is. Erskine's only real super soldier: side effects are ugly but you can’t argue with the results.

Steve sways back, under the next punch Schmidt throws at his head, ducks forward and slams his shoulder into Schmidt’s gut. It’s like shoulder charging a concrete bunker, and Schmidt grunts low, slides back half a step, and then grabs Steve by the shield straps and hauls his knee up into Steve’s chest.

There’s a soft *pop—a* low-pitched butcher shop crunch—and then a blaze of cold-hot and pressure in his chest. Yeah, fuck, there goes a rib.

Steve lets his weight drop, drags Schmidt down with him, rolls and comes back up to his feet and Schmidt is fast, as fast as he is, but Steve’s leading with an elbow as Schmidt comes up and catches him clean in the cheek, bone striking bone, and Steve hears and feels the Godawful glorious crunch of Schmidt’s jaw sheering away from his skull—

And then—front of the plane—*bang—*

—something in the control panel gives up, and Steve can smell smoke and then *sideways becomes down* and he’s reeling, falling, grabbing for something, and Schmidt coils back and kicks him square in the chest.

He’s—*crack, black*—skull and spine meets the steel of a buttress on the far side of the cockpit and
then he's down, on the floor and scrabbling, bell fucking rung and—yeah, that's a couple ribs on the other side broken too, fuck it all.

Christ—pries his eyes open—Schmidt has taken half a second to haul the plane back to some kinda level and throw a fire blanket over the control panel. Sure, because that's gonna help, you crazy Arschloch.

And now he's turning back, pale eyes finding Steve and flaring wide and wild, white sclera showing clean on all sides, and he's striding—downhill, the Valkyrie is still on a gentle angle, and seems that's a lower priority than marching toward Steve, hands coming up to grab the red mess of his face and grind his jaw back into its sockets, and Steve—

—Steve’s doing this wrong.

He's been fighting his whole life, one way or another—feels sometimes like he came out of the womb swinging and chanting Bedlam Boys—but after he made this body he'd had to learn how to fight all over again. His right hook now goes through a fella’s ribs like paper, deep enough to wrap fingers around his spine, which is—fucking messy. Inefficient.

So he's learned how to fight in this body, learned from Army lads and trainers, and it's big guy fighting: broad and open and telegraphed, the kind of fighting that relies on being the biggest guy in the room. Longest reach, strongest back, calluses on his knuckles.

Up ’til now it's worked. He's always been the biggest guy in the room.

Up ’til now.

Time to fight like the little guy again.

“How? How did you—” Schmidt stops just short, thrusts his hand at the front of the plane, the trashed flight controls. “What are you?”

Steve lets his eyes sit half-lidded, lets one leg twitch—like he's dazed, like he's down for the count. Smiles crooked, dopey, because he needs Schmidt closer and that means pissing him off. “Me? I'm just a kid from Brooklyn.”

Schmidt snarls like an animal, steps in, hands convulsing like claws—and Steve hooks his twitching foot behind Schmidt’s knee, coils the other leg smoothly up and lands a neat kick just over Schmidt’s knee cap. The meaty click of bone and socket parting ways is like the music of the fucking spheres.

Schmidt goes down like a house of cards, howling, one fist lashing out hard enough to put a fist-shaped dent in the metal plating—and Steve’s rolling out of range, gasping around the grating pain of bone shifting in his chest, fetches up on hands and knees, heaving for breath against the crippling pressure against his lungs.

Schmidt—is halfway up, leaning against the wall, and either he doesn't know how to reset the joint or he doesn't give a shit but he's standing on his dislocated fucking leg, half-staggering, mouth working, and he looks up, meets Steve's eyes—

“Erskine's formula—” Schmidt begins, and Steve lurches up to his feet, talks over him:

“Erskine's formula never worked on me. I made myself.” Steve shifts his weight, sways half a step closer to the mechanism in the centre of the cockpit, the source of the furious world-quaking blue hum. Keeps talking, crowds as much Brooklyn Mick into his vowels as he can. “You think you've left humanity behind? Whatever tricks you've got, you picked ‘em outta the trash of things older and
more powerful than you’ll ever be—"

—and Schmidt makes an inhuman noise, a high raw scream that sounds like it's digging claws into every part of his throat as it pours out, and launches himself forward like a rocket bursting free of the gravity well, fists and teeth and half-crippled leg and all the insane strength that's in him—

And Steve gently rolls his weight onto the balls of his feet, holds for the length of a single sluggish heartbeat—

Schmidt’s right on top of him, fist cocked and hurling forward with the force of a fucking truck, and Steve turns, gentle, easy, catches Schmidt’s arm and all he's gotta do is turn that momentum half a degree to the right—

You don't have to be the strongest. You don't have to be the fastest. In war, the cheaters win.

Schmidt smashes into the central mechanism, bone-crushing speed, fist ploughing through the metal casing and into the wiring beneath, and there's a second of perfect silence like the whole world is taking a breath before—

The blue hum is a howl, a shriek, like how Steve imagines angels might sound—not the fluffy kind with harps but the fiery ones, with hundreds of wings and thousands of eyes, the kind from the Old Testament. The Valkyrie lurches in the air like a kicked dog, and blue electricity sheets over the central device, over the control panel, and—

“What have you done?” Schmidt howls, pulling his fist free of the casing, chunks of sheered-off metal and glass coming with his hand, and light spills out like he's put his hand through the skin of the world and it's bleeding out blue. There’s—it's so bone-deep it's almost chthonic, a rattle coming up through the floor, up from the belly of the beast like it's sick with fever and quaking, and that rattle is getting stronger, blue light bleeding out thicker, crazed angel-scream building and building until it's pressing on the inside of Steve's skull like a huge crushing hand—

“What have you done?” Schmidt asks again, dazed, almost a moan, and he reaches into the guts of the machine and lifts out a cube. It’s blue, a little bigger than a human heart, and it—it looks like it's not all here. Like what Steve's seeing is a movie projection and the real thing is somewhere else. Or maybe it looks like it's the most solid and real thing here, the most solid and real thing he's ever seen.

What he does know for sure: the light, the screaming howl, they're all coming outta that cube, and he can feel that light where it pools on his skin, the cold weight of it like the bright edge of surgical steel just before it breaks the skin. He's gotta look away, gets a last glimpse of Schmidt staring into the very heart of that glow like he's seeing all the answers there—

And reality tears open at the seam.

There's—it's a tear, it's—the surface of the world has given way like the seam of a coat in a fist fight, like a hole punched through a painted backdrop so you can see the stage behind it: black, the Godawful black of starless space, with wild smears of light unspooling across the darkness, purple and blue and colours he doesn't have a name for.

There's a heartbeat pause—the hole in the world, silent and alien, and Schmidt just below it, blue light pooling on his skin and backlighting the bones of his hand—

And then the light is slicing through Schmidt and lifting up, through and up and into that hole in the world. Like it's a mouth, like it's swallowing him by the chunk, the molecule, the atom—and over the insane howl of the light tearing him apart, Steve can hear Schmidt screaming, screaming. He's being
stretched out into strands of wicked electricity, pulled out like taffy, head and shoulders and limbs and torso and—

And he’s gone and the hole closes, immediate and seamless like a vast eye blinking closed, and the cube drops to the metal grill of the floor with an almost musical clang. The metal distorts, glows, sways away, and the cube falls again, down and through—

—and gone, and good fucking riddance.

Steve sags like an old building, almost falls, latches onto the trashed machine casing and hangs on for grim fucking death for a couple moments until his knees get back in gear. The shudder tearing through the plane is building higher, even as the light and noise falls away.

Hangs on, counts his breaths slow in and out—broken ribs are not a bad substitute for asthma—and when he gets to ten he pushes off and staggers up to the front of the plane, the control panel, the big ugly chair bolted front and centre to the floor in front of the controls.

He's walking downhill. The plane’s in a gentle decline. Beyond the glass—smears of cloud cover, sheet ice far below.

He grabs the chair and hauls himself into it, grabs the fire blanket and pulls it off the control panel and stares for a long moment, because—half of what he’s seeing is labelled in German—and he's pretty fluent but his brain’s stuffed with cotton wool right now—and the other half’s not labelled at all, and… Most of the gauges aren’t working. The ones that are still lit up are mostly showing nonsense.

He finds his compass, parks it on a panel: west, or west-sou'-west, more or less. It's a start. He finds the radio, fumbles with the dial until—

“This is Captain Rogers,” he says, and—

“When! Steve, are you alright?” Peggy replies, and Steve could fucking weep to hear her voice. Thank God it's her.

********

He's going to have to force the plane down.

“There’s not enough time,” he says, and a lifetime of training keeps his voice steady, because—fuck. He's looking at the instruments, at the projected flight path, at his compass, and he wishes to Christ he were wrong but—even if some of the displays are wrong, broken, cracked glass and garbage—there are enough working, saying the same thing. The same Goddamn thing.

“This thing’s moving too fast, and it’s heading straight for the East Coast. I don't know how much longer we'll stay in the air for, and the steering is…” Hexed. Hexed all to buggery. He’s done too good a job. “Peggy, it'll take out New York. I've gotta put her in the water.”

Yesterday morning he was sorting through Bucky's effects. Found the stack of folded letters from his family, tied careful with a yellow ribbon. Winnie and Becca's neat handwriting, drawings and pressed flowers. The picture Izzy drew when Bucky first shipped out is in there, their little family and Steve with spiky yellow hair and suspenders.
Steve's a fuck-up and a fraud, he took their brother and son off to war and couldn't even send him home in a box because you gotta find the body before you can do that, but fuck it: he can do this. He can keep them safe.

“Please, don’t do this. We have time, we can work it out,” Peggy says, and Steve bites at his lip and closes his eyes, opens them again. Beyond the glass everything is blue and white, a curved line of fuzzy grey marking the horizon.

“Right now, I’m in the middle of nowhere,” Steve croaks. “If I wait any longer… I might not get another chance to put her down somewhere safe. Peggy, I’ve gotta do this.”

“Steve. Please,” Peggy says, and—oh God, she's crying. Christ on a crutch, he's made Agent Margaret Carter cry. He's a war criminal. At least she knows that he—that he loves her. At least he didn't leave her not knowing.

“Peggy,” Steve says. Wraps his hands around the steering array—it's loose in its casing, only just hanging in there—and tilts the nose of the Valkyrie down, down, until the grey horizon line is up in the top third of the window and the dark blue of the ocean eclipses everything. He's shaking, makes his grip on the control array real firm. Keeps his breathing slow and careful and deliberate. Ave Maria, gratia plena—

“He wouldn't want you to do this,” Peggy says, and Steve chokes on the air in his chest—fuck, Bucky.

If they end up in the same place, with what comes next—which… Steve doesn’t think they will. Suicide is a mortal sin—oh Mama please I promise I'm doing my best. If they end up in the same place Bucky's gonna punch him in the nose for doing this.

The grey line of the horizon is gone, now: all he can see is the deep blue of the ocean, the lighter blue-white of sheets of ice, smears of white on the caps of waves.

“Jesus,” Steve says. “I know he wouldn't, but the dead don't get a say in what the living do. It's everyone else I gotta worry about. I've gotta keep them safe.” He can see the sides of the breakers now, the ripples in the ice sheets, variation in the blue of the water—oh Christ, it's coming—

“I'm so proud to have known you,” Peggy says, and the nose of the plane hits ice like ploughing into a brick wall.

********

After:

Water carries him, shoves him bodily up and back through the plane—the windshield sheered away from the frame the second the plane hit the ice, and then—and now water, pouring into the Valkyrie as she slides through the ice and—and Steve can't use his arms because he slammed chest-first into the control array and his whole upper body feels splintered to bone shards—he can kick, he kicks, and it's enough to keep his face above the water, desperate animal strength in his legs, and in his head he’s resolved to this but his body is going by different orders, and—

It's cold, it's so fucking cold it burns, sucks the feeling out of his flesh so it's like he's piloting a shop mannequin around, and then the water shoves him into a corner, pins him like a cold fist to metal
plating and the heads of bolts. He tilts his face right up, into the air pocket. Can hear the roar of the water driving deeper and deeper into the plane, into its bowels and pockets, the moan of metal shifting under the huge pressure, bolts popping—

Oh Jesus, that fucking kid. If he hasn't bled out yet he's gonna—Christ. This is a shitty way to die, and he's an enemy combatant but he’s also twelve fucking years old.

“I'm sorry,” Steve mouths, and then “Pater noster…”

Wishes he had his Mam's rosary with him. Teeth won't stop chattering. It's hard to keep track—you can use your fingers to count off your prayers but his hands are pretty numb.

Water pushing deeper into the plane. Water lapping at his mouth, into his mouth—kick, keep kicking you son of a bitch, but his legs are getting so heavy. It's like trying to move a couple wooden oars through muddy slurry, like he's can't really feel what's happening but it's taking everything, everything, and he's so tired.

Maybe he can rest for a bit. The noise has died down, like a hush is falling over the world. Tastes salt where the water is lapping at his mouth. It's starting to feel warm. He's so tired. Maybe he can just rest until it's over.

******

Mam? Mam, I'm sorry—can I—please—

A stor, comes the answer, a leanbh.

He's so warm.

Chapter End Notes

*gingerly emerges from beneath soft furnishings*

So, uh. That happened.
I'll start posting the next arc same time next week. It's okay, I swear, it's okay. Let's all take some deep breaths and om for a bit, I promise it's gonna be okay. Follow the series, there's more to come. I wouldn't leave him like that, or you. I'm a sadomasochist (in the way of all writers), but I'm not actively evil.

Thank you so much to everyone who came along on this ride--it's been epic, and a joy to meet you all and have you come along on this weird journey into the unknown.

Much love <3

Works inspired by this: [ART - Truth May Vary](http://example.com/ART-Truth-May-Vary) by [jazzy2may](http://example.com/jazzy2may)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://example.com/drop-by-the-archive-and-comment) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!