Prizrak

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**Prizrak**

by RiverTam

Summary

"A shave, a minor haircut, several weeks of consistent sleep with the help of some of Banner’s sedatives, and he was feeling more like good old Bucky than he had in almost seventy years. Something was still different though, and a long hour studying his face in the mirror, finding every new line, the touches of fading hair at his temples, the small scars from his goggles and mask, had shown him that there was no going back to the cocksure twenty-something who had chased skirts as if his life depended on it.

Might as well make the best of what was left."

He's had so many names that he honestly didn't remember them all - some of them, he put significant effort into forgetting. But now, free from his captors, the man once known as the Winter Soldier, Prizrak, the ghost story that hunts down ghost stories, tries to rediscover what it means to be himself... and what it means to be human.

Finding your place in the world is hard enough as it is. Finding your place in a world that isn't so sure it wants you in it, now that's another challenge entirely.

Trigger warnings in the tags, will tag chapters/sections when appropriate. Smut-free.

Notes

I’ve tried to add all the trigger warnings and tags I can think of, but please let me know if there’s something missing. Big thanks to my beta reader TacticalTaylor. If you see any errors/typos/etc, please point them out!

Tags and Archive Warnings will be updated as the story develops.

Enjoy!
See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

It was the middle of the day, in the middle of August, in the middle of a hard workout, but he still wore long sleeves and gloves. Though he’d been cleared and allowed out in the world, he knew from experience how quickly people can learn to fear a symbol. While Stark had offered him some sort of silicone glove to put over his metal hand, he didn’t use it at the gym since it didn’t stand up well to exertion. He’d rather sweat and stink a little extra and get the occasional sidelong glance than risk causing any panic as soon as the media shockwaves were finally beginning to die down.

A shave, a minor haircut, several weeks of consistent sleep with the help of some of Banner’s sedatives, and he was feeling more like good old Bucky than he had in almost seventy years. Something was still different though, and a long hour studying his face in the mirror, finding every new line, the touches of fading hair at his temples, the small scars from his goggles and mask, had shown him that there was no going back to the cocksure twenty-something who had chased skirts as if his life depended on it.

Might as well make the best of what was left.

His days had blended into a revolving door of running, meeting with Sam, working out, single therapy with his SHIELD doctor (group therapy was still out, mostly due to his entire everything being so classified that the security clearance levels were classified), working out, library trips, weekly phone check-ins with Natasha or Barton, more working out, the occasional stop by the corner bar, and attempting to learn how to cook.

He was in the middle of one of his workouts now, at a well-equipped gym a short walk away from his new apartment. The gym, its staff, and its patrons had all been vetted by SHIELD but he still saw at least three shadows on him at all times. He had no intention of making things difficult, however, and let the agents do their jobs without complaint.

While most of his workout was geared towards maintaining physical conditioning, there was a good portion of it dedicated to both preventative and reactive physical therapy. The doctors had discovered the true extent to which his body had been mangled for the sake of his arm, and he needed to keep the muscles around his shoulders, back, and spinal column strong or risk a potentially disastrous injury. Blessings and curses, after all. The arm was useful at times, but the cost of its abilities was prohibitively high.

Chin-ups, sit-ups, crunches, an embarrassingly effective exercise called ‘dead bugs,’ weight lifting, anything to maintain the muscles that his life literally depended on. The workouts were also helping his mental health as well, giving him a way to focus and re-center himself, meditation through exertion. Oh, and the serotonin boost was good, according to the Doc.

Doc still wished he’d be comfortable displaying his arm in public. He didn’t have the heart to tell her that the world had to be comfortable with him first.

He’d followed the wake of the media coverage of the Winter Soldier, learned everything he could about how the world saw the weapon that he had been forced to become. It hadn’t been a good time for him. That’s when he found out that getting drunk now required some special happy juice he could only get from Thor, and only in controlled amounts. Despite the Asgardian’s boisterous personality, he was surprisingly careful when dosing out the strong stuff.
His thoughts started to drift as he worked through a set of basic punches and kicks with a Stark-designed heavy bag borrowed from Steve. The gym kept his bag at the end of the row, and it was an unspoken rule that no one else touched it. Taking out his aggression on the voiceless, indestructible cylinder of whatever it was Stark had used was decidedly cathartic. He let the attacks get faster and more complex, ignoring the itch in the back of his head reminding him there were other people there.

He thought about Steve’s reaction on the day Sam had found him. He’d lost a lot of weight, his stolen clothes were filthy, and he barely looked like anything resembling a functional human when he had collapsed under a tree near the National Mall. It had been two weeks since the floodgates in his head had crashed open, bringing back many of the memories HYDRA had tried to lock away over the decades. He’d been lost in his own head, and his trip to the Smithsonian hadn’t helped as much as he’d hoped it would. Weak, dehydrated, and shaking from exhaustion, he’d managed to work out Sam’s running route and strategically dumped himself where he knew Sam would see him.

He thought about the unbearable nausea, panic attacks, tremors, and confusion that made life a living hell until the doctors put him back on a drip. They’d said something about HYDRA pumping him full of a cocktail of drugs designed to mess with his head. No one knew the exact formula, so the best they could do was treat the symptoms. For several weeks as the withdrawals lessened, he’d had coordination problems, shocks ricocheting up and down his spine, and hadn’t been able to keep solid food down.

He thought about Stark arranging everything for him to live on his own but always with support nearby. Bankrolling everything. Wheedling and whining to the right SHIELD agents. Giving him an expense card and a phone. Teaching him how to use them both. Talking the rest of the Avengers into going along with it. Convincing Steve to give him space to heal.

He thought about Steve’s protests. Steve had wanted his friend where he could see him at all times. Wanted to mother-hen him into being old Bucky again. Thought he knew better than the trained professionals, probably better at their jobs than he was at his. Wanted to take the man that had shot him multiple times and tried to kill him and his friends into his home and baby him til he was better.

He thought about how Steve wouldn’t take no for an answer, until the doctors threatened to block his access to the medical bay.

He thought about how Steve had been kept far away from him during the worst of the withdrawals. How even through the steady progress in therapy, Steve was questioning the doctors and demanding things that weren’t his to demand. “You’re doing it wrong,” he’d told them. “I know Bucky better than anyone, I can get him back.”

He thought about the twisted anger on Steve’s face as he’d been ordered by Hill to stand down or lose his place on the team. The burning embarrassment that crept up his neck as Steve stared at him, turned to Doc and said, “I’m not losing him again. You do your damn job and you bring my friend back.”

He thought about the set of Steve’s shoulders as he’d walked out of the room, alone. The last time he’d seen him.

The heavy bag shuddered under his fists, and finally he stopped after his left fist thudded into the bag with a full-bodied swing. He grabbed the bag between his wrapped hands, closed his eyes, and rested his forehead against it as he panted.

What little he remembered of the man in the star-spangled suit didn’t add up to who this new soldier was. Steve had always been reckless, but only ever flirted with danger, never openly courting it. Now, he welcomed it with wide arms and a holler. Steve had accepted him as he was, both before
the war after Kreischberg. Now, he had trouble believing that his Bucky had changed so much that
he was now a different person completely.

He’d tried to call himself Bucky. James didn’t even feel right any more, but it was all he had left.
During his time with HYDRA, he’d never been given a new name.

Most of his handlers had called him The Asset or Soldier. His identity had been lost with his transfer
to Russia, and for years he had been a faceless and nameless tool. The Asset was never officially
given a human name. The Asset was a human-shaped deadly marionette that could never learn to
dream of being a real boy.

When Steve had learned that his Bucky was asking to be called James now, he became very quiet,
turned and left, and was found in the ruins of several punching bags a few hours later. Then, he’d
very quietly and politely asked if he could take some time to work things out, away from James. It
was going to take some adjustment, and he felt it best they both come to terms with the new James
Buchanan Barnes on their own.

So, James had taken the words to heart, moved away to the suburbs on the outskirts of DC, spent
several weeks being angry, and worked out his anger in as healthy a way he could, pureeing
punching bags instead of people. The other people at the gym had learned to ignore him by now,
mostly after reassurance from Tony Stark Himself that James wasn’t a threat.

He kept himself clean-shaven and usually scraped his long hair back into a small bun. He dressed
sharp, learned the mannerisms and slang of the day, and did his best just to blend in. Most days, he
had fairly good results.

Today didn’t seem to be one of those days.

A quick glance around told him that more than half of the people in the gym were openly staring.
This is why you don’t hit the bags when people are here, you flip your wig and of course they’re
going to notice.

He closed his eyes again and huffed out a breath, stepping back.

Gradually he heard the machines start back up and he chanced another look around. Most of the
other gym patrons had turned away and resumed their routines, but one of the girls at the rowing
machines several yards away still had him fixed with interested eyes, arms crossed over her knees.

She was average height but solidly built, and had her hair swept back with a bandana. Bright eyes
creaked out of a freckled face with a narrow jaw and a thin, straight nose. A small constellation of
pockmark scars sat in front of her right ear, and her right eyebrow had a tiny patch missing towards
the end. Just visible at the neckline of her shirt was a span of puckered, pink skin.

She held up a hand in the OK sign and cocked an eyebrow. Nodding, James began unwrapping his
hands. “Rough day,” he said, throwing his voice just enough for her to hear. She gave him an
understanding nod and began rowing again.

Embarrassed and tired, James made his way out of the gym and began to walk home.

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His apartment was small, spartan, and squeezed into the corner of the top floor of the apartment
complex. The building creaked during storms, the carpet was a few different shades of stained, the
walls were a patchwork of Rental White, and the back left burner on the stove always took a match
to light since it never sparked properly. The heater smelled like dead rats when he used it, he didn’t
have any AC, and the window screens had more holes, snags, and runs than worn out stockings.

It was perfect.

While he didn’t want to pretend he was still the Bucky Barnes that had shipped out to the war in the early 40s, it was still nice to have little pieces here and there that reminded him of how things had been. Life was hard, money was tight, winters were cold, and Steve had been constantly sick, but things were simple. Wake up, get through the day, stop Steve’s latest relapse of stupid, go to bed.

His new apartment was significantly nicer than the one in Brooklyn they’d shared. Stark had pushed hard to get him into a luxury condo, but it just felt wrong, living in all that opulence. There had to be small things to ground him, to remind him that he wasn’t dreaming. Arguments had ensued with disturbing regularity until Barton had kicked Stark off the house-hunting committee. They’d quickly settled on a modest one bedroom corner apartment with no shared bedroom walls, a discrete landlord, and a good neighborhood.

He dropped his gym bag on his bed, a small landmass of a mattress bigger than anything he’d ever had before. Thankfully Stark had understood when he didn’t want anything too soft; years of sleeping on the ground meant it was nearly impossible to sleep on a giant pillow. The one battle he’d lost was the size of the bed, and as a result the queen took up most of the room. At least there was still room for a nightstand and a few bookshelves, generously covered with books from regular trips to the library and the local bookstore. Reading was one of the luxuries he had no issues with enjoying to its fullest.

Gym bag empty and contents sorted to their appropriate places, he pulled off his gloves and shirt and sighed as he stretched his sore shoulders. As much as it was necessary to keep eyes off his arm, he hated wearing long sleeves. It reminded him too much of his uniforms as the Soldier.

It was one small blessing, however, that Stark had made it abundantly clear that his expense account was bottomless. “You need to focus on getting better. I’ve got assloads of money that Pepper wants me to do something productive with and I’m not allowed to buy any more art, so shut up and use it,” he’d said. Natasha had thoroughly enjoyed taking him shopping, and he had to admit he liked the new fabrics, especially for gym wear. It certainly beat doing calisthenics in wool.

He held out his left arm and shifted it so that the plates all slid down and locked in place, checking for anything out of alignment or in need of cleaning. Sweat tended to gum things up around his shoulder if he wasn’t careful.

Keeping the plates locked tight, he stripped the rest of the way and made his way to the shower. One benefit to the complex he’d ended up in was unlimited scalding hot water; after so many years of feeling nothing but numbing cold, James freely admitted that hot showers were a minor addiction. If his arm hadn’t been waterproof already, he would have asked Stark to modify it. Nothing would get in between him and hot showers. Nothing.

The water ran down his face and arms, dripping onto the gray tilework as he leaned against the wall with his hands up by the shower head. He let the warmth soak through his scalp and into the back of his neck, soothing aches and sore muscles. A good Army-grade scrub and some stretching left him feeling much more relaxed than he ever did outside his front door.

Another thing he’d developed a taste for over the past few months was thick, luscious towels. Towels could never be too plush or large, and he and Sam had made a game of seeing who could find the fluffiest towels. The runners-up got donated to the local thrift stores. There had been countless donations made, especially with the unpredictability of online shopping. They’d probably singlehandedly provided the entire state of Maryland with new towels in their competition to one-up
each other’s linen hunting skills.

Dry and significantly less stinky, James twisted his hair back into a club at the base of his neck, slid into a pair of loose, soft jeans, and reheated some leftovers for lunch. He didn’t have to worry about anyone seeing him through the windows, strategically coated with something Romanoff had called ‘privacy film.’ At first the dull, frosted white had reminded him of the lethal blizzards in Russia, but he quickly began to appreciate having a space of his own away from any prying eyes.

A quick glance at the stack of books on the entry table told him it was time to stop by the library again. He didn’t ever go with a specific genre in mind, since his favorite librarian had usually set aside a sizeable collection for him between visits. It had become something of a routine for him to finish up at the gym, head to the library, and fall into a good book with a cup of coffee.

The coffee shop was on the ground floor of the library, as well as a large lounge with overstuffed and deliciously comfortable armchairs strategically placed for maximum sunbeam coverage.

Boots, shirt, synthetic skin glove, riding gloves, jacket, books, backpack, helmet, keys, down the stairs and to the carports. His motorcycle thrummed under him, the loud growl echoing off the concrete walls and ceiling. James snapped up the kickstand with his heel, snapped his visor down, and rolled out onto the street.

Riding was one of the few times he felt like he didn’t have to hide. Not only was the anonymity welcome, it was expected; gloves and a helmet never got a second glance, even off the bike.

James had been thrilled to discover that the local university’s library was the pride of the town. The front façade of the three-story building was made up entirely of floor to ceiling windows, subtly tinted glass that allowed warm sunbeams to cascade over the library patrons. There was a huge storage depot attached to the building, with equally large robotic retrieval arms that pulled car-sized metal crates of books up for library staff to pull requests from.

The stacks were tall enough and numerous enough to allow himself to get lost in the forest of books, something he took delight in on a regular basis. He also had the feeling he was one of the few that still preferred to use the physical card catalog, even when the older librarians considered it a point of pride to keep such an important part of library history alive.

James loved the smell of old paper. Before the war, he worked three jobs to support his sister and Steve, and borrowing books was the only way he’d been able to keep educating himself. After his transfer to the Soviets, he had been rewarded for good behavior with books and records. At first it had been mostly propaganda and patriotism, but he’d eventually convinced his handlers to allow him a list of requests. He’d been limited to Russian authors only, and any request had to be vetted by his handlers before it was allowed. He’d ended up reading a lot of Russian poetry.

He dropped his books through the deposit slot, swung his bag back over his shoulder and settled his helmet under his arm. There was one specific person he always went to see.

She sat at one of the reference desks in the lower level, supervising the archives. Many of the books in her section were too old or delicate to allow out of the library, and she was the last line of defense protecting such valuable books. James’s face spread into a wide smile whenever he saw her.

Her fiery red hair had faded long ago to a soft white and hung loose around her thin shoulders, floating above a powder blue suit jacket that matched a tasteful skirt and classic flats. She’d always dressed impeccably. Even past ninety years old, her face was still vibrant and full of life. The delicate creases around her eyes and mouth only made her lovelier, James thought. Her green eyes twinkled behind a pair of red wire glasses, and her small mouth was always ready with a smile.
“Hey, Dot,” he said as he sat in one of the chairs next to her desk. She looked up from her work, and her face lit up as her eyes crinkled.

“James! Always good to see you.” She stacked up her papers and set them off to the side. “One of these days I wish you’d walk in looking as old as I feel.” She steepled her fingers and hid a smile behind them.

Dolores was one of his last links to the old Bucky Barnes. They’d only met a handful of times before the war, but she had never forgotten his face. She’d found and taken in his sister and her fiancé, helping them both after Bucky and Steve disappeared. While they’d lived a meager life, Rebecca had been happy and even married, though they hadn’t been able to have children. Dolores had been there for her, for no other reason than having a heart of gold.

James really didn’t understand why she’d taken in Rebecca, especially when all he’d done was flirt and spend money he didn’t have to win her a stuffed bear at the fair. Nevertheless, he was grateful. She was also one of the only people outside SHIELD who knew who he was.

Dot pointed him over to a stack of books on the corner of her desk. “Figured you’d have finished last week’s books, so I had some of the aides help me get some more for you. I told them you like history. You’ll probably get a good laugh out of the Cold War books.”

He snorted as he stood to scoop the books up in his arms. “I’ll tell you what actually happened sometime. Let’s just say that Brezhnev didn’t die of a heart attack.” Setting them by his chair, he sat back down and settled into a comfortable slouch.

“Oh, James…” Dot sighed and shook her head. “I wish you’d agree to sit down with my graduate students. There’s precious few people like you.” This was a conversation they’d had many times, and James scratched his head as he gave her an apologetic frown.

“I’m not sure I’m someone you’d want in a bibliography.”

“Nonsense,” she scoffed. “I know young men and women willing to sell their souls for an interview with someone like you.”

“Dottie, I was in a cell or on missions for most of it. What I know about the Soviets is not something I’d tell a kid about.” He kept his voice down, partly out of respect to the other patrons and to avoid any unwanted listeners. “You’re realistic about it all. You’ve lived through the Depression, the wars, everything. These kids, they just don’t have the experience to understand.”

She fixed him with that same no-nonsense, wry smile that’d had him head over heels in the 40s. “That may be true, but it won’t change until someone steps up and teaches them.”

“Yeah, yeah…” He flapped a hand at her, chuckling when she wagged her eyebrows at him. “I’ll think about it, ok? I promise.”

Her eyebrows furrowed and lips pursed as she noticed the bags under his eyes. “Are you sleeping properly, young man?”

James blinked, startled. “Well, yeah, I suppose so…”

“My dear, you are a horrible liar.”

He deflated a bit and looked away. “I’m having nightmares again. Doc and I talked about some stuff a few days ago that’s kept me up since. Hasn’t been this bad since before she started giving me happy pills.”
“Well,” Dot said with no small helping of enthusiasm, “I’m going to let my pages know that I’m done for the day, and you’re going to walk a little old lady down to the park, buy her some ice cream, and tell her about it.” Her keys, phone, and glasses were all deposited into her small purse in the most businesslike way James had ever seen.

“Dottie.”

“Perk of being the oldest hag working here. Come along, James.” She stood, smoothed her skirt, and held out her hand.

Chuckling, James stuffed the books in his backpack – no need to check them out, she’d already taken care of that for him. He offered her his arm, and she called out to one of the pages as they walked past.

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Whenever they walked together, most people assumed James was Dot’s grandson, and neither of them made any effort to say otherwise. It seemed like it had been in another lifetime that they’d flirted over cotton candy at the fair, before the war, before rationing, before everything.

They stopped at his bike so he could lock down his helmet – he had no desire to carry it around with him longer than necessary.

“I do wish you’d get a proper car,” she admonished, crossing her arms. “You have no idea how much I worry about you, knowing you’re riding that thing.”

The thing in question was a stunning Harley, which Steve had offered as a sort of olive branch after James had gotten settled in his new apartment. “I survived falling off a train in the Alps, I’m pretty sure I’ll survive high-siding off a motorcycle.”

Dot didn’t respond, but merely shook her head and pursed her lips.

He grinned at her, and offered his arm again. Together they walked through the outskirts of the university campus, slowly making their way towards Dot’s favorite ice cream parlor. There was a park nearby where they usually sat on sunny days, a comfortable bench by a small pond just off the main path. They chatted about various things as they walked: the weather, how Dot’s nieces and nephews were doing, new recipes for James to try and which farmers market had the best plums.

They were regulars at the parlor now, and James was always game to try whatever new lactose-free flavor they chose for him each time. So far the only one he hadn’t liked was butter pecan – the taste reminded him of the nutrient slurries he’d been fed before and after missions. Today’s flavor was mint chocolate chip, one that he’d had before but was always willing to revisit. Dot got her small cup of burgundy cherry as she always did, and James couldn’t leave with anything but a two-scoop waffle cone.

With her ice cream in one hand and the other hand around his arm, Dot greeted a group of young students as the kids ambled their way into the parlor. James always felt uncomfortable around this new generation of young adults, so crass and disrespectful with their language. The boys in the Army could have filled a dictionary with their creative expletives, but he never allowed anyone in his unit to treat a dame wrong. As a few sorority girls trooped past, he heard something resembling hot-ass arm candy and felt his neck flush.

“Is it actually okay for people to…”

“Unfortunately so, my dear. It seems folk with old-fashioned manners and good sense are few and
far between nowadays.”

He caught a stray drip as it started to run for cover down the cone, and spun the scoop around expertly on his tongue. “At least ice cream’s gotten better. There’s more flavors now, and they’re using real sugar again. And you have no idea how awesome it is that I don’t have to suffer for it anymore either.” Ice cream had been a rare enough treat on the shoestring budget that he and Steve barely managed to maintain that Bucky had enthusiastically put up with any and all side effects of the lactose-heavy treat.

Dottie’s laughter always made him smile. “They didn’t let you out much, did they?”

“Not really, no, and certainly not for ice cream. Christ, this stuff is good.”

They reached their usual bench and James shooed away a few seagulls before they sat, eating their ice cream in silence and enjoying the warm, sunny afternoon.

Finally, Dottie finished her cup and set it aside. She turned slightly to face him, papery hands folded in her lap, every inch the proper lady. “So, James. Tell me about what’s troubling you.”

He didn’t answer for a minute as he chewed part of the waffle cone. “Doc and I talked about Siberia.”

“You were there in the 90s, right?”

“I’m not exactly sure. Never really got to stare at a calendar much back then.” He’d pieced together where he was and when based on the missions he could remember. One of his therapy journals had a rough timeline sketched out, and he added to it whenever he remembered anything new.

Dot’s delicate hands closed over the cold metal of James’s fingers, the gentle pressure reassuring through the thin layer of silicone.

“Until then, I only got dumped in the chair if a mission went wrong, if I started acting up, you know, not being what they wanted. The guy in Siberia, he used it before and after every single goddamn mission. I can barely remember anything for almost ten years.” He took a deep breath, and the words started tumbling out. “Doc’s started bringing SHIELD files in, and we’re trying to put together what happened during that time. It’s kinda messing with me a bit. I’m getting flashes and whatnot, but nothing coherent.

“She says it’s normal to have things be all muddy like this. I’ll remember setting up my rifle in the snow, but not who the target was, or confirming a kill but not having made it. I remember training some girls, I think? I’m not sure. They were in tutus or something.” Dot’s mouth twitched up at that but she stayed quiet. “Got my ass kicked pretty bad by some guy named Josef, too. I think they put him down after that, never saw him again.

“What’s been messing with me bad is this one mission I had. They pull me out of my cell, drag me to the chair, and go to town on my brain. I get my briefing, ship out to some place in America, I have to take a car off the road, grab the people in it and take them back to HYDRA, and get a case of something from the trunk. But I can’t remember their faces, or what was in the case. The people died in the car – I think I killed them. But I wasn’t supposed to, and I can’t fucking remember why.”

Less enthusiastic now, James finished his ice cream and ate the remnants of the cone, then brushed the crumbs off his hand and set it on top of Dot’s. He tilted his head back and studied the clouds. “Doc said Stark helped get footage off the archives in the bank where they kept me here. They raided the shithole right after they found me, and destroyed most of it so that they couldn’t do that to
anyone else. Stark saved as much data as he could, though. Says he’s got films of all my mission reports going back to the 50s, promised he hasn’t watched anything. It’s weird how he’s respecting my privacy, I’ll be honest.”

“That seems like a good place to start, if you really do want to remember everything.”

“I don’t, doll. I really, really don’t.”

Dot squeezed his hand and paused for a few seconds before saying, “You know, James, even those of us who didn’t serve still carry pieces of the war with us. I don’t put sugar in my coffee. My sister could never throw anything away. But those of us that did serve and came back, you’ll carry that with you for the rest of your life.” She paused and watched as a flock of ducks took off from the pond. “I think you need to do this. You said last week that Steve asked Sam if you’d be interested in being an Avenger.”

“You’re forgetting the part where I told that towheaded idiot to fuck right off.”

“James.” She gave him a sharp look. “That team would be lucky to have you, and I know that Steve needs you. Even as big and strong as he is now, he’s always needed you.” She pulled a hand up and gently pressed it to his cheek; James braced for the small spark in his skin right before the involuntary flinch, but instead found himself leaning into her hand slightly. “But if you join them tomorrow, next month, or next year, you will all need to know what lies locked away in your mind. Those doors need to open, and as painful as it is, they won’t be able to trust you without it.” Her thumb brushed over his cheekbone before she reached back down to clasp his hands in hers again.

He thought about that for a moment, running through possible outcomes, and asked, “Should I move back into the Tower? What I do remember is pretty shitty, and if there’s a reason I’ve forgotten this stuff, chances are I’m going to get a lot worse before I get better again.”

“I think you need to be where your support network is. This is something to talk about with Sam before you make a decision.” Dot still had the fire in her heart that James remembered from before, but time and experience had tempered it into a steady, warm glow of wisdom.

“I’m supposed to have dinner with him tonight. I’ll… talk to him. I promise.” Another gentle squeeze on his hand, and hers were back in her lap.

“Let’s talk about something happier now. What did you think of reading The Hobbit for the first time since before the war?” she asked, eyes twinkling. The books she’d given him were always a fairly good mix of fiction and nonfiction, and she tried to tie each set together with a theme.

He chuckled, and began to compare Gollum to some of the men he’d known in the trenches.

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The walk back to the library was pleasant, and Dot kissed him on the cheek before getting into her cab. She was right, he should get a real car; that way he could be a proper gentleman and offer her a ride home. He watched the cab pull away into traffic, and turned to walk to his bike. If he didn’t get caught in traffic, he had just enough time to get over to the VA around the time Sam finished up.

“Hey, get off that, punk!” James hollered when he saw two young boys sitting on his bike, playing, making vroom and brraaaaap noises. “That’s not yours!” They froze as he walked up, their eyes huge. The boy in front was gangly with a mop of reddish-brown hair and a constellation of freckles across his cheeks, and the boy behind him was slim, fine-boned, with long, graceful hands and straight sandy blond hair.
James blinked, disoriented, and he was in an alley in old Brooklyn, looking at himself doing exact same thing with Steve on his uncle’s Harley as kids. He blinked again and he was back at the library, the two young boys still frozen in fear.

Sighing, he shooed them away. “Be careful around motorcycles, you could get hurt. Now get outta here. Scoot.” The boys bolted without a backward glance and he unlocked his helmet, checking for any surprises before stuffing his head in it. He kick-started the bike awake, grinning at the rich thrum as it roared to life.

The trip to the VA was uneventful and thankfully clear, and James cut the engine as he rolled into the parking lot. As much as he enjoyed the throaty rumble of the exhaust, he knew all too well the memories the sound could trigger for some of the vets.

Sam was waiting at the front entry, flipping through something on his phone. A helmet sat next to his feet – while Steve may not be much of a stickler for safety, James never allowed anyone to ride with him without at least a brain bucket. Stark had obligingly bought matching Avengers-themed helmets for the entire team - high quality ones, too - and most of them had immediately been spray-painted flat black by their new owners.

“Hey, man,” Sam called as James leaned the Harley onto its kickstand. “Just in time. Got room for another helmet on that lock?” Nodding, James secured Sam’s helmet next to his and cracked his neck.

“We going to the diner again? I could go for some pancakes.”

“We really want to pay for pancakes?” James gave Sam a confident smirk.

“Oh-ho-ho, is that how it is?” Sam playfully flipped him off and pointed down the street. “Well in that case, we’re gonna ruin all that hard work with bar food tonight.”

“There a game on or something?”

“Yeah, the Dodgers. Figured you’d want to catch it.”

“Aw hell no, there’s no way I’m watching those traitors again.” James wouldn’t deny that he was still quite sore over the move. The Dodgers had been his team, and then they up and transplanted themselves to LA.

“Well, suit yourself, we’re still going,” Sam said, punctuated with a firm shove to James’s shoulder. He swallowed the involuntary twist of panic and played up the stumble a bit for comic effect before gently whacking the back of Sam’s head – gently, don’t hurt him – with his flesh hand.

The two laughed a little, and turned into the small sports bar at the end of the block. The game was already in the second inning, but James didn’t pay it any attention even as several people stood and cheered. Suddenly a big, juicy burger and a smorgasbord of unhealthy, greasy sides sounded like an amazing idea.

Halfway through a plate of gooey mozzarella sticks, Sam broke the silence and pointed to James’s backpack with the drooping cheese. “Did you go see Dot again today? How’s she doing?”

“Surprisingly well for ninety-plus. She’s still pretty spry. I’m honestly not sure what her secret is, maybe she had some sort of serum or something but she’s still bossin’ around the other librarians.”
“Good for her. What’d she give you this week?”

“Well, we did fiction from the Great War last week, so she jumped forward a bit and now I’ve got some treatises on the Cold War. I think she wants me to mark it up for the post-grads.”

Sam considered this, his face falling into that familiar, interested frown with his eyebrows up. “You gonna do it?”

Pulling the tie out of his hair, James fluffed it up with his hands and rolled the tie onto his wrist. His hair was still slightly damp and he wanted to let it hang loose to dry for a little bit while they were eating. “I’m not sure. What good would it do? They can’t exactly use me as a source; I mean, technically I died in ’45.”

“You’re a special case. SHIELD did the same legal magic they did with Steve, so you shouldn’t have too much trouble with that. Tax season might get interesting, but...”

“Yeah, but still. Who’s gonna believe me? The shit I went through in Germany and Russia, it’s not stuff you tell normal people about.”

Their burgers arrived, and the buxom waitress winked at James, who flashed her a shy smile and wagged his eyebrows towards Sam to deflect her attention. Relief flooded through him when it seemed to work; Sam had been making eyes at her since they’d arrived and he didn’t want to get in the way of that.

The conversation stalled again as they dug into the burgers. James had had better, but he’d also had a lot worse. After all, Soviet field rations kept you from starving at the expense of anything mildly resembling a flavor other than ‘sawdust.’ As they ate, he let his eyes wander around the room, unconsciously logging his exit paths and categorizing each occupant based on their threat levels.

James finally looked over toward the far end of the bar, a quiet corner tucked in the back near the restrooms. The girl from the gym was sitting on the last stool, nursing a tumbler of amber-colored liquid, with her short, bleach-tipped black hair styled into a fluffy, modern look. Two men were leaning against the bar on either side of her. From the thin line of her mouth and her short responses, James got the feeling the men weren’t welcome.

Both men were in simple work clothes: plain t-shirts, jeans, and sturdy boots, and they were also both nearly twice the size of the dame. The man to her left looked to be a bog-standard bodybuilder, and his muscles were far too large for any practical purpose. The man to her right was smaller, leaner, a construction worker based on his tanned skin.

James tuned his hearing to their conversation, ignoring the sounds of the game and the conversations of the other patrons. She was just trying to enjoy her drink, from what he could tell. Her polite responses and demonstrated lack of interest in her company hadn’t made the point to the other men though, and she was beginning to lose patience.

The larger of the two men moved a little closer, slid his hand from her shoulder down her back, and casually groped her ass. She yelped and swatted him away, clearly upset, and the man’s friend started laughing, teasing her about her reaction.

Before he realized it, James was on his feet and stalking over to the three of them. Sam’s concerned voice called after him but he ignored it. “Hey pal, leave the lady alone,” he growled, projecting his voice so they could hear him.

As James approached, Muscles stepped towards him and crossed his arms, purposely flexing his
“You got something to say?”

“Yeah, actually. Maybe you should ask her permission before gettin’ fresh? Or is personal space too new-fangled a concept for you meatheads?”

At this point, he and Muscles were standing about a foot apart, and James tried to ignore the unsettling feeling of being dwarfed by a man he could look in the eye. Anyone would look small next to the bodybuilder; the man’s biceps were the size of Sam’s head.

“Hey, man,” he heard Sam say, and held up a hand to stop him. The rest of the people in the bar were starting to turn and pay attention and James wanted this over before it escalated.

“Tell you what, big guy. Call it a night, go home, and learn some decency on the way out the door.”

Muscles grinned. “Or what?”

Keeping his voice nonchalant and calm was a challenge, but he managed to pull it off. “Or I send you home horizontally. I ain’t askin’ twice.”

The big guy must have thought he was quick, but the right hook telegraphed seconds before it could have connected. James raised up his left hand and caught the man’s fist, feeling the small cracks as delicate bones fractured from the unexpected impact. Judging by the look on Muscles’s face, it must have hurt.

“Leave,” James said, voice quiet and low. “Now.” He knew how to make his face look blank and dangerous like the Winter Soldier, and it always had the effect he needed it to.

He’d never seen anyone settle a tab and skedaddle so quickly.

“What the hell was that?” the girl asked as James turned to go.

“You’re welcome?”

“No, that wasn’t a thank you.” She stood up from her barstool and jabbed him in the chest with a finger. “What the hell was that?”

James’s patience was already thin, so he took a breath before answering. “Call me old-fashioned, but it never sat right with me to watch grown men treat a lady like a piece of meat. Especially when she’s on her own.”

After staring at James for several seconds, she exhaled and closed her eyes for a moment. “Sorry, right. Sorry.” She pinched the bridge of her nose and sucked her lips in between her teeth. “Thank you. I guess I’m having a rough day, too.” Sitting back down, the girl picked up her drink and grimaced after downing a large portion of it. James looked closer at her face and noticed a slight puffiness to her eyes that- oh. Oh.

“You’re not watching the game, are you?” he asked quietly. She pinched her nose again and shook her head.

“It’s my brother’s birthday today. He, um.” Her voice was scratchy, and she cleared her throat roughly. “He died during the attack on DC. He was at the Triskelion when the helicarrier crashed into it.”

James dropped his head and looked away, guilt rising up in his stomach, a heavy cold feeling weighing him down. “I’m… sorry to- sorry for your loss.”
“We used to work out together at the gym whenever he wasn’t on call. I’ve been fine for a few months now, but I guess today just hit me kind of hard.” She tossed back the rest of the drink and set it down on the bar gently. After a few moments and a deep breath, she pulled out some bills and tucked them under her coaster. “I should get home.”

Out of reflex, James offered his hand to help her down from the barstool. She obliged his old-fashioned manners, even though he got a small smirk. “May I walk you to your… um…” He wasn’t sure if she’d driven, and definitely hoped not. Hopefully his awkward smile helped cover the gaffe.

“My roommate’s on the way to pick me up, but you’re welcome to wait with me.”

Catching Sam’s eye as they headed toward the door, James stayed half a step behind the dame. He hooked his thumbs in his pockets and was glad he’d left his jacket at the table when the warm summer night landed on his face.

“My roommate’s on the way to pick me up, but you’re welcome to wait with me.”

Catching Sam’s eye as they headed toward the door, James stayed half a step behind the dame. He hooked his thumbs in his pockets and was glad he’d left his jacket at the table when the warm summer night landed on his face.

“Says she’ll be here in two minutes,” the girl muttered, looking at her phone.

“I, uh, didn’t catch your name earlier. I’m James.”

She gave him an amused smile. “That’s because you didn’t ask earlier, James. Call me Mickey.” It took him a moment after she stuck her hand out to remember he was supposed to shake it. “Your friend there, that’s Sam Wilson, right?”

“Yeah, he works over at the VA. He’s helping me through some stuff.”

“I know, I go there too, I’ve got Group with him on Thursdays. Three tours in the Navy. You a veteran?”

“Served in the Army for a while, then did some special ops stuff. It kinda messed me up, ‘s why I spend so much time beating the shit out of punching bags.”

Up close, James could see that the spattering of pockmarks on the right side of her face was more extensive than he’d thought, and bore the telltale signs of shrapnel wounds. They were barely visible in the light of the gym and the bar, but the streetlights cast harsh shadows over her face, accentuating the small valleys left by the scars. With a start, James realized he was staring and quickly looked away before she noticed.

“Figured you were military or something. There’s not many guys who move like you do, maybe SOG but I dunno. Half the guys in the gym are afraid of you, half of them want to be you, and a few of the crazy ones want to spar with you.”

He grinned at her – it was what the old Bucky would have done. Most of the time, he felt completely lost talking to new people, so he tried to do his best to channel the old Bucky when it happened. So far, it hadn’t let him down. “And which group do you belong to?”

There was that half-smirk again. “Ask me again next time you see me at the gym.” A black sedan pulled up to the curb, and Mickey turned to face him, shaking his hand again. “Good to meet you, James.”

“Likewise.” He paused. “I’m sorry about your brother… Take care of yourself.”

Mickey tapped her temple in a subtle salute, and got into the car.

James made his way back inside and found Sam standing next to the table, cheering with the other
patrons as someone cleared the bases. Chuckling, he picked up his burger and finished it before Sam sat back down again.

“Somethin’ on your mind, man?”

“Jeeezus fuck, how do you people do that?” First Dot, then Sam.

“You get this sort of, like, scowl or something.” Sam said, waving his hand expressively in front of his own face. “Little frowny-face going on there. Got that wrinkle between your eyebrows.”

James absently nibbled on his fries for a minute before answering. He knew Sam would wait till he could put it into words properly. One of the issues he’d had for the first few months was inconsistent control over language, and Sam had quickly made it clear that conversations would happen at the pace that James could put the words together.

“You know the footage Stark got off the drives from the bank?”

Sam nodded, eyebrows drawing together.

“I’m thinking about asking to watch it. See if it helps me remember more.” James twirled a fry between the fingers of his left hand, entranced with how the salt stuck to it just like it would to normal skin. “I’m gonna get worse if I do, lots of fucked up stuff there. Dot said I should talk to you about where’s best for me to live while I do that. Here or at the Tower.”

Sam immediately dropped into therapist mode. “Well, where’s your safe space?”

“Um… home? And your place.” They’d talked about setting up safe retreat spaces where he knew he could go if he felt uncomfortable, scared, threatened, whatever. It was part of the reason he didn’t have a TV in his living room; it was significantly easier to control which websites he visited than it was to control what was broadcast on cable.

“So I’d recommend you stay where you are. This is sort of a team thing, to be honest, though I can work on having you watch everything separately first in case you get triggered.” ‘Triggered’ meant not only his PTSD, but in case any of the footage had the activation words. No one wanted to risk that. “We’ll watch it at my place,” Sam continued, voice quiet, pitched just right so that only James’s enhanced ears could hear him. “That way if you have to fall apart for a bit, it’s okay.”

He’d watch everything privately, with Sam. It didn’t seem so bad now, and he nodded. “Sounds good.”

Sam studied him for another minute as he scooped up the last of the ketchup with a fry. “You sure you’re ok with this? You don’t have to do it.”

“No, Dot’s got a point. You’ll need to be able to trust me if I join the team, and we’ll all need to know what’s in my head. It isn’t safe any other way.”

“Okay, I’ll get everything from Stark tomorrow. We can start when you’re ready, and we’ll take it slow. You need a break, you say so, okay?”

James mm-hmed around a few of the pretzel bites that had appeared while he and Mickey were talking. As worried as he was about unlocking everything in his head, he couldn’t let himself stress about it until it had to happen. “How’s Steve?” he asked, not bothering to hide the fact he was changing the subject.

Chuckling, Sam shook his head. “Still won’t use his damn parachute. He’s doing better, though. I
think mopping up HYDRA is helping, giving him something to do. Keep his head in the game, you know.”

“Good to hear. He healed up okay then?”

“Yep, back out and lapping me five to one the day before we found you. You know, he asks about you nearly every day.”

“…he does?”

“Yep,” Sam said, popping the p. “Mostly it’s just checking to see how you’re doing, do you need anything, you know.” The therapist pause, again, and James knew what Sam was going to say before he said it. “He asked when he’d see you next.”

James fought down the butterflies fluttering in his lungs – no need to be nervous, he’s your oldest friend – and swallowed, his throat clicking. “I’ve been thinking about starting in your group sessions. Haven’t talked with Doc about it yet, though. Um, if Steve wants to meet me after one of them then that might work.”

“Tell me what your doctor says and I’ll let Steve know.”

Neither Steve nor James had each other’s phone numbers yet. It wasn’t out of any animosity, more out of a need to maintain a certain distance while they both healed. Sam usually served as a go-between.

Sam steered the conversation back to the books James had been reading, and James even found himself checking in on the baseball game every so often. As much as he missed his Brooklyn Dodgers, he couldn’t imagine a world in which he didn’t like baseball. He blinked rapidly, shaking his head to clear away an unexpected flash of young girls in school uniforms, watching him intently as he demonstrated proper pitching technique, sending the ball hurtling toward a girl with defiant eyes and fire-red hair as she raised up her bat.

Eventually they made their way back to the VA and then rumbled over to Sam’s place. Once he was sure Sam got inside safely, he rolled back out onto the street as quietly as he could. Sometimes he wished the exhaust were quieter… not a lot, but sometimes.

The ride home was uneventful and calming, and he cut the engine as he coasted down the street towards the apartment complex. After rolling silently through the gate and into his carport, he leaned the Harley onto its kickstand and made his way up the stairs to his door.

He felt the tightness in his shoulders release as soon as he threw the deadbolt, and he reached his right hand around to rub at the scar tissue on the edge of the plates in his shoulder. No matter how warm or cold, it always ached.

The first thing he did after hanging his helmet on its hook by the door was neatly arrange his books on the shelf marked LIBRARY in Sharpie letters on masking tape. Then he took off his riding gear, set his boots by the door with the heels against the wall, and scrubbed at his scalp with his fingertips.

A glance in the kitchen told him the dishes could wait til tomorrow, so he brushed his teeth, yanked a comb through his hair, swallowed the nightly handful of pills, and pulled off his shirt and jeans. He hated being cold during the day and almost always overdressed for the weather, but at night, he couldn’t stand to feel restrained so he slept in just his skivvies.

Twisting just right to pop his back, he worked out the remaining tension in the rest of his body with a few stretches before sliding into bed, then reached for the book on his nightstand and thumbed it
The sun was sinking behind the mountains, and the shadows were deepening in the woods, when they went on again. Their paths now went into thickets where the dusk had already gathered. Night came beneath the trees as they walked, and the Elves uncovered their silver lamps...

Chapter End Notes

Dottie was mentioned in Civil War, the girl that Bucky attempted to impress by spending $3 trying to win a stuffed bear for her at a carnival. (Note, Bucky sucks at carnival games. That’s around $50 now.) She’s roughly 95 at this point.

James has been on his own for about a month and a half now, even though he spends time with Sam practically every day. The falling out with Steve happened shortly before Steve’s birthday, which I’m not entirely sure if James remembers at this point.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

**Trigger warning:** transphobia mentioned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

_The Winter Soldier_ stumbled as his toe caught on a crack in the sidewalk. He caught himself, barely, and pulled his stolen coat tighter around his body. No matter how many layers he wore, he couldn’t shake off the bone-chilling cold that coursed through his veins. He kept the thermal turtleneck shirt from his HYDRA uniform, but the rest he’d wrapped around a large rock and thrown as far as he could into the river.

He’d made two stops immediately after stealing some new clothes: the first was to dig up something he had a vague memory of burying behind a flop house on the outskirts of DC half a century ago, and the second had been to use some of the cash he found in the waterproof yellow capsule he dug up to buy food.

That was when he could still throw things. That was when he could still control his hands well enough to dig.

The servos in his left arm chattered quietly at him as they complained about the feedback in his nerves. He knew he was shaking and he couldn’t control it. His right shoulder still ached viciously from being dislocated. He’d reset it as soon as he could, but the muscles had been torn badly and still needed more time to repair themselves, something that wasn’t going to happen unless he got both food and rest – and quickly.

The Soldier dropped himself on a bench, choking back a grunt as he jarred his wounds. The pictures he’d seen in the museum flashed before his eyes, and the man who shared his face laughed at him. Bucky Barnes. James Buchanan Barnes. The laughter in his head grew louder, more cruel, and Bucky’s face morphed into a fat, round mug with circular spectacles and a thinning swatch of grayish blond hair. The Soldier felt sick and couldn’t remember why the face made his stomach twist.

His memory was foggy, and he knew he couldn’t trust it. He knew he didn’t have a name, so why did this man’s name sound so familiar? Why did it hurt so much in his head when his target had called him by it?

He couldn’t make sense of the brief glimpses of a small, waifish blond boy with a stubby pencil and paper in his hands. Seeing the same face, but larger now, filled out, on a body a foot taller, and feeling... scared? Lost? Upset? Proud? He wasn’t sure what to call the emotions. He wasn’t sure what emotions even felt like. He was a machine. He wasn’t human. The small round man with the glasses had told him that.

He jerked himself back to the present as he felt his head start to tip forward. His stomach growled and he tried to ignore the shuddering weakness that he knew meant his body was consuming itself in an effort to stay alive. Scavenging in trash cans and dumpsters wasn’t giving him enough calories, and he almost missed the slurries his handlers made him drink. Almost.
Just as he raised his head, he saw a familiar-looking man jog past. Sweat glistened off the man’s brown skin, and it took the Soldier a minute to wade through the fog in his head. That was the man with the wings that he’d kicked off the helicarrier. The Captain’s ally… no, his friend.

He watched the man until he jogged out of sight, and slowly muddled his way through a decision he knew he had to make. He needed medical attention. He knew he was on the verge of dying. He couldn’t go back to HYDRA. His metal arm was badly damaged from the fight, and he had no way to fix it himself. He’d managed to hide this long, but unless he got help, he’d either die or end up back in HYDRA’s hands. He knew they were looking for him.

Rocking forward until his elbows rested on his knees, the Soldier drew in and let out a shaky breath. He clenched his hands into fists and used them to push himself up off the bench. The world swayed in front of him and his stomach dropped as he lurched forward. Thirty feet, that’s all he needed. Thirty feet to the tree next to the black man’s route. He had roughly two and a half minutes until the man came back around.

He shuffled forward, holding his left arm tight against his body so the mechanical whining wouldn’t be as loud. His metal hand clamped down on the capsule in his pocket until the plastic cracked. If his arm couldn’t move, it couldn’t make noise. Twenty feet. His foot slid a fraction of an inch as he stepped onto the grass. Pausing for a moment, he waited for down to be down again, then continued forward. Ten feet.

The Soldier stumbled the last few feet and involuntarily dropped to his knees, rolling onto his back. His head knocked against the hard surface of a tree root, and his baseball cap fell off as he winced. Sunlight filtered down through the branches and leaves of the tree, and gray spots started to spread inwards from the edges of his vision. What seemed like an eternity later, he heard footsteps.

“Hey, man, you okay?” Someone thumped to the ground next to him. He hoped it was the Captain’s friend. A brown hand waved in front of his face and relief washed over him. He tried to say something and felt his mouth move but no words came out. The Captain’s friend brushed the Soldier’s hair out of his face with a gentle hand.

“Oh shit. Oh holy shit.”

The Soldier heard a small click as the man unlocked his phone. “Steve. I’m at the mall. Get your ass over here and call in a SHIELD medical team. I found him. Fucking hell, maybe he found me, I don’t know. He’s barely conscious, looks like he hasn’t eaten in a week.” Something pinched the back of his hand. “He’s dehydrated. I’m gonna get some water into him.”

A hand slid under his neck and his mind dropped into waves of panic, his body remembering being held down underwater, pressure on the nape of his neck. He tried to push the Captain’s friend away but his arms wouldn’t cooperate. The man pressed a bottle to his lips and tipped it, and lukewarm water trickled into the Soldier’s mouth.

“A hand slid under his neck and his mind dropped into waves of panic, his body remembering being held down underwater, pressure on the nape of his neck. He tried to push the Captain’s friend away but his arms wouldn’t cooperate. The man pressed a bottle to his lips and tipped it, and lukewarm water trickled into the Soldier’s mouth.

“Easy, easy,” the man said as the Soldier coughed a little. “Yes, ma’am, it’s fine,” he said to someone else. “I know him, I’ve got someone on the way to help. I’ve got it under control. Thank you, ma’am.” The Soldier’s vision was still blurry but he could see a few people staring at him. The Captain’s friend waved them away and eventually the bystanders walked off.

“Hey, buddy.” The man gently patted his cheek to get his attention and helped him sit up. “You know where you are?”

Closing his eyes, the Soldier tilted his head back against the tree. “I’m in DC, right?”
“Yeah. What year is it?”

“Fuck if I know.”

“You remember your name?”

He opened his eyes and stared at the Captain’s friend til his face came into focus. “I don’t know. The Captain called me Bucky.” The gray closed in over his eyes again and he felt his head thump against the tree.

“Hey, man, stay with me. Come on!” The man’s voice faded as he slipped into unconsciousness.

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James ignored the runnels of sweat dripping down his back as his feet pounded their way down the sidewalk. His shirt stuck to his shoulders and the glove made his right hand sweat as he ran, a pair of shorts the only concession he made to the unseasonably warm October heat. His hair was still just a little too short to tie back completely so he’d given in and used one of Mickey’s thin hairbands to keep it out of his eyes.

His watch beeped at him, and he glanced down to see that he’d covered another mile. Eleven down, four to go. The rhythm of breathing in time with his steps was soothing, and he enjoyed the exercise. It was one of the few times his brain quieted down long enough for him to feel like he could hear his own thoughts.

The last leg of his run brought him back to his apartment, and he paused at the stairs to stretch for a minute before going inside. He felt the pull of the bolts in his bones as he worked his shoulders; the serum was the only thing that allowed his body to heal the micro-tears that happened simply from moving around.

Fishing his key out of the pocket in the back of his shorts, he jogged up the stairs and let himself in. Mickey was still sprawled on the couch with her tablet, one foot up on the armrest and the other on the coffee table.

“How was the run?” Mickey popped her earbuds out and sat up to face him.

“Fine. A little hot. Can’t wait for the weather to cool down again.”

“Well if you wouldn’t insist on wearing sleeves and gloves everywhere…”

“I told you, I’ve got my reasons,” James said, pointing accusingly at her with the bottle. “I’m fine. Really.”

Mickey dropped her tablet next to her and scrubbed her fingers through her short, wiry bleach-and-black hair, sighing. Glancing over at her tablet, James saw the email message on the screen. He downed the rest of his drink and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Hey, kid, what’s wrong?”
“Shelby bitched to our landlord. I’m getting evicted.”

“What the shit.”

“Something about me doing illegal drugs? It’s bullshit, here, read it.” She thrust the tablet at him and he took it, absently scanning through the email.

“Wow, she doesn’t play around.” Shelby had fabricated a story about Mickey’s weekly hormone injections containing heroin.

“I’ve already called most of the people I know, no one’s got a spare room and all their leases expire next year.”

An idea began to take shape, but James knew he needed a sounding board before he brought it up with Mickey. “Gimme a minute.” He swiped his phone from where he’d left it on the island counter, scrolled through his contacts, and tapped ‘Doctor Ellmore’ as he walked into the bedroom. She picked up on the third ring.

“Good morning, James. Everything okay?” Usually he only called if he was having a rough day and needed some extra help.

“No, yeah, everything’s fine,” he reassured her. “Listen, um. Mickey’s getting kicked out of her place. Do you… do you think it’d be ok for me to have a roommate?” He kept his voice quiet as he sat on the bed. Mickey’s duffel was in front of his closet, and she tried hard to keep everything tidy as if she was only staying for the night. So far, it had been a week.

“Is she okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. Letting her stay here was good, she seems to be doing a lot better.”

The phone cracked as Doc huffed out a breath. “Well, I think it’s a call that you’ll need to make yourself. You said your nightmares aren’t happening as often and you’ve been much more stable for the past few months. If you’re comfortable with this, I can’t see any reason it’s a bad idea.”

“What about my…” He couldn’t bring himself to finish the sentence. He’d been lucky so far, but that wouldn’t hold out forever. Eventually, she’d see his arm.

“That’s going to happen at some point whether you want it to or not, with her or someone else. You can’t keep hiding forever, James. It might be time to take a leap of faith. It sounds like she trusts you, I’d like you to think about whether you trust her.”

He curled the fingers of his left hand, then uncurled them, the tiny motors making quiet whirring noises. He knew most people couldn’t hear it, but it still bothered him.

“Thanks, Doc. I’ll, uh, I’ll see you Wednesday, usual time?”

“That’s right. Call me again if there’s anything you need to talk about. Take care.”

He took a few more breaths to lower his heart rate, and walked out into the living room. Mickey was back on her tablet, flipping through Craigslist ads.

“Let’s go grab your stuff later today, Micks. I’ve got a storage space downstairs off my carport, you can stay here til we figure something out.”

She took off her glasses and looked up at him. “We?”
“Well, yeah.” Perching on the arm of the couch at her feet, James crossed his arms. “My lease is up next month and I haven’t signed anything yet. Been thinking about moving anyway,” he lied. Pepper would help him figure something out.

Mickey’s mouth quirked up in that now-familiar half smile. “I can’t really contribute much in rent. That’s the only reason I’ve been putting up with Shelby as long as I have.”

He waved a hand dismissively. “I’ve got that covered, trust me.” Steeling himself for a moment, James decided to take the plunge before he lost his nerve. “You’ve already learned that my PTSD gets me bad sometimes. You’ve even helped me through some attacks, and I can’t thank you enough for that. But I’m gonna need the windows covered like they are here, and you can’t try to wake me up if I’m having a nightmare.” He added, quietly, “I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t know where I am sometimes and it can get dangerous if you don’t let me wake up on my own.”

Mickey tilted her head to the side. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?” She’d helped him through a few minor panic attacks, as well as a full-blown dissociative episode where he’d forgotten how to speak – in any language. The girl had the patience of a saint.

“I… yeah. Um.” He pulled off the headband, snapped the hair tie onto his wrist, and shook out his hair. “I think so? Doc said it was okay.” His heart rate started to rise up again as he tried to think of how to say what he wanted to.

“Jim…”

Fuck it, just tell her. “If we’re roommates, you’ll, uh, you’ll have to see my arm and whatnot, so, um, might as well get that out of the way.” Mickey knew his left arm was messed up, he’d told her that much, but when she’d assumed it was scarred up from his time in the Army, he hadn’t corrected her. Before he could second-guess himself, he pulled off his gloves, first the right, then the left.

His hand gleamed dully, and he dropped it onto his leg. Mickey hadn’t said anything, and he didn’t want to look at her. He was sitting with his left side facing her, and his hand reflexively flattened out on his thigh as if he could hide it there.

Eventually, Mickey muttered, “Well, that’s one hell of a prosthetic.”

James laughed awkwardly, and reached back with both hands to pull his shirt over his head. He felt exposed, self-conscious, and reminded himself that Mickey wouldn’t care – she’d seen far more than a bare chest when on tour with the Marine unit she’d been attached to.

“Jesus Christ,” Mickey whispered. “It’s your whole damn arm?”

“Yeah.” He jumped as the pressure sensors in his elbow reacted; looking down, he saw that she’d gently touched his arm. When he flinched, Mickey drew her hand back and gave him a small nod. No touching, got it. Normally, James could push down the fire in his throat that rose up at human contact, enough that no one noticed, but there were times at which his whole body burned unbearably and physical contact hurt like a gunshot.

Folding her legs under her, Mickey sat just a few feet away, eyebrows furrowed. “You’re not an Army vet, are you.”

“No, I am, I just… HYDRA got me and, um, messed me up pretty bad. Lost my arm in a train accident, hit my head pretty hard, too. Didn’t know who I was for a long time. I did a lot of black ops stuff for them. That stuff in April, um…”

“Yeah, I remember. Kind of hard not to, with my brother and whatnot. You and Captain America
beat the shit out of each other a few times. Pretty much everyone thought you just had some weird armor on your arm or some other shit.”

*That* got him to look up and meet her eyes. She had an eyebrow cocked and her head propped up on her fist. Nervous, James swallowed and bit his lip.

“Look, Jim, I’ve been there. I was in the Navy, you know that. I’ve done shit I’m not proud of either, and I’ve got plenty of red on my record after three tours, even though my job was to save lives instead of take them. Sometimes, you have to pull the trigger to save a life. Sometimes, you can’t save all of them. Sometimes, you can’t save any of them, and their blood’s on your hands.”

She looked down at her hands, balled them into fists, and stuffed them into her crossed legs as if she couldn’t bear to see them. “Sometimes you pull the trigger and you realize that was a life you could have, should have saved,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“I get that a lot of people are afraid of you, and honestly, I can’t really blame them. But by that same logic, they should be afraid of me and every other combat veteran, too. We’re all dangerous, we’re all deadly, especially those of us that brought the war ghosts back with us.”

James looked down at his hands, tracing his fingers over all the tiny scratches on the metal plates and the matching silvered scars on his right arm. “Have you been to the Smithsonian?” he asked hoarsely. “The Captain America exhibit, the one Rogers hates so much. I went to see it after everything went down in April.”

“Well, yeah, everyone-” Mickey cut herself off in mid-sentence, jaw dropping open as James gave her a lopsided, embarrassed smile. “Oh, hell no. You’re Bucky Barnes. What the… what the fuck. What the actual fuck.”

“The one and only.” His Brooklyn drawl thickened unconsciously, as it tended to do when he was nervous. “What I’m tryin’a get at is, you’re basically the only person my handlers have let me hang out with outside of the team, and you haven’t called the fuzz on me yet, so, um, yeah.” He paused, staring at the light reflecting off his left thumb. “I trust you.” With a jolt, he realized that was the first time he’d said that to anyone since… he couldn’t remember.

“Will I get to be an Avenger?” Mickey asked, then laughed. “Nah, I’m joking. Sorry.”

“Um, well, you’re probably gonna need to get screened and whatnot, at the very least. I’ll give Hill a call once we get your stuff picked up, she’ll help us get everything taken care of.”

“Hey Jim,” she began, then stopped. Her lips pulled in as she sucked on them, a nervous habit that was oddly endearing. “What do you want me to do if… if you… do you call it ‘reactivating?’ I’m not sure what the right word is. Do you even do that?”

“Doc and I call it ‘triggering.’ God forbid, if that happens, I want you to get as far away from me as quickly as you can, ok? I know you can fight, and you’re damn good, but you won’t be able to take me on when I’m like that.” His right thumb wandered down the seams in his left hand, so familiar yet still so alien to him. “Doc’s pretty sure they got it all suppressed enough that it isn’t a big risk, but I still get bad nightmares. I don’t have any guns anymore, but I don’t need ‘em to hurt people. Just don’t startle me, and let me know if I start talkin’ in another language, okay?”

After what seemed like an eternity, Mickey nodded. Picking up her tablet again, she looked up at him. “Should I bother looking for a new place, or are your friends going to take care of everything?”

“Pepper’s got this.” James tapped out a quick message on his phone and sent it. “Just texted her,
she’ll get back to me when she’s got news. C’mon.” He stood up and started to pull on his running shirt again, then thought better of it and walked into the bedroom to grab a fresh one. “Let’s hit the gym and then I’ll get Sam’s car so we can go get your stuff after.”

“You just ran like twenty miles!”

“Fifteen,” he corrected her, grinning. “And that was just a warm-up.”

On the walk to the gym, Mickey peppered him with questions about his childhood, the war, what he remembered about Steve before the serum. She steered well away from his time with HYDRA, and he found himself enjoying the conversation. It was refreshing and liberating to be able to talk freely with someone who wasn’t in SHIELD; security clearance be damned, he’d made a friend.

James stopped them just before they got to the gym. “Hey, thanks for not freaking out. That…it means a lot to me.”

Smirking at him, Mickey shrugged. “Oh, I’m kinda freaking out, but it’s more fangirling than panicking. The Howling Commandos are one of the reasons I joined the Navy.” She started forward again. “Hope you brought your A-game, we’re sparring today.”

“Aw man, seriously?”

“What, I thought you liked it!”

James grimaced at her as he handed his card to the girl at the front desk. “Oh, I like hand-to-hand just fine, I just don’t like it when it involves getting my ass handed to me. It’s embarrassing as shit, and MCMAP fucking sucks on the other end.”

“That’s kind of the point.”

Making eye contact with each of his shadows, he nodded his head subtly. He’d decided that it did no harm to let them know he knew they were there. At least it was the same three agents: two men and a woman. They never worked out together, just quietly going through their routines alone. In an effort to make their jobs easier, James did his best to stick to a schedule at the gym.

There was a section marked off near the punching bags, a large mat specifically for sparring. It was usually occupied by martial arts classes in the afternoons, mostly for kids to work out the wiggles after long days at school. When there weren’t any classes, the mat was open for general use.

“Knives?” James asked as he zipped open his gym bag. He’d gotten into the habit of bringing a set of orange polypropylene trainers with him, and when Mickey nodded, he tossed one of the knives over to her. They were the closest he was willing to get to real knives outside of the block in his kitchen.

His muscles were still warm from the run, so he sat down and stretched while Mickey worked her way through a set of exercises to get her blood flowing. James would never admit it, but he secretly relished the looks he got from the other guys at the gym as he slid down into the splits. One benefit of the serum was enhanced flexibility and HYDRA had taken advantage of this by providing him with a plethora of acrobatic and gymnastic training. He’d even done quite a bit of ballet, even though he’d never admit it to anyone outside of a few close friends.

As Mickey did skip jumps across the large mat, he reached his hands behind his head and popped up into a bridge, counting to 30 while he kept his breaths long and slow during the stretch. Then, he kicked his legs up and over and stood up smoothly, leaning back and starting a set of walkovers. It felt good to flip himself around like that, and at the end of the mat he turned, running into a flip
followed with a back aerial. He bounced up off his feet and cracked his neck, swinging his arms.

“Showoff,” Mickey taunted, and he grinned shamelessly. Tumbling was one of his favorite things to do at the gym, and it was also one of the things that helped him feel most like himself. He’d loved to dance, before everything. Gymnastics wasn’t really all that different.

A few of the other gym members wandered over to watch as James picked up his trainer knife. They’d been sparring together for two weeks now, and people had really started paying attention the first time Mickey knocked him flat on his ass. A large amount of the gym members trained in various martial arts, so sparring was a common enough occurrence that it didn’t often warrant any special attention... unless, of course, the quiet lady sailor managed to KO the crazy punching bag guy.

“Ready to go?” James quickly wrapped his hands to protect the knuckles – no need for padded gloves since he wasn’t afraid of Mickey hurting him, and she refused to be ‘coddled.’ He dropped into a relaxed stance, knife held backhand in his right hand by his chest, left arm out in front of him.

Their sparring matches were often abrupt and fierce. Mickey’s MCMAP training left little room for extended combat, and more often than not one of them was on the floor from a takedown within a matter of seconds. On occasion they ended up trading blows back and forth, James drawing on his training as the Soldier and Mickey mixing in some kickboxing and Muay Thai. James had been boxing since he could swing his fists and had two titles under his belt before he turned sixteen – hand-to-hand combat came as naturally to him as breathing.

Most of the time, one of them ended up with a trainer pressing into what would have been a kill zone, and that was that, square off and start again.

James decided to try something different today; his appetizer of tumbling had given him an idea. Rather than directly engage, he focused instead on making sure none of Mickey’s blows ever hit him. Ducking, swaying, and every once in a while rolling away, he started feeling a warm satisfaction as her face reddened and her forehead glistened with sweat.

The orange knife flashed as she tightened her stance, switched it to a backhand grip, and brought her fists up. With a dangerous smile, she charged in and forced James into closer quarters. He had to keep his head in the game, now; even though she was half his size, she was built solidly and packed more power behind her blows than he’d expected the first time they’d sparred.

Switching the knife to his left hand to limit how much he blocked with the metal arm, James started to push back a bit. Just as he was hitting his stride, a voice jolted him out of his focus. His head snapped around and he saw Steve greet the girl at the front desk, then start walking towards the sparring mat.

Mickey’s foot hooked around James’s leg, her fist whacked into the side of his head, and his feet flew out from under him; he landed heavily on his back and his breath whuffed out of his lungs with the jolt. Blinking hard a few times, he tried to ignore the ringing in his ears as Mickey grinned down at him, trainer knife at his neck.

She stood up and held out a hand but he waved her away, rolling onto his side and rubbing his jaw where she’d hit him. The back of his head ached from the hard landing.

“Sometimes, I think you like getting punched,” Steve said with a wicked grin as he sat down on one of the nearby benches.

“Yeah, yeah, shut up, punk, you distracted me.” James rotated his jaw around, rubbed the joint once
more, and pushed himself to his feet.

“You okay?” Mickey asked. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to have you land so hard.” Her grin told him otherwise. Once he’d reassured her enough times that she didn’t need to be afraid of hurting him, she’d begun to enjoy not having to pull her blows.

“Nah, I’ll be fine. Just got my bell rung something fierce. Ears are still whistling.”

Steve snorted eloquently.

Since Steve and James had first grabbed lunch a little over a month and a half ago, both of them were making an effort to revive their old friendship. It was still awkward and came in fits and starts, but for the most part the easy companionship was coming back. The moment of truth had come when James had hollered at Steve, “Well you’re not the same tiny-ass punk I left behind in New York either!” Mouth open, Steve had stared at him for several seconds before closing his eyes and nodding. After that, things had been a bit easier. Steve had started asking questions instead of just assuming. Making an effort to learn.

“Captain,” Mickey said, raising a hand to her temple in a politely subtle salute. They’d met a little under two weeks ago when James had nervously introduced them to each other at the VA. He’d been desperate for them to get along, and thankfully, they did. Sticking a foot forward, Mickey reached down to pull up on her toe and stretch out her calf. Her right calf always gave her a bit of trouble; there was a thin line crossing the back of her leg diagonally from the same shrapnel that had hit her face and neck.

“Good to see you, Mickey. How’re things?”

She glanced at James, and he nodded discreetly. “Well, I got an eviction notice today so Jim offered to give me a place to stay. He said he was going to have someone called Pepper help him out finding a two-bedroom.” Steve fixed James with an incredulous look, and Mickey’s eyes flicked between them. “I’m, uh, I’ll go run for a bit. Do a cooldown.” She handed her trainer knife back to James before trotting over to a treadmill.

“You’re giving her a place to stay?” Steve asked as James unwrapped his hands and tugged his gloves back into place. His tone reminded James of all the times before the war that he’d come home after a night on the town, drunk as a skunk and rarin’ to go.

“I know what you’re thinking. It’s not like that.”

“You know it’s fine if it is. Honestly, it’s probably a good thing for you to have a girl again.” He gave Steve a sharp look and tossed the trainers into his bag before zipping it up. “She’s not my girl.”

“And pigs fly.”

James tossed his workout towel at his friend and it neatly flapped around Steve’s face. “Shaddup.” A grin flashed back at him from behind the towel, and he took it back to wipe his face and neck. Moving closer, he lowered his voice so it wouldn’t carry. “Her roommate Shelby’s being a little shit. You’d think with everything being better nowadays for queers and all, people wouldn’t have a hard time with it anymore but Shelby’s making it clear she’s pretty transphobic.”

Steve looked over at Mickey where she was jogging slowly. “I thought she said her friends were being supportive.”
“That’s what she tells people when it comes up. Truth is, almost everyone pushed her out, except her brother and some of his friends. He paid for everything right after she came out. Micks says he used to work for SHIELD, got her the best doctors.”

“Well, she’s got you, now. That’s gotta count for something. When’s she moving in?”

“Tonight, if we can manage it. She’s been pretty beat up about it all, doesn’t really have a lot of friends. She’s already been at my place for about a week, we’ll just be boxing up what’s left.”

“Want another set of hands? I’ve got the truck today, Nat swapped me for the bike.”

“Man, she steals everyone’s stuff.” James swung his gym bag up on his shoulders, rolling his eyes expressively. “She’s still got my blue coat, can you talk to her about maybe giving that back sometime soon? I kinda miss it.”

Steve chuckled as he shook his head. “I’ll ask her. Not sure it’ll do any good, but I’ll try.”

The way Steve kept glancing around, looking for someone or something, caught James’s attention quickly. “Not that I don’t wanna see you, but why are you here?”

“Fury’s called an all-hands tomorrow afternoon. We’ve got a lead on a pretty big HYDRA base in Ohio. Fury specifically ordered me to bring you; you’re to provide any intel you can.”

“No.”

“Bucky…”

James sighed and scrubbed at his eyes with his hand. The big blond idiot had recently reverted to calling him Bucky again, and James didn’t have the heart to ask him to stop. “Steve. I turned in my guns for a reason. Please don’t make me do this.” Poor choice of words - Steve’s face crumpled. After a second, James realized Steve had said that to him on the helicarrier.

“We need you on this one,” Steve said, his voice cracking. “None of us have watched any of that footage yet-”

“I haven’t either.”

“More than half of the geo-stamps since 1986 are from that facility.” The blond took a deep breath and held it for a second; James narrowed his eyes. “JARVIS has been running analysis on the footage and he’s pulled up some pretty big stuff, and it’s recent. Unusual power draw, homeless people missing off the streets then turning up dead weeks later… with marks on their faces. Bruises, blood in their eyes, bleeding ears. Like how I found you in Kreischberg.”

James closed his eyes. One of the first memories to come back after seeing his reflection for the first time was a hazy view of his face in the tarnished, foggy mirror in the bathroom of the pub they’d formed the Invaders in. Eyes sunken, cheeks hollow, a large rectangular map of bruises and cuts on the left side of his face. His left eardrum had been ruptured, but the medics couldn’t explain why he could still hear. Blood vessels in his eyes had swollen and burst, giving his right iris a disturbing crimson ring.

The pain from Zola’s torture still resurfaced from time to time, ghostly aches of wounds long healed. Doc said the amount of pain he managed on a daily basis was enough to incapacitate an average adult male, but he’d become so accustomed to it that he didn’t even notice it any more. He couldn’t wish that same nauseating daily struggle on anyone else.
Looking down at his hands, he noticed his left one was clenched so tightly that the motors were starting to grind. He forced it back open, and said, “What else?”

“We’ve identified a number of targets that could be high value.”

“Who.” His voice was flat as he tried to keep his breathing under control.

“I haven’t been given any names yet.” Steve reached out to hug him, then stopped. He’d learned not to touch James at times like this, but the motion was still reflexive, driven by years of close friendship. “We really need you on the team for this one.”

“Please, Steve. Don’t ask me to do this. I’m finally getting my shit back together. What if I snap? What if they trigger me? What if I kill someone?” James’s voice was barely above a whisper. “What if I try to kill you?”

“You’re only helping us with intel, this isn’t a field assignment for you. Anything you remember could tip the balance in our favor.”

James stared at the floor between his shoes. His face closed up as his forehead wrinkled, and huffed out a breath. “I’ve been through some fucked up stuff, Steve. I’m messed up pretty bad, and I don’t know if I’m ever not gonna be messed up. I’m not sure if I want everyone there when I start remembering, if anything happens and whatnot.”

Brain archaeology had become a process in and of itself; when traumatic memories resurfaced, there was a high risk of a danger night. So far, whenever he’d had them he’d stayed at Sam’s place for the night; he needed to be in a safe space but couldn’t be alone. Suicidal thoughts and self-harm tendencies had plagued him since the late 40s, and his body and mind bore the scars of both. One of the biggest reasons HYDRA had isolated and monitored him between missions had been to prevent another dangerous relapse.

As a result, he’d been under constant observation for the first two months after surrendering to SHIELD. Once the doctors had figured out he was only a danger to himself, his treatment had changed completely. They shifted tactics from arguing over whether or not he was culpable for his actions as the Winter Soldier to attempting to dismantle HYDRA’s programming and help him recover from decades of unconscionable abuse.

The amount of brainfuckery that HYDRA had done to him meant that his symptoms could appear at random and were often debilitating. For the most part, he could predict and usually manage the PTSD, depression, and anxiety, but he still had the occasional seizure.

The seizures had been frequent and frightening at first, but as his doctors worked on him and his brain began to repair itself they’d tapered off from several a day to one every few days, then one every few weeks. It had been over a month since his last episode, and even the mild tremors in his hands were gone on his good days. On bad days, his MedicAlert bracelet jingled against his jittery metal wrist in warning.

Even though seizures were now less of a risk, his brain chemistry was still all sorts of whacked. The cocktail of drugs Doc had him on seemed to be helping, but when Dottie had helped him read up on the fancy names printed on the little orange bottles, he’d discovered his dosages had to be high enough to kill most adults thanks to his enhanced metabolism. Doc had made it clear that the goal was to have him functional without any medications, but he wasn’t one to fix something that ain’t broken. If he wasn’t a drooling mess or a killing machine, that was good enough for him, even if it meant taking sixteen pills a day for the rest of his indeterminate life.
“Fury-”

“In case you forgot, I kinda blew up his car, and then shot the guy. Twice. In the back. I’m surprised he’s willing to be in the same room as me.”

Steve’s smile was pained, but a smile nonetheless. “It’s not like he’s in an exclusive club anymore.”

“Oh, fuck off,” James muttered darkly. He and Steve regularly argued about whether or not the large, puckered scars on Steve’s torso and leg were his fault. The scars would eventually disappear, but James wasn’t sure he’d ever forgive himself.

Steve was quiet for another minute, then spoke again, keeping his voice low. “Does she know?”

“Told her earlier today, showed her, too.”

Blond eyebrows shot up. “And she didn’t run screaming?”

“Nope. Apparently the Invaders are the reason that she enlisted.”

“Huh. She’s either a keeper, or just as crazy as we are.” Steve waved at someone behind James, and he turned to see Mickey walking back over to them. “C’mon, gotta get you two through the shower before we hit the diner.”

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James reached his arms up and back, then dropped his head forward, letting the hot water from the showerhead loosen his muscles. After a minute, he squirted some shampoo into his hand and began working it through his hair. Stark had been magnanimous enough to develop something that didn’t gum up the delicate finger joints in his mechanical arm, and it even smelled like vanilla.

The door creaked open a bit – he never showered with the door closed, not any more, even with people in his apartment. Having a door closed made any room close in on him like his old HYDRA cell within a matter of seconds. He was too embarrassed to admit to that particular source of anxiety, and was relieved when he’d noticed it also gave him the logical excuse of helping the fan draw more air in and keep the steam down.

“Hey princess, hurry it up,” Steve’s voice teased from the other side of the shower curtain. “Mickey’s getting hungry.”

Without looking, James snaked an arm around the curtain and flicked water at the door. He grinned at the resulting yelp, and worked his hands through his hair to rinse out the last traces of suds.

His two towels sat folded on the toilet just where he’d put them – good. Steve had stolen them once last week to make James chase him around the apartment, dripping wet and naked, cursing in all the languages he knew. According to his shithed of a friend, it was prime entertainment. At least the windows were frosted, or what was left of his dignity would have died a horrible death.

After drying himself off, he wrapped one towel around his waist and aggressively scrubbed the other one over his hair to dry it. He silently thanked Stark again – but never let that walking ego hear it – when the comb slid through his hair with minimal effort. HYDRA had never been gentle with his scalp when cleaning him after missions, and it was nice to see some of the yanked-out patches finally growing back in.

He draped the second towel over his shoulders and trudged into the bedroom to grab some clothes, then saw that Mickey had already laid something out for him.
“You’re gonna intimidate my bitch of a roommate this afternoon,” she said from the door. “Gotta dress to impress.”

James spun his finger at her to get her to turn around before he dropped the towel and started dressing. Dark, snug jeans with black shoes and a red Henley shirt, finished with the gray leather jacket that he wore out when he wasn’t in his riding leathers. “Did I know I owned these?” he asked, plucking at the jeans. Natasha must have picked them out.

“Do you even look in your dresser?”

Fair point.

He pulled the silicone glove out of the small box he kept it in and slid it over his metal hand, wiggling the fingers until it settled. Mickey shuddered as she watched him, mumbling something about the uncanny valley.

The diner wasn’t terribly busy when they got there, so they were seated almost immediately. James was a regular and always ordered the same thing: every type of protein and a huge heap of hash browns. Steve got a real lunch, a BLT that actually looked halfway decent, and Mickey ended up with a waffle combo and the waiter’s number on a piece of paper under her plate.

She held up the scrap of receipt and showed it to Steve and James once the waiter was out of earshot. “Seriously?”

“He thinks you’re cute. Take the compliment.” James grinned at her as he stuffed his mouth full of eggs.

“Should I start wearing a ring or something?” she grumbled. She made it no secret that she wasn’t interested in, well, anything.

“Bad idea.” Steve picked up the tomato that plopped out of his sandwich and set it back on his plate. “Sometimes that just encourages them.”

Dropping her head on the table, Mickey groaned. “Ugh. Boys.” As James and Steve tried not to crack up, she pointed a finger at each of them. “Shut up. I get the irony. Shut yer faces.”

Sausage, eggs, bacon, steak, and ham gone, James finally started in on the potatoes. They were crispy and salty, just the way he liked them. He probably enjoyed good old potatoes more than he should, but it was hard not to savor anything that he didn’t have to eat through a straw or a tube. It was a safe bet that HYDRA had replaced at least four of his teeth throughout his career as the Soldier, and he planned to make good use of said teeth for the foreseeable future.

Once they’d paid and James had successfully glowered the waiter away, the three of them trooped back to the truck and drove to Mickey’s apartment.

Steve became more uncomfortable the closer they got; Mickey’s directions were taking him directly into the shady side of town. When they rolled up to her complex, he stared at it for a few seconds before asking, “Are you sure this is the right place?”

“No, I live in a penthouse on Capitol Hill,” Mickey said flatly. “Seriously, I’m on VA benefits and going to school on the GI Bill. I can barely afford the rent on this place as it is.”

Steve’s mouth pressed into a line and he made eye contact with James as they got out of the truck. His expression said it all, and James shrugged. ‘Now you know why’, he mouthed.
Third floor, no elevator, rickety stairs. Mickey trudged up the stairs reluctantly, and shoved her key into the door without any finesse. “Hey,” James called, and pushed past Steve to move Mickey aside. “Let me.” If Shelby was in one of her moods, he didn’t want Mickey getting hit in the face with a shoe again. Her roommate had developed a taste for throwing things recently.

Nothing flew towards the door when he pushed it open, but he wasn’t disappointed. Shelby sprawled across the couch, the TV remote in her hand. She shot him a look, and turned up the volume without greeting him.

When Steve walked in, that got a different reaction. She sluggishly muted the TV and sat up, wobbling slightly, and that was when James noticed the small pile of cheap beer cans on the coffee table.

“Whuzzis? Is that actually-”

“Just getting my things. I’ll be out of your hair tonight.” Mickey brushed past them and stalked to her room, carrying the flat-packed boxes they’d bought on the way over.

Shelby’s eyes followed Steve as he walked into Mickey’s room to help her pack. James stayed where he was, though, watching the mess of a girl on the couch. Eventually, her attention drifted back to him, and she popped the tab on another beer.

“Wha’d’you want?” she grumbled. Shelby was indifferent towards him, on a good day. On a bad day, she yelled things at him that would have made Morita blush.

“Oh, nothing. Just want to make sure you keep your drunk ass on the couch, otherwise our pal Steve here is gonna have to call in that favor that his lawyer buddy owes him. Stunt you pulled? Bad fuckin’ idea.”

Shelby sputtered. “You- what-” Her mouth worked wordlessly as her sluggish brain tried to keep up, and James got at least a few minutes of entertainment just watching her try to form a coherent sentence.

Steve walked by with a stack of boxes in his arms, nudged the door open with his foot, and clomped down the stairs. Crossing his arms and leaning against the wall, James counted four beer cans, not including the one in Shelby’s hand. His mouth flattened into a thin line and before he said anything stupid, he turned and stepped into Mickey’s room.

Even though he’d been to her apartment several times, he’d never been in her room. Old-fashioned manners and all that. Now, he saw that she was nearly done packing; all of the furniture was Shelby’s, and Mickey kept all of her books on her tablet. Her clothes were already at James’s apartment, and all that was left were small things here and there.

She put the lid on the last of the banker’s boxes and handed them to James, stacking them in his arms. Swinging the strap of a guitar case over her shoulder, she told him, “That’s everything I want. Everything else, Shelby can dumpster it all if she wants to. Let’s get out of here.” She grabbed an amplifier by the handle on the top, shifting her weight to balance it.

Steve was on his way back up the stairs when James got out the front door. Rather than have one of them back up, James simply handed off the boxes and went back into the apartment.

Mickey tossed her key at Shelby without looking, and it bounced off the arm of the couch before landing on the floor. He took a quick glance around to confirm that he didn’t see anything he knew belonged to Mickey, and mockingly saluted Shelby as he pulled the door shut behind him.
The boxes were already stacked in the back of the truck, and Steve was carefully setting the guitar down on top of them when James stepped off the stairs. Mickey had already climbed into the front passenger seat, so the only option left was in the back; at least it was a truck and not something smaller.

Unloading the boxes went just as quickly; Steve backed the truck up as far as he could without knocking over the Harley, and they just stacked everything in the storage room. “If I haven’t used it in a week, I probably won’t need it soon,” Mickey told them. “And if I do, I know where to find it.”

Now, they sat around the small table in James’s kitchen, eating pizza from the mom-and-pop across the street. James still had the glove on, mostly because he didn’t want to have to disassemble and clean the components in his hand; those tiny plates were a bitch to realign, and the articulation never worked right for the first few days after each time he'd opened things up.

Mickey burped softly as she leaned back and threw an arm over the back of her chair. She picked up her bottle of beer, half finished, and raised it towards the two men. “New beginnings.”

Smiling softly, James raised his bottle. The quiet clinks of glass on glass reminded him of that painful and wonderful first night in the pub with the Invaders, and when he caught Steve’s eye, his smile got bigger. He’d been given another chance, and things were finally starting to come together. “New beginnings.”

Chapter End Notes

Mickey doesn’t have much in the way of a support network after her brother’s death; her parents aren’t in the picture anymore and most of the people she regularly spent time with were her brother’s work buddies when they hit the gym or went to a bar. After the HYDRA Uprising, well… most of those guys are either dead or in the wind.

With regards to the Invaders, they weren’t actually called the Howling Commandos until well after the war. The first canon mention of the name is actually in the Agent Carter TV show, and Happy Sam Sawyer is credited with coming up with the name. During the war they were commonly referred to as the Invaders or simply the 107th Tactical Team.

Also, for those of you worried about her being outed without her permission, she’s not secretive about her transition and voluntarily told both James and Steve. Both boys grew up right smack dab in the middle of the queer capital of New York State, so… yeah. They probably knew several drag queens and at least one trans person.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

**Trigger warning:**
- Suicidal thoughts and attempts mentioned
- Sexual, psychological, physical, and medical abuse mentioned
- Alcoholism in background character, very little detail
- Swearing (James swears a LOT in this chapter)
- Racial and gay slurs that aren’t okay in today’s context but were common language in the 30s and 40s (not representative of author’s views)

This is the chapter where James/Bucky finally unloads on Steve about the stuff he’s kept bottled up. Fair warning. Nothing too graphic, but my beta said this could be tough for some people. If you’re reasonably familiar with the MCU and the Winter Soldier’s backstory, not a lot of this will come as a surprise, but best to be prepared. He also lists off several of his assassinations.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

_He sat quietly on the exam table, legs dangling over the side, toes just brushing the floor. His hands gripped the thin cushion tightly, the only sign of his discomfort. The papery hospital gown did little to prevent the familiar bone cold from settling in once more. Young medical techs in sterile white coats moved around him, voices hushed as they spoke with each other._

_The Soldier pretended he couldn’t hear the Captain and the black man through the door to his room… his cell. He pretended he couldn’t see the fear-tinged sidelong glances from the medical techs. He pretended he couldn’t feel the panicked, twitching throb of his heart in his throat as medical equipment was wheeled around him, his right arm was pricked with needles, and his left arm was scanned and prodded with sensors._

_“Look, man, we have no idea what we’re dealing with right now,” the Captain’s friend said. “He’s been through hell and back, and he was barely conscious when we got him here last week. We know he’s dealt with a lot, probably been tortured, starved, confined in solitary, tasered…”_

_“What else, Sam?”_

_A quiet pause answered the Captain. “He’s got some personal space issues. Attacked a tech for approaching him from behind. Don’t touch the back of his neck, I think that’s where they… held him down. He’s, um… we think there was some sexual abuse involved. He’s got the same triggers I see in some of the girls that got captured.”_

_The Captain choked softly._

_“As much as I know you want to hug him, trust me, don’t. He hasn’t been touched in a way that didn’t involve pain probably since you landed on the roof of that train.”_

_The Soldier closed his eyes, a blinding white blanket of snow and mountains with a rushing train scything through it painting the inside of his eyelids. He felt his breathing and heartbeat come more rapidly, and the answering beep on the monitor only drove him further into his panic._
Agitated voices surrounded him, the door clicked open, and heavy footsteps thumped towards him.

“Hey, hey, Bucky.” The Captain’s voice. It was soft, forgotten but familiar, and hurt his brain when he heard it. “It’s okay. You’re safe now. C’mon. Breathe nice and slow with me, okay?”

The Captain counted quietly and the Soldier tried to follow orders. It took him a few minutes to get any success but gradually the insistent beeping slowed down. He opened his eyes again and saw the Captain crouched over in front of him, hands on knees.

“Did you remember something?” the blond man asked quietly.

The Soldier opened his mouth, feeling and hearing his throat click as he swallowed dryly. He licked his lips and tried to spread what little saliva he had around his mouth. “Train.” His voice was rough, rusty, cracked from disuse. “There was a train.” The sentences were short, halting, hesitant; his head was still so scattered that it was often difficult for him to put more than a few words together at a time. “In the snow, in the mountains. Moving fast.”

“Yeah, Buck.” Large blue eyes stared at him, sad and older than the face that held them. “You fell pretty far. No one thought you made it.”

Before he could stop himself, the words sprang unbidden through his lips. “I’m not entirely sure I did.” His voice sounded different somehow. Smoother, younger, with a slight lilt and drawl. With a jolt, another memory rose up of what he now knew was his own voice, before. Sassy and sly, charming and young. The muscles around his eyes twitched as everything narrowed in, his eyebrows furrowing. “Steve.”

Steve’s hands rose up, reaching for the Soldier’s shoulders, but Sam cleared his throat before the hug happened. Face crumpling, Steve dropped to his knees and pressed his hand to his eyes as tears started to fall. “You’re here, Buck. You’re really here.”

The Soldier didn’t know what to say. He looked at Sam and saw a mixture of caution, wariness, and empathy.

“Where am I?”

Sam answered while Steve accepted a tissue from an orderly. “HYDRA took out most of SHIELD, but there’s still a lot of us left. You’re in a high-security private medical facility.” He must have noticed the Soldier’s shoulders tighten. “Trust me, if HYDRA gets in here, they’re gonna have two regiments and all of the Avengers to go through. This place is locked down tighter than Fort Knox.”

Quickly processing another short flash of memory, the Soldier felt his mouth twitch into an unfamiliar shape. Was that what they called a smirk? “Been there. Security’s shit.” Sam snorted and stifled a laugh as the two-man military security detail at the door gave each other indignant looks.

Having finally emptied his sinuses, Steve caught the Soldier’s eye and pointed to the table. “Is it ok if I sit next to you?” He nodded, and Steve slowly lowered himself down, leaving a healthy distance between them. “How’re you feeling?”

His handlers had never asked him that. Well, they had, but only to gauge injuries and the necessary medical attention. Here, now, things were very different, but he was starting to get used to different. He didn’t remember what it was like to be a human being, but maybe this was it.

“Cold,” he croaked, his voice dropping back into the gravelly tones from before. “Tired, hungry. Arms are beat to shit. Had another surgery yesterday, right shoulder’s better now.”
deep breath while his thoughts reorganized themselves again. His brain was so scrambled that it was hard to stay coherent and cogent for longer than a few minutes at a time. “I washed my hair this morning. I think it was this morning.” The sentences were getting longer, he noticed with an anxious thrill. “What time, what day is it?”

A sputtering noise to his left made him raise his head – a little too quickly. The sore muscles in his neck complained and he winced. One of the white coats with big glasses on top was staring at him, pen hovering above a tablet. The Soldier knew he should remember the man’s name – he was important – but couldn’t. Steve cleared his throat, and the doctor visibly shook himself.

“That’s the most words you’ve said yet,” the doctor explained. “You’re making good progress. Oh, and it’s the third of May, 2014. Roughly half past one in the afternoon.”

After a moment, the Soldier heard a voice echo in his head, a matronly woman’s voice chiding him on his manners. “Thank you,” he said hesitantly. It must have been the right thing to say, because the doctor smiled broadly and nodded, then walked away tapping quickly on his tablet.

He heard two huffs as Steve inhaled and exhaled deeply. “I’ll ask about getting you some real clothes, something better than those… scrubs. Gonna check to make sure they’re feeding you enough; you’ll need a lot more than normal since you’ve had the serum.”

“Hard to eat.”

Steve blinked, confused, until Sam explained, “They gave him most of his calories and nutrients through an IV or a straw. He’s been having trouble with solid food.”

Cursing quietly, Steve balled his hands into fists on his thighs and closed his eyes.

“Soup’s good.” The Soldier wanted to be helpful. These people were being nice to him. They told him where they were going to touch him, where the needles would go. Always waited for him to nod. Tried hard not to surprise him. Their hands were gentle and warm. He wanted to be good for them, wanted them to stay nice.

A spark appeared in Steve’s eyes, and he stood up with a grin. “I’ve got just the thing,” he said, and walked quickly out of the room.

An hour later, Steve came back with a large Thermos. He pulled a bowl and spoon out of a small bag on his arm, handed them to the Soldier, uncapped the Thermos, and poured a thick, creamy, pinkish-red liquid into the bowl. After a moment’s hesitation, the Soldier scooped up a spoonful and slowly sipped it. The rich, tangy flavor startled him, but it was pleasant, balanced with some sort of sweetness.

“Tomato and bell pepper soup with heavy cream mixed in,” Steve murmured.

With each spoonful, the mess in the Soldier’s head shifted to allow him glimpses into the memories previously locked away. He ate the whole bowl without a word, and Steve refilled it.

Before starting in on the second bowl, the Soldier studied the slightly-bumpy surface and how the fluorescent lights reflected off of it. “We couldn’t ever afford this,” he muttered slowly. “The cream was too expensive unless Mr. Bailey had some day-old that he couldn’t sell.”

A watery smile looked back at him over the bowl of soup. “And it took a long time to make it from scratch.”

The world seemed to slow as images flickered behind his eyes like an old movie reel. “We used to
grow our own vegetables. There was a roof garden. We had tomatoes, peppers, carrots. Celery. Lettuce, one year."

“You did the growing. I killed every plant I touched.”

A small, spiny little green ball popped up in his mind unexpectedly. “Except that stupid cactus.”

Steve guffawed. “You remember that?!”

The Soldier’s face slowly twitched into what he was hoping resembled a smile and not a grimace. “I’m starting to.”

***

Steve and James stood on the small balcony off of the living room, each holding a glass tumbler generously full of the old bourbon that Dum Dum had favored so many years ago. While neither of them would feel the slightest buzz from the alcohol, the buzz from the nostalgia was almost as effective.

Mickey had gone to bed half an hour before, mumbling about a deep dish pizza coma. Unpacking could wait til tomorrow. So as not to bother her with their insomnia, the two men had gone outside to enjoy the last few warm breezes before the weather turned.

James swirled the bourbon around, watching the wan yellow light from the parking lot lamps sparkle through the liquid and refract onto the silicone glove on his left hand. “You looked up the rest of the Invaders yet?”

“Yeah. SHIELD’s got files on all of ‘em. There were a few that joined up after we… left. Nobody we knew, though.”

“How many of ‘em are still around?”

“Dum Dum, Gabe, and Frenchie, as far as I know. Monty’s in Birmingham, he’s at the family plot. Morita’s got a spot in Arlington, when you’re ready for that.” Steve took a sip of his drink. “I went to visit Dum Dum and Gabe last month. Gabe’s got dementia and he’s more gray than brown now, but Dum Dum’s still going. Still drinks like a fish and smokes like a chimney, too. Frenchie, I think he retired and started a vineyard somewhere in California to get away from Europe; I haven’t been able to track him down. He’s supposed to have a grandson in the Army.”

“How’s Peggy?”

“She’s got good days and bad days. She asked about you, you know. Wants to know when you’re gonna come visit?”

James nearly choked on his drink. “You told her I’m alive?”

“No, God no. Not without asking you first. She just… she thought that since I survived, maybe…” And there it was again, that hunch in his shoulders, the line between his eyebrows, and James could feel the guilt in Steve. If he’d survived the ice, then he could have survived jumping after Bucky…

“Steve. Fucking hell, we’ve been over this. It’s not your damn fault.”

“I could have reached farther.”

“And you would’ve fallen, too. They would’a gotten both of us.”
“And then you came back-”

“Never left, just got brainjacked for a while.”

“I saw you again and it was like losing you a second time. Then a third. All over again. Only this time I fell.”

“Pulled you out, didn’t I?” And mirror-signal your team, he silently added. And pumped the water out of your lungs. And called the ambulance. And watched and waited until you were safely taken away. And I didn’t even know why when I did it.

“Bucky… before the war, neither of us thought I’d live to hit thirty. We’d be lucky if I made it to twenty-five. Oh, don’t look at me like that, we both know it’s true. But then suddenly, I had a future and I didn’t get sick, and I found you again… My worst nightmare came true, you died first. I outlived you. The world didn’t have my best friend in it any more. And then I was ready to die for you.”

Something in James snapped, and he set the tumbler down on the small patio table with a solid thunk before it went flying. “And you nearly fucking did, Steve!” He tried hard to keep his voice low, but couldn’t mask the anger completely. “I shot you! I beat your face seven ways to Sunday! I was going to kill you the first time until Sam dropped out of nowhere and kicked me. You were betting your whole damn life on the fact that I’d remember some sentimental shit I said to you nearly a century ago!

“How in the fuckin’ hell did you think that was a good plan? You wore your old goddamn uniform, the one without all the Kevlar, in case you hadn’t noticed! What if it hadn’t worked? What if I hadn’t remembered? What if I’d killed you instead? Are you goddamn suicidal or something?”

“I was.” The pain in Steve’s eyes only made James more furious.

“Well then tell someone about it! That’s why Sam’s here, you knucklehead, he’s a therapist. You’ve got friends now, it ain’t just you ’n’ me against the world any more. You wanna go eat your gun, you fucking tell someone first so we can help you. It’s what friends are for, moron.” The words came tumbling out of him, faster than he could keep up with. His voice had dropped to a low whisper, hissing out.

“You wanna know about suicidal? You want your little pity party? You wanna know what it was like for me? I fought them for months, day after day, hour after goddamn hour. They cut me open and pulled me apart again and again while I was awake and breathing. They yanked out my fingernails, ripped off my scalp like some fuckin’ redskin, and when they killed me? When I died? They brought me the fuck back so they could do it again.” He spat out the words through gritted teeth, and the look on Steve’s face reminded James with a start that he’d never talked about this before with his friend.

The words kept coming though, and at this point there wasn’t anything he could do to stop them. “They hosed me down, they fried my brain, they did everything they goddamn could to break me, but I kept telling myself, ‘Steve’s gonna come for me. Just like Kresichberg. He’s gonna storm in here and break me out. Just stick to the training, they can’t break you.’

“You never did. Months turned into a year and a half, and then HYDRA just got bored of their three-legged pet American. They threw me in a cell and slid food through a tiny hole for four months. I counted. I promised myself that you were busy moppin’ the countryside with krauts, you had more important things to do. But you’d come back for me, when the war was over. You’d find me and we’d go home.”
His hands were wrapped tightly around the railing, and he made a conscious effort to loosen his grip before he broke something. “And then Zola came in with newspaper after newspaper, newsreels of the memorial parades. He told me you were dead, had been dead for nearly two years. You were never coming. You’d put the Red Skull’s plane down somewhere in the ocean, and they’d never find you. You crashed a fucking plane no more than two months after I fell.”

“I thought I’d lost you,” Steve whispered. “I wanted that to mean something.”

“Mean something?” James choked out. “You lost me? You drop into the water, turn into a fucking rocket pop, bing badda boom, you’re awake again in the future. You know what, Steve? You know fuckin’ what? You were the only thing keeping me going while Zola had me! You were the one thing I could count on! You were the only reason I didn’t chew my own wrists out! And then you crashed that stupid fucking plane, and I died that day! That’s the day Bucky Barnes died and I became the Winter Soldier! Because I lost YOU!”

He hadn’t realized he’d started shouting, or that his fists had wrapped themselves in Steve’s shirt. He panted heavily, eyes stinging, face twitching as it couldn’t decide whether to be angry or sad.

“I lost you,” he repeated, quieter, his voice wet and cracked. “For sixty-eight years, I had to live with knowing you were dead.” His vision blurred and hot tears leaked out even though he screwed his eyes shut. “You never came back. I hit the end of the line, and then I had to keep going without you.” James tried to take a steady breath and failed so spectacularly that it all came spilling out at once. Wet, heavy tears and gasping sobs, shoulders shaking, he hunched over as he forgot how to stand.

His skin felt electrified as large, heavy arms dropped around his shoulders and pulled him in close. He tried to twitch away but Steve was unyielding. Eventually, the fire in his skin died down and he willed himself to relax as much as he could with his whole body shaking.

Steve rested against the thick column on the corner of the balcony, letting James lean against him. He pulled the tie out of James’s hair and gently flattened the mass of brown hair down with one hand as he put his cheek on the top of his friend’s head. James was so much bigger than they’d been in Brooklyn – they both were – but now Steve was the taller one, if only by an inch. He pulled James in tighter, one hand palming large circles over his friend’s back as mismatched shoulders racked with ragged sobs.

Eventually, James’s breathing evened, and his hands relaxed their death grip on Steve’s shirt. He let himself enjoy the hug before his anxiety overrode the minor endorphin rush; he could count on one hand the number of not-painful experiences he’d had touching other people since the helicarrier crash.

Wiping his face sloppily with his right hand, James rested his forehead against Steve’s collarbone. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“...the fuck?” Steve pushed him out by his shoulders and held him at arm’s length. “What in the fuck do you have to be sorry about?”

“Ruin your shirt, for starters.” He sniffed wetly and wiped his nose on the sleeve his own shirt. Steve glanced down at the large patch of tears and snot, and chuckled.

“I’ve washed worse things out of my clothes, trust me.” Looking back up, he gave James an empathetic smile. “If anything, I should apologize for being a reckless shit and not taking door number three. Howard could have figured something out, I dunno.”
“Well, yeah. Man was a goddamn genius, after all. He’s the only reason you weren’t still using that stupid prop shield – oh piss off, I could dent it with my thumbs.” His nose was plugged up now and he sounded badly congested. Great. “I don’t think either of us were supposed to survive the war, but here we are.”

“How much did you hear?” James asked.

“None until you started shouting.” She gave them both a sleepy look, picked up James’s drink, and waved them inside. “Come inside, it’s getting cold out there.” After setting the tumbler down on the small end table, she dragged the coffee table to the side and grabbed the couch cushions before James shook himself and walked over to help her tug the sofa bed open.

Mickey pushed him down by the shoulders so he was sitting on the end of the sofa bed, and walked into the bathroom to return with one of his pill bottles. He caught it as she tossed it to him, and read the label to see that it was one of the as-needed anti-anxiety prescriptions that sometimes helped him sleep. “Don’t forget to take your other ones tonight, too,” she reminded him.

“Doc says it’s fine. Can’t get drunk off this anyway.” Picking up his drink, James downed the specified three pills and the rest of his bourbon, and gave the pill bottle back to Mickey. “Thanks, kid. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for being human,” she told him with a stern look.

A small surprised noise made James look up, and he saw Steve looking at his phone to check the time. “Shit, I missed late check-in.” He glanced up to see James looking at him flatly. “What?”

“Y’know, Sam or I could have put you up for the night. Get your stuff from the truck, you’re crashing here and then we’ll head up to New York for the briefing tomorrow.”

“So…”

“Yes, I’ll do it.” James stood up and walked into the bathroom to rummage through the medicine cabinet and start getting ready for bed. “Get your bag.”

A quick shower helped James feel less gross again, and being able to walk around in his apartment without his arm covered was decidedly relaxing. Mickey didn’t hide it when she looked at his arm, but she also made a point not to stare at it either.

They fist-bumped, his way of hugging for now, and she swung the bedroom door closed behind her until it was just barely still open. Steve had already changed into a loose pair of flannel pants and an old t-shirt, and was perched awkwardly on the sofa bed when James made his way into the living
room and picked up the folded blankets from the corner.

“So… we’re sharing this?”

“Only had the one single mattress in Brooklyn and that tiny-ass cot in the war, this is easily twice the size.”

“So are we, pal.”

James shot his friend a tired look, spread the blankets out on the bed, and stretched himself out on the side opposite Steve. “Just don’t spork me and we’re fine.”

“What’s…”

Wait for it.

“Oh.” Steve blushed. “Yeah. Got it.” He leaned sideways, slid his feet under the blankets, and rolled so he was on his back next to James. “G’night, Buck.”

“Night.” Shifting so he was laying on his side, his back to Steve, James closed his eyes and took deep, long breaths like Doc had told him, forcing his body to relax so he could sleep. He’d been more tired than he thought, and the calming drugs helped drag him under fairly quickly.

***

James woke with a start, his body still locked in place from sleep paralysis while his limbs followed him into wakefulness. After a minute, he shifted onto his stomach, propping himself up on his elbows, and rubbed his hands over his face. A thin layer of sweat covered his forehead and his heart was racing; he couldn’t remember what he’d dreamed, but he knew he’d just had another nightmare.

Most of the time, now, he just woke up terrified, panting, and sweating, and waited for his mind to calm back down. If he could remember the dream, he wrote it down in the small notebook he kept at his bedside. With the exception of therapy sessions or new entries, the notebooks sat locked in a small safe under his bed, and the notebook in his nightstand was secured to the underside of the drawer.

At first, the sketches had been rough and sloppy, but now he was able to reproduce faces he’d only seen once or twice in near-perfect detail. Steve would have been proud, if James ever let him see the notebooks. With the exception of therapy sessions or new entries, the notebooks sat locked in a small safe under his bed, and the notebook in his nightstand was secured to the underside of the drawer.

A weight on the small of his back shifted, and he forced himself not to jump. He glanced to his right and saw Steve sprawled out on his stomach, arm draped over James. He couldn’t help but smile a little; as two broke boys in Brooklyn, they’d shared a cramped twin bed more often than not, but now Steve seemed to take a unique pleasure in taking up as much of the bed as he could, a hand or foot in every corner.

He extracted himself from under Steve’s arm, taking care not to wake his friend, and sat up on the edge of the bed. Picking up his phone and one of the spare blankets, he wrapped himself snugly and flopped into the armchair, clumsily punching the lever to recline it.

As he swiped numbered blocks around in 2048, his tired brain trying to remember which ones combined together, his eyes grew heavy again and after half an hour he could barely keep them
open. He locked his phone, set it on the floor next to him, wiggled deeper into the chair, and fell back asleep.

***

This time, the smell of bacon and French toast gradually pulled him from sleep. He blinked a few times, disoriented, and realized that at some point he’d made his way back to the sofa bed. That was the only explanation for the large, fluffy mop of blond hair taking up most of his field of view.

Steve was on his side, snuggled up tight against James’s chest. James had his metal arm tucked up under Steve’s shoulder – couldn’t lose circulation in something that didn’t have any – and his flesh arm curled around Steve’s ribs. He closed his eyes and sighed, rolling onto his back.

“You two are disgustingly adorable. Like, I’m gonna get diabetes from how sweet that is.” Mickey’s voice drifted from the kitchen where she was, apparently, cooking breakfast. “And you are totally the big spoon, that’s so cute.”

James groaned, hiding his face, as Steve flopped forward onto his stomach, burying his head in his arms. “Fuck, I was gonna run this morning,” the blond mumbled through the pillow. “What time is it?”

“Just after eight. Didn’t want to wake you two up when I got up.” Mickey was an early riser, usually awake sometime around six. James definitely wasn’t.

“Steve.”

“What.”

“Can I have my arm back?”

“No.” Steve wrapped himself around James’s arm and held on tight.

“You’re a fairy with a cripple fetish. I’ve dicked broads less cuddly than you.” Mickey’s answering snort was anything but elegant.

“Fine, asshole,” Steve muttered as he lifted himself up enough for James to pull his arm away. “You’re the one that rolled over and started spooning.”

James dimly remembered waking up to see Steve shaking violently in his sleep, and blearily pulling his friend towards him out of habit. The Invaders had teased them both incessantly during the war after they’d found out Steve swung both ways, and it got worse after Monty had walked in on them spooning to stay warm in the middle of the harsh German winter just like they had on that small bed in Brooklyn. No one had believed that there wasn’t any sex involved, and eventually the two of them had given up trying to explain it. At least the Invaders hadn’t said a word to anyone else, and the worst they got was hoots and cat-calls.

“I swear to god, I am going to die from adorable,” Mickey drawled, setting down a cookie sheet covered in a small army’s worth of French toast on the table. “Now get your asses up and eat, I didn’t make all this for nothing.”

As soon as James sat heavily in his usual chair, a mug of coffee slid into view, strong and black with two scoops of sugar, just how he liked it, morning pills collected in a small pile on his napkin. He gave Mickey a half-hearted salute and sighed as the bitter warmth spread through his head. Steve stumbled up to fridge and pulled out the jug of OJ that James had started keeping there for him.
“When do you two leave for New York?”

“Briefing’s at three, we should probably head out around ten to make sure we get there in time.”


“Well, don’t sound so excited, Buck.” Steve grinned as he sat down and pulled a few pieces of toast onto his plate. His hair stuck out in every direction, and his face was still slightly puffy.

Pointing a piece of bacon at Steve, he grumbled, “The last time we were on a road trip, we were in the back of a deuce-and-a-half getting our asses beaten black ‘n’ blue by rocks in the road. I swear, my own mama never whupped me that hard. Fifteen hours in that thing, Steve. Fifteen hours of not being able to feel my ass, my legs, or even my balls, it was so fucking cold. And that didn’t stop you from goddamn farting every fifteen seconds.” He punctuated the last few words by stabbing the bacon further at him.

“Hey, beans an’ SPAM, remember? ‘s all we got sometimes, outside of our C-rations.”

“Farting. You farted in my face. Captain Fucking America farted in my fucking face.”

“Loving the imagery. Now stuff it and eat.” Mickey pulled another cookie sheet out of the oven, and dropped a trivet on the table before setting it down. “Careful, this one’s pretty hot.” James had initially been skeptical when he’d seen her put bacon in the oven, but the results couldn’t be argued with. She tossed the towel she’d used to protect her hands onto the island and slid a big bowl of fruit towards James. Strawberries, blueberries, grapes, and green melon.

“Did we go grocery shopping and I lost time again?” They hadn’t had fresh fruit for a few days, but he was cautious with his memory ever since he’d had a few seizures where he’d simply zoned out and his brain had stopped recording for a few minutes.

“No, you’re good, I would have told you. I ran out this morning. You two hadn’t even moved by the time I got back.”

“Oh god,” James groaned. “You took a picture, didn’t you?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t post it anywhere. I’m not stupid,” she said indignantly around a mouthful of toast. “You’re just a cinnamon roll when you forget you’re supposed to be scary.”

“I’m a… what?” James still wasn’t used to all of the new slang. “Y’know what, nevermind. Whatever.” He took a bite of toast and made a thumbs-up at Mickey; she definitely knew how to cook. “When’s your class today?”

“Starts at ten-thirty, then I got another one at three. Physics and Calculus. Yay.”

“You’re studying engineering, right?” Steve asked.

“Yeah, mechanical, maybe bioengineering. Figured I’d try to do something worthwhile with the GI Bill while I still got it, y’know? See if I can transfer to a state school or something, get a decent job.”

“I’ll talk to Tony for you; maybe he can line up an internship. Wait, better idea, I’ll ask Pepper. She can definitely do something for you.” Steve smothered his latest heap of toast with syrup. Somehow he always managed to sop up every sticky drop of liquid sugar, and James had never been able to explain it.
“Is this Pepper I keep hearing about Pepper Potts? She sounds awesome.”

James smiled warmly. “She is.” Pepper had been one of the first ones to warm up to him during his short stay at the Tower, sullen and terse as he was. She’d taught him how to take care of his hair better, picked out a good shaver for him, and introduced him to new foods by getting takeout when he was still skittish in public. Pepper had shown eternal patience when she didn’t question why he did or didn’t like something, but merely tried her best to identify a pattern in his tastes. Stark was a very lucky man.

Looking up, he saw Mickey discretely pinch herself. “What was that for?”

She started, a flicker of guilt passed over her face, and then she sighed. “Well, yesterday I found out that one of my closest friends is the reason I joined the damn military in the first place, and Captain America himself helped me move and is now sitting across the table from me eating a breakfast that I cooked. I’m finally away from Shelby, and… it just feels a bit too good to be true. Feels like a dream. Kind of fangirling a bit,” she admitted.

“Well, we’re probably going to be in New York for the night, so take some time to unpack a bit and make yourself feel at home. Feel free to move anything around, just toss my stuff on the sofa if it gets in your way, ok?”

“Isn’t that what I’ve been doing the whole past week?” she teased.

“Now you’ve got permission, kiddo.”

Grinning at him around a mouthful of food, Mickey stood up from the table and cleared her dishes. “Gonna get ready for school. Twenty-second warning for the bathroom.”

“Want a lift? We can drop you off on our way north.” Steve, always the gentleman.

“Take the bike,” James said as he pointed to where he’d left the keys. “Just don’t crash it or get pulled over. I’m not bailing you out. And wear your brain bucket this time.” He ignored Steve’s startled look and made quick work of the remainder of the fruit bowl.

“Roger that, Sarge.” She disappeared into the bathroom and closed the door, the sound of the shower starting a second later.

“You let her ride the Harley?” By the tone of his voice, Steve wasn’t upset, just surprised.

“Well, yeah.” James pointed at the last few pieces of bacon and caught Steve’s eye, grabbing the deliciously crispy slices when Steve shook his head. “She’s got a good handle on it, and she’s stronger than she looks. Her brother taught her to ride dirt bikes as a kid, and she says it isn’t too different.”

“Seems like he was a cool guy. I kinda wish I could’ve met him.”

James laughed softly. “Can you imagine that, though? ‘Hey, bro, come meet my two new friends. They’re both ancient assholes that saw Noah land the Ark, they kind of broke DC twice, and one of them has a metal fucking arm, but I promise they’re nice.’ Yeah, that’d go over well. Besides, she said he was on one of the STRIKE teams so he’d probably end up just standing there glaring at us menacingly the whole time.”

He smiled more when he heard Steve’s quiet chuckle. “Yeah, we’re definitely a sight to behold, aren’t we, Buck?”
The bathroom door opened and Mickey walked back out, hair slick and wet. She detoured into the bedroom and emerged tugging a heavy motorcycle jacket over her shoulders before she swung her backpack on. James had given the jacket to her when she’d started riding with him; he wouldn’t let anyone on the bike without proper gear. While it looked a little big on her, it definitely worked with the cute-but-badass look she pulled off so well. She had a helmet tucked under her arm, another gift from James, and grabbed the bike’s keys from the wood bowl on the kitchen island.

“Well… no. Or at least, I don’t think I can. I’m not even sure if we can die of old age, either.” He spun his mug around on the table, staring at it moodily as memories played back in his head. “They used to test stuff on me. Vaccines and shit, I dunno. Used to stab me full of needles and see what happened. I’d get sick, but only if they injected me with it, and it never killed me. I think they tried to give me cancer at one point.”

“I think I had something to do with the polio vaccine. And all that MK Ultra bullshit, that was real too; I was their main lab rat. I can’t really remember much about it though. That was a while after I… after I hit the bottom.”

Steve made a choking noise. “God, Buck… Jesus. I’m… I’m so sorry.”

“Wait, HYDRA cured polio? They were behind that?”

“Not everything they did was purely evil, Steve.” James sifted through his swiss cheese memory, trying to come up with a few examples. “The chair, that was actually originally for fixing up loonies. It was a… some sort of hypnosis device.” He gestured to the upper left side of his face. “They used the shocks to drop people into a super suggestible trance sort of thing. It worked in all the clinical trials, but then they started using it as torture by cranking it up a bunch. Most of the prisoners just died in the chair, but a few of them just kinda… went zombie. Like those… Screamers. The things we saw in the mansion with the Invaders, back when they had Monty and Dum Dum.”

He shuddered, remembering the writhing, inhuman things that had come off the chair in the early days. He was only one of thousands of test patients, and his captors had taken a unique delight in chaining him up to watch as other prisoners were tortured to death. “The ones it did that to, they’d shoot them five, six, seven times, and the fuckers would still be moving. They made so many changes, perfected it over the course of a few years. Sent the schematics to asylums, and it actually helped people when it was used properly. Prevented a lot of lobotomies.

“But me, I was different. It didn’t just hypnotize me, it created this whole… second personality…”
thing? No, that’s not right.” James huffed out a breath, blowing his cheeks out. “Like, I could still see and hear and feel everything, but I was a goddamn marionette, someone else was pulling the strings and moving me around. Like I was trapped in my own body. They’d shock me to make that happen. Used it to prep me for missions, punish me if things went wrong, scramble my brain long enough to dump me back in my cell.”

“When did they start putting you in cryo?” Steve was trying hard not to sound hungry for information, and James realized that he’d never actually talked about a lot of his experiences with anyone other than Doc. The last word Steve had said stuck in his brain, and he turned it over mentally, trying to – right. Cryo. Cryofreeze. That. He’d heard that term before.

“I was never put on ice, Steve. Cryo was just a code word.”

There was a long pause, then a quiet, “Wait, what?”

James drew in a deep breath and tapped out a rhythm on the table with his left hand, trying to focus on the soft clicks to ground himself. “The picture in my file, that’s not a cryo tank. That’s a sensory deprivation chamber. Part of the torture. They pumped me full of psychoactives and dumped me in there whenever I acted out. Only time I actually went on ice is when I put a bullet in my heart in ’86. They had to slow down the tissue death while my body repaired itself once I came back.”

“So you’ve…”

“Been awake this whole time? Yeah, more or less.” His voice got quiet and he stared into his empty mug, avoiding looking at Steve’s horrified expression. “When they noticed I wasn’t aging normally, they had to come up with a way to explain it to the peons. Code Cryofreeze. Time to zap my brain again, I was acting too much like a human being.”

“That’s what you meant by sixty-eight years.”

“Yeah, you dense knucklehead. I may not have been in control, but I remember a lot of it now.” The words came out with a lot more venom than he’d intended. Setting the mug down, James pressed his face into his hands. “Sorry, pal.”

Steve didn’t answer, just made another strange choking noise, and James glanced up to see him crying.

“When I found out you’d died crashing the plane, I stopped fighting the strings. Just hung there, limp puppet and all, let them control me. And after a few years, I forgot how to be me. Wasn’t even sure who me was until the beginning of May anyway.” Steve was still crying, dammit. “Stevie. Look at me. What I’m trying to say is – godfuckingdamnit stop crying or I’m gonna start – what I’m trying to say is, I lost you, I lost everything. You found me again, and I yanked my strings back. I’m not a puppet any more. I’m me now, okay? Whoever that is. I’m still figuring it out.”

The words kept tumbling out and Steve kept staring at him with that soft, sad expression. “I’m not Bucky Barnes. I’m not the Winter Soldier. I’m something in-between now. Still finding which side of in-between that is, though, and it kinda changes day to day. I’ve had a lot of good days recently – I have, really – but my bad days are still really bad, okay?” Steve opened his mouth and James held up a hand. “Not done. Please, I’ve been trying to get myself to say this shit to you since I checked out of the hospital, okay?

“It really rubs me the wrong way when people call me Bucky now. Hopefully won’t forever, but I’m not him any more, at least right now. I let it slide with you because I don’t mind so much, I know how much my old name means to you. And you’ve been doing really good, asking questions,
letting me show you who I am now. I just… I really wanna say I appreciate it, Stevie.

“I’ve been through a bunch of really bad shit, and it still hangs over me like this fuckin’ storm cloud, every single stupid day. The reason I’m going to the briefing with you? ‘S not ‘cause I wanna be active duty again, because I sure as fuckin’ hell don’t. I’m doin’ it ‘cause if it means I get to help my friends come home safe, then that’s worth it to me.” James paused, mouth starting to go dry, and took in a deep breath that surprised him with how unsteady it was. “I owe all o’ you everything. You, Sam, Natalia, Barton, Stark, Banner, everyone. And that pisses me off, you know how much I don’t like owin’ folks for shit.”

His drawl got thicker the longer he spoke, and he took some small comfort in that; it meant he was less likely to slip into Russian or German again.

“I dunno if I’ll ever wanna be active duty again. I dunno if I’ll ever wanna hold a gun again. I killed so many people, Steve, and most of them probably didn’t deserve it for any reason than they pissed off the wrong mook.” Another deep breath. “I dunno if the team will even want me around, when we finally finish lining up my record. There’s some stuff in there, it’s… pretty bad.”

“Buck…”

Quietly, robotically, he began to list the names. “1954, I staged a Jeep crash and killed three GIs, that was my first field test. Then in 1955, I bombed the UN. ‘55 also had General James Keller and Curtis Chillingsworth. 1956, Ambassador Dalton Graines and Jaques Dupuy. Hit the Algerian Peace Conference Convoy with an RPG. 1957, Colonel Jeffenson Hart. 1960, Esther John. 1962, Moloud Feraoun and Mohamed Boudiaf. 1963, President Kennedy. Oswald was a HYDRA operative. I was sent to watch him, make sure he took the shot. I did it when Oswald chickened out – he intentionally missed and made it nonlethal – and then I made sure he took the fall for it.” Steve flinched. The thin line of his lips grew thinner with each new name.

“1965, Medhi Ben Barka. 1966, Peter and Milla Hitzig, but they got away, I think I let them get away, I can’t remember much more than a creepy pale guy and a grumpy black-haired SHIELD agent. Got my brain fried back to a clean slate after that one. They didn’t use me again until 1973, with Senator Harry Baxter, and then I vanished and went on the fritz for a few weeks after it, more reconditioning. ‘74, Rodger Davies. The year after that, Mir Akbar Khyber. 1979, Pierre Goldman and Cesare Terranova. 1982, Eduardo Frei Montalvo. 1983, Edgar Graham, and Olof Palme in ‘86. Victor Ludenko and Rina Szynski were a sanctioned hit on rogue Red Room operatives towards the end of ’86 as well. 1989, Danny Huwé. 1990, Joseph Doucé and Ian Gow.” He took a deep breath. “1991… In ’91…” The words caught in his throat.

Oddly enough, Steve responded with a hushed, “I know about the Starks, Buck. Zola told me when we found… what was left of him at Camp Lehigh.”

“Then you can understand why I don’t necessarily want the rest of the team knowing.”

“You still don’t know what happened. You told me there were some pieces missing, and things don’t add up quite right from what you do remember.” Steve’s eyes narrowed and his head tilted. “You really haven’t watched the HYDRA footage, have you?”

“Why in the fuck would I do that to myself?” He’d gone back and forth several times, but had eventually decided against it.

“Because those gaps, those missing pieces-”

“They probably went poof for an important reason, Steve.” His brain was fairly consistent in how it
permanently erased specific traumas from the record. Judging by what he and Doc had figured out about some of the other blank spots, he really didn’t want to delve into the missing pieces from December of ’91.

“Okay.”

James’s head shot up and he blinked at Steve. He’d expected his friend to fight him longer on this.

“What? You were just saying how you’re a different person now. I gotta respect that. Or at least, I’m trying to.” Steve balled his hands up in the front of his shirt and clumsily wiped his face with it. “I won’t push you on this. Whenever you want to talk, please, I’ll listen, even if it hurts. I want to know about it, because if I know about what happened, I feel like I know who you are now better. God, I’m not saying this right. Did that make sense?”

“I…” This wasn’t the reaction he’d expected, not entirely. “Yeah, well enough. Thanks.”

Nodding into his shirt, Steve slumped his shoulders forward. “I realized yesterday when I was getting ready to drive down here that even though we’re best friends, we don’t really know all that much about each other… not any more, anyway. So… can we fix that? Please?”

A slow, warm smile spread across James’s face. “Well, we’ve got one hell of a car ride coming up.”

Chapter End Notes

With Steve’s health issues, it’s unlikely he’d survive past 25, let alone 30. I have the feeling that neither of them expected Steve to outlive Bucky.

The mansion mission James mentions, when Dum Dum and Monty got taken, is one of the main plot lines of the Captain America: Super Soldier video game. Not widely considered canon, but almost all of the actors from the movie reprised their roles for the video game. I highly recommend you watch through all the cutscenes. Link to video It’s got such great one-liners as, “Top floor: ladie’s hosiery and anti-aircraft guns.”

Also, oven bacon. You’ll thank me later.

Edit: I just looked back at the official MCU timeline and realized that whoops, apparently the events of Captain America: Winter Soldier take place in January, not April. Ooooooops. Oh well. Um, they do now.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Posting early! Will be out of town tomorrow, so enjoy the early update :)

Because I'm silly and forgot to mention this before, I'm updating this every Saturday.

**Trigger warnings:**
- Torture mentioned, little to no detail
- Prosthetic arm discussed
- Winter Soldier fighting his brainwashing
- James and Natasha talk about some painful stuff from their past (Previous WinterWidow relationship)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_The Soldier wandered aimlessly through the streets of a city he didn’t know the name of. It wasn’t important to the mission to know where he was. He’d left his target floating in the opulent swimming pool behind a disgustingly large mansion, death by asphyxiation. Crude but untraceable without fingerprints. The child had seen him, but no one believed children when they described giant black monsters with metal arms._

_His feet carried him tirelessly over the pavement. He discretely shouldered his way through the crowd, lifting a coffee here, a wallet there, car keys from someone who’d just left a parking meter. The gas tank was nearly empty. Shit._

_He got sixteen miles before the engine coughed and shuddered, stalling out as he let it coast to the curb. He left the keys on the seat with a $10 from the stolen wallet and started walking again._

_Somehow, he ended up in front of a small museum. Downing the last of the lukewarm coffee, he tossed the cup into the trash bin and trotted up the steps. Attaching himself to a gaggle of children and posturing like a chaperone was far too easy and he slipped in past security without any fuss. The smile he forced across his face felt foreign, even painful, as he moved his hands as if to shoo the children into the museum._

_After a moment, he realized what had drawn him there. The same set of faces were plastered all over the buses he’d been glaring at for the past week. A bowler hat, a strange helmet with built-in goggles, a beret worn at a rakish angle. Fluffy brown hair, well past being out of regs, and four days’ salt-and-pepper scruff under a mop of jet-black hair and almond eyes. Coffee-brown skin with a pouty mouth that somehow he knew sang with a golden tenor voice._

_The faces were merely one part of a larger exhibition on the Second World War. Funny, he didn’t remember it being that long ago, but his memory wasn’t what it used to be. He was lucky if he remembered anything before the beginning of his mission. His handlers told him he’d had an accident but his skills were still intact, so they’d pleaded his commanding officers to let him keep serving the way he did better than anyone. Comrade Karpov always knew best._

_Strolling through the exhibition, the Soldier let his eyes flicker around the crowd, looking more at the living faces than the dead ones. He kept his left hand firmly in the pocket of his hoodie; gloves or
not, his handlers had drilled into him that his left arm must never be seen. He kept it unnaturally still and pretended it was like any other normal prosthetic.

His right hand unconsciously raked through his floppy brown hair, pushing it back from his forehead. It was getting long enough now that it hung to his shoulders. Maybe his handlers would cut it for him if he said it got in his eyes when he was peering through his rifle scope. He liked how the hair looked in the picture of the young man with the blue wool coat; it was short, practical, and visually pleasing, an unfamiliar but welcome sensation.

He jumped as a small force of nature barreled straight into his legs. The girl barely reached his waist, and her right hand was firmly clenched around the arm of an oddly familiar teddy bear with a navy blue, button-laden jacket and rich chocolate-brown fur. She stared up at him, mouth hanging open, before squeaking out, “Sorry!” Her small nose was shaped like a little button and her cheeks were peppered with light tan dots.

Hoping he didn’t scare her, the Soldier tried to smile. It must have worked. She bounced up on her toes and tilted her head to the side, bangs flopping up and down as she did.

“It’s hard to see when my hair’s down. That’s why I ran into you.” She swished her mousy brown hair back and forth, then quickly swept it back into a ponytail, rolling a thin band off her wrist. There was a small rainbow of bands, nearly twenty in total, decorating each of her wrists.

“Momma says I have to keep my hair back or I’m never gonna be able to fight the bad guys.”

The Soldier opened his mouth quickly, tongue and throat clicking dryly as he licked his lips and glanced around.

“I promise there aren’t any here. Me an’ Bucky Bear, we scared ‘em all off.”

Bucky Bear.

What the fuck?

He blinked slowly, not sure what to say – or if he could say anything at all.

“I wanna be a superhero when I grow up. I’ll be the first one since Captain America! Do you wanna be a superhero too? I promise I’ll share.”

He nodded, giving her a bemused chuckle and smile.

“Well,” she said matter-of-factly, “you should start keeping your hair tied back. That way you’ll be able to see the bad guys.” The girl peered up at him from under her curled bangs, and quickly glanced around. Her eyes lingered a moment on a woman with two other children, standing by the display of the group of men, and the Soldier realized the woman must be her mother. As she looked back at him, the girl’s eyebrows furrowed, she glanced back at the display, down at her bear, back at him, and suddenly her eyes were as wide as saucers.

“I won’t tell anyone,” she whispered. “Pinkie swear.”

Tell anyone what?

She’d stuck her pinkie out at him, and slowly, so slowly, he reached out to copy the gesture. Wrapping their pinkies together, she squeezed hard and then pulled her hand back.

What. The shit.
But her grin was definitely something else. It lit up the whole museum with its brightness, and an unbidden flash of a lean face framed by a lank mop of sandy blond hair with the same smile startled the Soldier into a smile of his own.

Opening his mouth again, the Soldier’s lips moved for a second before words formed. His voice was thick and coarse, and his accent was embarrassingly Russian. He was supposed to be better at this.

“Can I have a hair tie?”

She rolled a light green band off her wrist and handed it to him solemnly, saluted, and bounced away to her mother.

The Soldier managed to stay hidden for two weeks before his handlers found him. He hadn’t been trying to be bad, he just wanted to understand the empty void in his head a little better, that dense black wall that seemed like it was hiding something.

Hours before he’d been found, the Soldier had bought a small waterproof diving capsule, stuffed the hair tie and a wad of cash in it, and buried it in the backyard of the flop house he’d found a bed in. He didn’t know if he’d ever come back for it, but the little yellow cylinder with its precious treasure inside gave him the strength to stay conscious during his next visit from Comrade Lebedev. Blacking out always made it worse.

Comrade Karpov knew best. Lebedev would not have to hurt him if he’d been good.

Comrade Karpov knew best…

***

The ride to New York was uneventful, ass-numbing, and long. James had brought a few of his books from the library, and amused both himself and Steve by reading aloud and rudely correcting the book’s recollection of a large majority of the events. He should know, he’d been there for most of them. By the time he’d finished the first book, the pages oozed scribbled-on post-its.

They were halfway through the second book, Steve blue in the face from laughing and James’s voice starting to crackle with the constant use, when they rolled into the garage of Avengers Tower. James shot off a quick text to Mickey and shoved his books into his bag as Steve backed the truck into Natasha’s space.

The elevators still made him nervous – he hated closed spaces, even if they had glass panels with a breathtaking view of the city. They also had square screens instead of floor buttons, with a live feed of a balding blond British man on them.

After James had reacted violently to JARVIS the first time, Stark had installed small screens in the elevators and JARVIS portrayed himself as the head of building security through the screen. JARVIS had also begun calling James’s phone whenever there was important information to deliver. James still knew the thing was an AI, but it made it much easier to not freak out.

No one had asked why after Steve had simply said, “Zola,” and had merely adapted to the new way of interacting with JARVIS without any fuss. His new family was amazing.

They made their way to the mid-tower briefing room to find Clint, Natasha, Stark, Banner, Fury, and Hill already there. Two large pizzas splayed across the center of the conference table, and six more were stacked to the side.
“Boys! Eat.” Hill shoved the stack of boxes over to James and Steve, and James flipped the lid of the top one open before blindly shoving a slice into his face. Next to him, Steve flopped into the nearest empty chair as he did the same.

Fury tilted his head and looked at James for a long few seconds before speaking. “Mr. Barnes. Thank you for agreeing to be here today. How’s your recovery progressing?”

“Well enough,” he mumbled around the gooey heaven in his mouth. He chewed a few times and shoved the blob to the side so he could speak more clearly. “Doc’s cleared me to start group sessions, and that’s helping a bit. We’ve got a pretty good line drawn for what I can and can’t talk about so it’s not too bad.”

“Good to hear, son. You sure you’re up for this?” Fury waved a hand behind him, and James noticed the data projection on the wall for the first time. It had a grid of thumbnails, some of the views familiar, others not. He realized he was looking at a listing of the footage from the facility they were discussing today.

With a thick swallow and a glance at Steve, he nodded. “I can’t promise anything, but I’ll do my best to help.”

The briefing was straightforward, and James surprised himself with how much he remembered. The facility had served as his drop point for several missions when he was shipped over from Siberia. JARVIS had done his best to assemble a detailed floorplan from data available online and gathered from the footage.

“Entry points are here, here, and here,” James said as he tapped the various points on the display. Small red highlights obligingly appeared. “This is an excellent spot to funnel any hostiles through – it doesn’t look like it on the map, but there’s limited visibility and the hallway’s a lot narrower than it looks. You’ve got a good choke point here where they can only come at you one or two at a time, the only trouble is going to be clearing bodies if that happens.” As he traced his fingers through the map, he fought off a smile; it was starting to look like the graphics they used during football broadcasts.

“The main power room is here, and I’m guessing this is where they keep their servers. This black zone here, that’s where they kept all of my… stuff. I’d approach it from the south if you can, there’s a lot of cameras in this zone and you only want to push through there if you don’t have any other choice.

“Most of the hostiles will fall back to this set of rooms since they’re easily defensible. Barton, there’s a set of ventilation shafts that’ll take you directly to them, with four points where you’ll need to breach a filter or other type of panel.”

Barton raised an eyebrow. “What is this, amateur hour? Don’t insult me.”

“They have a pretty narrow cross-section, so you’ll probably wanna go for a weigh-in and buy a tape measure.” James grinned when he got a dark glare from the archer. Turning back to the map, he tapped the wall and gestured toward the table, suppressing a small thrill when he was given a 3-D, manipulable scale model floating in the air above the glass surface.

“If you go in through the northeast hatch on the roof you should be able to keep the element of surprise long enough to sweep the upper two floors. There’s a lot of blind spots and sound dampening since those are mostly cubicles; it’s perfect for a quick takeover but the hostiles are going to have cover if they know how to use it. The second floor is likely where you’ll run into issues, since it’ll be nearly impossible to stay undetected that long. I’d advise two full tac teams, split up and
swing in from both sides so you can clear everything quicker. You want to be in and out in a matter of minutes since it’s got a self-destruct and HYDRA’s never been squeamish about killing friendlies.”

“How many two-heads are we lookin’ at, Tin Man?”

He ignored the jab as best he could. Starks just had it in their blood or something. “I didn’t see much of the facility while I was lucid. Usually got stuffed in the holding cell here until extraction back to the primary base. Based on the size of the building and the level of activity, probably one-fifty, two hundred? Most of them should be non-combatants but they’re all trained and dangerous. There’s probably going to be some civilians around the area since it’s a densely populated part of town. We’ll need to have a plan that minimizes casualties.”

Banner leaned forward onto the table and adjusted his glasses. “Tony and I have been working on a new implosion bomb prototype we should be able to calibrate for the exact blast radius needed. We’ll run some more tests on it tonight but if we’ve done our jobs right, we should be able to flatten the building without any collateral damage.”

“Your vote of confidence is overwhelming, Bruce. Thanks for that. Fury, who’s on point?”

James noticed how Stark’s eyes found their way to his arm every few seconds but slid away just as quickly. He didn’t know what the smaller man’s hangup was; Stark had been the one to repair his arm when he’d been in SHIELD custody.

“Cap and Natasha will head up Alpha Team, and we’ll have Clint and Tony on Bravo. Hill, get the tac teams briefed later today, we’ll fly out Tuesday at 1300 hours to set up field ops.”

Steve nodded and pursed his lips, thoughtful. “Sir, you said there were some high-profile targets identified in JARVIS’s facial recognition sweeps. Any idea who we’re dealing with?”

“So far, we’ve got a few high-level weaponsmiths, four former officers from our STRIKE teams, and one of Pierce’s inner circle. Dossiers have been sent to your phones. Look them over tonight. Dismissed.”

Dissolving the hologram with a wave of his hand, James made his way around the table to grab a last slice of pizza from the box in front of Steve. The ragtag team ambled to the elevator, chatting about various things, Tony’s new repulsor design, new Widow’s Bites for Natasha to try, a new nanopolymer Stark was integrating into Steve’s uniform. A few strategy questions got thrown James’s way, and he did his best to stay engaged in the conversation.

Finally, he and Steve stepped off the elevator and found themselves in front of the door into their shared floor in the Tower. For some reason, Stark had insisted that each Avenger have a full home available to them at all times, and James had to admit, having a known-safe bolthole was reassuring even if he’d never been back since he’d moved to DC.

The decorations had been gaudy at first, red white and blue everywhere, and Steve had gradually worked his magic by replacing things one by one until it had the same sigh-and-relax texture to the air as their tiny little studio in Brooklyn in the 40s. Warm, comforting colors, some of Steve’s art framed on the walls, a rich chocolatey brown granite and oak kitchen with stainless appliances, and it was all topped off with a gigantic couch big enough for a supersoldier to actually feel comfortable on.

There were two huge bedrooms, each with their own full bathroom en suite, and a third room that Steve used primarily as a studio. With the whole north wall made up of floor-to-ceiling mirrored
windows, the apartment was open and airy in a way that James had never appreciated before.

He yawned and stretched his arms above his head, cracking his neck carefully to avoid stressing the fused bone and metal. “Is there a gym here?” Before Steve could answer, a cheerful ping! told him he’d gotten a text message. JARVIS informed him that the training facility three floors below them was currently empty and could be privately reserved for as long as he wished.

Thanks, pal, James typed back.

My pleasure, sir. JARVIS was always so polite.

The chest of drawers in James’s room did not disappoint. Most of his clothes at home were duplicated here; maybe Natasha had given JARVIS a pick list. He’d packed a change of civvies but no gym clothes, and whoever had stocked the dresser had apparently anticipated such a need. Quickly shucking his street clothes, he changed and trotted down the stairs.

Just as JARVIS promised, the gym was indeed empty. Stark had equipped it with many of the common weight training machines and a good set of free weights and barbells, but James was more interested in the large expanse of open space past the weight area. The huge nerd he was, James couldn’t help but squeal a little the first time he’d seen the hard light obstacle course.

After some stretching and a few minutes of jogging on one of the treadmills, James walked over to the control console for the training platform. He scrolled through the list, but nothing really caught his eye. Instead, he cancelled out of the menu and walked out onto the platform, testing the surface.

“JARVIS?” James asked, hesitant. This was the first time he’d addressed the AI without a screen or phone between them.

“Yes, sir .”

“Can you black out the windows and block entry? I’d like some privacy, please.”

“Certainly, sir. Can I offer you any music?”

James thought for a moment, pursing his lips. “Tchaikovsky, opus 66, No.28 c. Give me something basic as a warm-up first, though.”

“Of course, sir .”

As some fairly generic classical-ish music rolled out of the hidden speakers, James took some deep breaths to help dull the static in his head, and focused exclusively on his movements as he flowed gracefully through the basic positions and forms. He’d grown up swing dancing and twirling girls through the air, but when the KGB had forced him into ballet, he’d discovered to his surprise that it gave him a sense of control, a sense of grounding, that he’d never felt before.

Many of the more complex variations required complete focus; even a momentary lapse in attention could cause a catastrophic injury if it was at the wrong time. As much as he relied on the ballerinas’ technique and strength, they relied on him to, well, not drop them. Or throw them wrong. Or lose his balance. At least none of the Red Room girls had been afraid of his arm.

After a while, the grand cadences of Tchaikovsky took over, giving him a few bars to breathe and set himself right. Closing his eyes, he let himself fall back in time to the large warehouse hidden in Siberia, with an old, wizened man watching the Soldier as intently as the set of guards lined up at the wall.
The ballet master had refused to call the Soldier by any military rank or title. He was the only person who had not been executed for giving the Soldier a human name. As a result, the young girls the Soldier had trained had come to know him as Dyadya Nikolai, their quiet uncle.

James whipped his body through the variation, pleased that the muscle memory had not faded. After all, Maestro had accepted nothing less than perfection. Orders were orders, and the Soldier had complied.

Spinning, leaping, spinning, leaping again, he finished the set, closed his eyes, and held position, chest heaving as he slowly let his arms drop. Ballet had been a sissy-boy dance when he was a kid, and he still couldn’t hide his embarrassment, but he’d come to respect and love the pure strength it took at the higher levels.

“<Smile at the audience, do not glower at them.>” Natasha’s voice cut through his thoughts as she aped the cranky voice of the ballet master, the Russian phonemes rolling smoothly across the room. Opening his eyes, James saw her leaning against the wall just inside the door to the hallway. He sighed and tilted his head forward, rolling it from side to side to stretch the muscles in his neck.

“<I thought I asked JARVIS to lock down the room.>” They usually spoke to each other in Russian while alone; it felt more natural.

“<Not my fault if he neglected to kick anyone out that was already here.>”

“You said it was empty,” James accused, switching to English.

“Agent Romanoff requested that you not be aware of her presence.”

Grumbling to himself, James walked over to the fridge in the corner of the room and pulled out a water bottle. “<So much for privacy.>” He neither noticed nor cared that he’d returned to speaking in Russian.

“If you’re expecting me to tell the rest of the team, then I’m insulted. I thought you trusted me more.”

“<Lisichka, since when has it ever been a good idea to trust you?>”

She smirked at him. “Touché.”

After he finished off a bottle and tossed it into the recycling bin, James turned to face Natasha and crossed his arms. “<So, why are you here?>”

Pausing before answering him, Natasha looked away, out at the platform. “<I wanted to see how you’re doing. Haven’t had a chance to grab coffee in over a month so I wanted to make sure you’re ok.>”

“And?”

“I also wanted to ask if you’d like a partner,” she mumbled.

With a start, James realized that she danced for the same reasons he did: to take ownership of the trauma and learn to live above it.

“I… sure. Yeah. Why not?” Movements more graceful than his words, he headed back out to the platform and held out a hand. “JARVIS, surprise us.”
Natasha’s smile was small but bright as she took his hand. Glancing down, James noticed that she was wearing toe shoes - was she wearing these the whole time? - laces neatly hidden under black leggings.

The opening bars to one of the duets from Swan Lake reached their ears, and they began to move fluidly around each other, recreating a captivating performance from decades ago that neither of them completely remembered.

At the end of the duet, James held Natasha delicately in front of him, as if she was made of glass. “<Do you remember the last time we did this?>” he whispered. The shining costumes, burning stage lights, and weight of a thousand eyes ricocheted through his memory.

She shook her head slowly, red curls bouncing with the movement. “<They wiped me.>”

So that was why she’d never come back. “<Do you remember us?>” Another small shake, tears in her eyes. James knew that feeling, knowing he should remember something but not knowing why he couldn’t.

His hands tightened on her shoulders, and he forced himself to let go when she stiffened under the pressure. “Sorry.” Turning, he walked away, sitting down heavily on one of the weight benches and dropping his head into his hands. His handlers had taken a chance when he’d started ballet, realizing quickly that training would progress more quickly if he could remember it. He’d gone fifteen years without a wipe, having been erased to a blank slate after the torture following the Stark mission. Fifteen years had given him more than enough time to grow close to his little red ballerina.

After their combined undercover mission at the Bolshoi, his handlers had finally realized what was happening. Rather than wipe the both of them, Natasha had been taken away and he hadn’t seen her again until he put a bullet through her in Odessa. Orders were orders, but the horror he’d felt was sickening. His punishment was complete; he would be forced to remember her, but she would never know him.

The bench shifted slightly as Natasha sat down next to him. “<I’ve got fragments,>” she said softly. “<Bits and pieces. You looked younger then. The girls and I liked you, when you were still our Dyadya Kolya, even though we all knew there was no way you were really our uncle. You weren’t cruel like the others. You used to sneak us rations.>”

“<I had a little sister. I didn’t remember her, but something made me feel… protective. I couldn’t watch them starve you.>” His voice cracked as he spoke, his head spinning as images came flooding back.

“<You taught us how to kill.>”

He nodded.

“<But you taught us how to do it without pain.>”

Another nod. He chuckled slightly. “<You couldn’t hit the broad side of a barn with a gun until you were seven.>” That was before the Starks. James had been working with the Red Room since 1981, and had been there in 1985 when little Natalia, his little Lisichka, barely up to his knee, was handcuffed to her bed for the first time.

“<You changed, after that. You were gone for a year, then came back different.>” Natasha was hesitant, and James knew from experience that she was trying to cement those slippery, elusive memories.
“<Mission went wrong, got hit pretty hard by reconditioning.>”

“<The only time you were like… the old you, my Nikolechka, was when you danced.>”

“<They took you from me in ’03,>” James blurted out. “<We were undercover. The danceur partnered with you was starting to make moves. I got… jealous. I don’t know. I was just supposed to be your bodyguard, handler, whatever they called it. He pulled you aside and tried… tried to force you after rehearsal one night. I- I might have killed him. I think I dumped his body in the river.>”

Natasha didn’t respond, and he couldn’t bring himself to look at her.

“<They needed a new lead after that. His understudy just didn’t have the technique to dance Prince Siegfried. You told them I could do it, they laughed, you threatened to leave unless they gave me a chance. The opening performance was the next day. You got me shoes, a costume, and pulled me out onto the stage even though I warned you we’d break our cover.>”

“<Our handlers let us keep it up until closing night, and then we had orders to report back the following day. We… we slept together that night. First chance we’d had since our last mission months before.>” His fingers laced through each other, metal and flesh winding together. “<We got back, and they separated us. I never saw you again, until I was ordered to put a slug through you in Odessa. You didn’t even remember me.>”

She still sat silently, and when James glanced over, he saw dark spots on her leggings. She was crying, and trying hard to hide it.

“Oh, babydoll…” Only hesitating for a split second, James reached over and pulled his red ballerina into a hug. “<I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have told you that.>”

“<Was it real?>” she asked. Her voice was congested and thick, and her deceptively delicate hands wrapped around his arm.

“<It was to me.>”

They sat like that, neither speaking, for several minutes. Eventually, James pulled away and rubbed between her shoulders with his hand. “<Thank you for dancing with me.>”

“<Can we do that again sometime? There’s a real studio a few floors down that I had Pepper set up a while back.>” Natasha’s eyes were red and blotchy as she looked up at him with a watery smile.

He smiled. “I’d like that,” he told her, words slipping back into English, rich with his Brooklyn drawl.

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Bundled up in a thick, fluffy parka with a beanie pulled low over his ears, a scarf coiled around his neck like a fluffy snake, and a tundra-grade glove on his right hand, James leaned his head forward until it rested between two of the thin square bars that made up the railing on the balcony. Wind chill was nasty this high up, especially at the end of October, and he never liked being cold.

Carefully, so that he didn’t risk dropping yet another phone, he swept through a panorama photo and sent it off to Mickey. *Freezing my ass off but at least it’s a nice view*, he typed. He pulled the edge of his scarf up over his nose and squinted his eyes against a blast of frigid air.

Tapping on the window behind him made him turn, and he saw Steve waving him inside. “Dinner
in ten.” His voice was muffled, but still clear enough to hear.

As James extracted his legs from the railing, his phone buzzed, and he saw a new message from Mickey.  \textit{Looks awesome! Don’t pull a Steve on me and turn into a popsicle, I like not being homeless.}

\textit{How was class?}

\textit{Got some homework but at least it’s quiet, no more Hoobastank blasting from Shelby’s room. Got anything decent to put on here?}

James chuckled and pulled the sliding glass door shut behind him, pulling off his layers as he warmed back up. \textit{There’s some Dave Brubeck on vinyl in my room, should be on the shelf by the door.}

Three little dots flashed for a few seconds, then, \textit{Man, you’re awesome. Can I steal your turntable?}

\textit{Down, girl. It’d better be there when I get back tomorrow.}

After he dumped his outerwear on his bed, he followed Steve to the common area two floors up. It was rare to have even half the Avengers in the same place at the same time, so ‘family dinner’ was mandatory on those occasions. The fact that James was automatically included was all sorts of confusing for him at first.

The buffet table already had a generous assortment of various foods; James knew from experience that Tony and Bruce had cooked most of it. Bruce had learned how to feed himself out of necessity, and Tony had absorbed many things from his doting nanny, Ana. Much to James’s delight, traditional Hungarian cooking was one of those things.

During the first week of his stay at the Tower, James had still barely been able to eat anything solid. For several days, he’d had to shove all that amazing-looking food into a blender with some water and choke it down in shake form. Starting with bread, oatmeal, select fruits and veggies, and gradually working his way up, James had finally been able to eat with everyone else.

Even though his neck had burned with embarrassment every time he’d had to puree his food, no one had said anything. Nutrition drinks and bottled homemade smoothies had even started appearing in the fridge, and after some sleuthing, he’d discovered that Pepper was his fridge angel.

He beelined for her as soon as he entered the common area, and wrapped her up in a hug. Pepper was one of two people he never got skin shocks with, the other being Natasha, and the soft berry smell of her hair was always soothing.

“Hey, Pep,” he mumbled as she squeezed him tight. “Good to see you.”

“God, Jim, it’s been ages!” She put her hands on his shoulders and leaned back, giving him that sunshine smile that he adored so much. “You look great! Really, you do. You’ve got so much more color in your face now.”

He grinned. “Thanks, doll. Doc’s been helping a lot, and I even made some friends. Spending a lot of time working out and beating up heavy bags, it seems to help.”

“Oh! You texted me yesterday, sorry, I completely forgot to get back to you. I’ve got one of my real estate girls looking around for you, she’s supposed to send me a list next week after she does background checks, and then you can take your pick.”
“Fantastic, thanks so much for helping on such short notice. Mickey’s really up a creek right now and I wanna help her out.”

“I’ll do everything I can.” She guided him over to the buffet table and they continued chatting as they filled up their plates.

James remembered the first time he’d joined everyone, towards the middle of May. He’d still looked sickly and off-balance both mentally and physically, gaunt body covered in the dark bruises he got when thrashing awake from his nightmares, sometimes from hitting things, sometimes from Steve holding him down. His metal arm had looked far too large on him and he’d worn baggy sweatshirts for over a month to hide it.

With long, scraggly, greasy hair and dark circles around his eyes, he hadn’t expected anyone to want to talk to him. He’d simply wrapped his hands around the bottle of grayish-brown sludge that Steve had handed him and sat in the corner. That’s when Pepper had come over and charmed him into letting her fix up his hair… then teaching him how to shave, trim off his split ends, keep his scalp from flaking off, and eventually got him looking like a mildly respectable human being.

He owed her so much.

“Steve tells me you spent some time in one of the training gyms today,” Pepper prompted him as they sat down at the large table.

“Yeah, did a little tumbling and some lifting.” He glanced at Natasha and she gave him a small smile; ballet would stay a secret between them for now.

“Well, I’m just glad to hear it’s getting some use. Tony spent months slaving over it, and no one ever uses it.”

“That’s because you’re all boring geriatrics that prefer paper targets in a concrete bunker,” Stark grumped as he plopped down on Pepper’s other side. “Hey, Terminator.”

“Stark.” James felt his smile fade. It wasn’t that he didn’t like Stark, but every time he looked at the man, he saw Howard’s scared eyes pleading with him.

“Did you use the simulator? See any issues I need to sort out? Bugs, glitches, artifacting?” The words were barely intelligible around the huge mouthful of garlic bread that Stark was wrestling with.

“Not today, but it seemed good enough to me last time I was there. I like how you use a physical substrate for the projections. I’m guessing it helps with more complex arenas? The hard light works pretty well but it’s still sort of transparent unless it has something backing it for the larger features.”

Pepper scooted her plate to the other side of the table and stood up, putting a hand on each of their shoulders. “I’ll leave you boys to it.” She walked around and sat down next to Natasha, and James couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed.

“Cap told me you were a geek, but he never really said how much of one,” Stark stated as he slid into Pepper’s seat.

James chuckled as he remembered that last night before shipping out to Europe. “I dragged him on a double-date to Howard’s expo right before I deployed. Got to see the flying car.”

“Oh god.” Stark covered his face in his hands. “Was that the year it blew up onstage?”
“Yep.”

An interesting mixture of a laugh and a groan answered him. “He’d been so hungover the day before that he reversed the polarity on one of the couplers. Blew so many capacitors that he had to mothball it until after the war.”

“Did he still have it when you were a kid?”

“Yeah, he kept it under a tarp in the back of the garage. Never let me touch it. I can’t even remember what it was.”

“It was red, that’s all I remember at this point. Looked like custom coachwork.”

“Yeah, that’s Dad for you.”

Even trying his hardest, James still felt decidedly awkward talking to Stark. He let the conversation lull, focusing on clearing his plate of the remainder of his dinner. As soon as James had finished, Stark spoke up again.

“There’s something I want to show you in the lab tonight, wanna head down?”

“Um… now?”

“Yeah, now. C’mon.” Standing abruptly, Stark grabbed James by the arm and tugged him along. “Just leave the plate, someone’ll take care of it.”

James shot a baffled look at Steve which turned into a glare when he saw the amusement on Steve’s face. He let himself get pulled to the elevator and then down to Stark’s lab, eerie and silent until the lights clicked on.

The door hissed shut behind them, and Stark walked further into the lab, turning to half-sit on one of the workbenches. The smaller man crossed his arms and gave James a thoughtful, considering look. James realized that there wasn’t anything for him to see – Stark had come here to talk.

“What?”

“Well, I’m not sure if I should want to kill you or feel bad for you.”

James blinked. “…what?”

“JARVIS found a security tape in the records from my parents’ old house on Long Island. It’s from December 14th, 1991.”

He couldn’t completely hide the alarm that rocketed through his body. Surprisingly, Stark hadn’t moved except to gesture to the side. A floating rectangle appeared, a still-frame of an exquisitely decorated sitting room with a large piano and a plethora of seating. Three people stood in the center of the room.

One was recognizable as Howard Stark immediately from his clothes and posture, and James knew that the woman had to be Maria. The third figure was, unmistakably, the Winter Soldier.

“Now, the car crash happened two days after that.”

“Stark-”

“I know, Barnes.”
James involuntarily braced himself, expecting an attack. Stark just stood there, arms crossed, face unreadable.

“We found a bunch of VHS tapes – seriously, I had to go to a fucking thrift store for a VCR, I hope that doesn’t end up on Twitter, I have a reputation – and I saw the mission footage. I know what happened.” Sighing heavily, Stark dropped his face into his hands. “JARVIS…”

The still-frame sprang to life.

“Stark, I’m trying to help you.” James’s stomach lurched as he heard his own voice, flat and scratchy.

“Why the fuck would I believe you?” Howard shouted at the Soldier. “Why the fuck should I trust you?”

“Because right now, I’m lucid, and I know who I am. I know who you are. But when the mission imperative kicks in, I don’t have much control. I’m trying to warn you.”

“Howard, who is this?” Maria’s voice was soft and she’d been trying hard to hide her fear, James remembered, hands firmly clenched so they didn’t shake.

“Sergeant James Barnes. Cap’s sidekick.”

“Not a fucking sidekick. Best friend. His Sergeant. But I can’t… I don’t deserve that name. Not any more.”

Howard threw his hands up in the air and spun around in frustration. “And now you’ve miraculously come back from the dead and you’re supposed to kill us, but you don’t want to – Jesus Christ, Barnes, why did we get you back and not-”

“HowARD.” The whiplash of Maria’s voice startled James for the second time, even though he’d been expecting it, remembering it.

“Stark, you run SHIELD. You’ve been trying to track me down since the 50s. You know my record, you know I never fail. When my orders activate, I can’t twist them much. What I’m trying to do is give you a choice.”

The long pause was filled by a shaky breath that James mirrored in the future, hands clenching and unclenching.

“The mission is to extract both of you and the serum, and hand you over to the KGB and HYDRA for… reconditioning. They’re going to make you like me, Stark. And you, ma’am, they’re going to hand you over to Lebedev and make your husband watch.”

Colonel Alexei Lebedev. The KGB’s leading expert on torture in the 90s, also a verifiable psychopath and sadist. James’s knees suddenly felt weak and he slumped onto the closest stool, struggling to breathe through the chaos in his head. The memories raged up in his mind, pain blossoming as he felt again the hollow smack as his chest and face hit the wall of his cell, the burning agony as Lebedev forced himself in again and again, the unbearable itch of scars healing as he’d been tortured so often that he could no longer tell the difference between the nightmares of his sleep and those of his waking hours.

“I’m giving you a choice between that, and a quick death. You know I can’t get out of this and it’s going to happen either one way or the other. What I can promise you is… I wouldn’t call it mercy, but it’s always quick and I can make it painless. It’s all I can offer.”
James couldn’t tear his eyes off of the screen hanging in the air. He watched a soft, young version of Tony Stark sleepily stumble his way into the sitting room, freezing in mid-step when he saw the Soldier.

“Mom? Dad? What’s going on?”

In an instant, the Soldier rabbed through an open window, leaving no trace of his presence other than the tears on the Starks’ faces.

The screen folded in on itself and disappeared.

James counted back from ten several times in his head, trying to get his diaphragm to cooperate again. His ears were ringing, and his hands shook even through the firm grip he kept on his knees.

“I didn’t know it was you, back then, in the house,” Stark said softly. “But, you know, first time I saw the arm, I figured it out. Didn’t put two and two together for how Mom and Dad died until three days ago, though.”

His lungs still wouldn’t fill completely. James hoped he didn’t look like a guppy, gasping for air.

“Barnes… there was also a mission debrief in the archives. I’m not gonna make you watch that. Fuck, I had to turn it off when I figured out who Lebedev was.”

Oh, god. He’d seen that.

“Jesus fucking Christ, man.” Stark’s voice carried across the lab in a ragged whisper. “I looked at the run time… they did that to you for hours.”

“Can we- can we not. Don’ wanna talk about it.” The first words he’d been able to speak ripped out of him in a pained grunt.

“Yeah, sorry. Um.” Stark awkwardly folded his arms again. “I haven’t shown this to anyone else yet. Not gonna. I’ll bury this as deep as I can. It’s the least I can do.”

“’s’at why we’re here?”

“Yeah. Give you your privacy. Didn’t want this happening in front of the team.”

“Thanks.” His lungs were still on the fritz, but at least he could – sort of – talk.

“You gonna be okay, buddy?”

James nodded, head jerking around as if he’d forgotten the finer points of the movement. Then, after a second, he reconsidered and shook his head. “Never gonna be okay, Stark. Shit like this don’t heal.”

Soft footsteps echoed hollowly as Stark walked over and sat next to James. “Did Cap tell you about when I went to Afghanistan?”

“Said you got taken for a bit.” Don’t run, don’t run, he won’t hurt you, he promised himself.

Stark had picked up a strange small gadget from one of the workbenches and fiddled with it aimlessly. “They tried to get me to make weapons for them. I wouldn’t do it, so they started drowning and waterboarding me. Wouldn’t use electricity in case it fucked with what used to be here.” He tapped the ring of thick, knurled scar tissue under his shirt with the gadget. “Beat me up a bit, too.”
James didn’t know how to respond, so he just stared at the floor and listened.

“What I’m trying to say, I guess, because I’m fucking awful at this communicating thing, just ask Pepper, is that I know what it’s like to be tortured and forced to do something that you don’t want to do. I had the luck to be able to fight my way out of it, but I didn’t have anyone playing hockey with my brain.”

The image of someone dribbling a wrinkly gray blob down an ice rink made James snort before he realized it. The more he imagined it, the more he started to laugh. After a minute, he looked up at Stark’s startled expression and tried hard to rein in the giggles - it didn’t work. But hey, at least he wasn’t on the edges of a panic attack any more.

“I think that’s quite possibly the first time I’ve ever heard you laugh.”

“Sorry, Stark, it’s just, ‘brain hockey’ is a surprisingly good description for it.”

“It’s just Tony. And the rest of us, first names as well. You aren’t in the Army anymore.”

“Force of habit.”

Tony smirked, slapped his thighs, and stood up. “Well, that was fun, and more awkward than a high school prom. But I do actually have something to show you, if you don’t want to go curl up in an igloo or something.”

Ignoring the jab, James followed Tony over to one of the large hologram projectors set into the floor. When Tony swept his hands upward, a swirl of light followed them, rearranging itself into a transparent rendering of James’s skeletal, muscular, and nervous systems.

James’s lip curled as he saw where his bones had been reinforced with bolted-on bits of titanium alloy. The flat, rectangular control unit floated just under one of the panels on his bicep, accessible through a data port that had been upgraded over time. His arm now ran USB 3.0, which was fantastic until he’d realized that it meant virtually nothing unless he wanted to use his arm as an iPod.

Tony wrapped his hands around the digital elbow and dragged the panels outward to show them a blowout view. Each of the panels now had a small readout attached to it with dimensions, weight, and other notes. “So I did some calculations on everything based on the material samples we took while you were in the hospital, and the paneling alone weighs around twenty pounds.”

“Sounds about right.” James reached for one of the holographic panels, dragging it towards him and turning it over. He knew this technology was far beyond what most people had in their homes, but he was always staggered by how far everything had come. “I usually come in about three hundred when I’m at fighting weight. Guess I won’t class in welterweight any more.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t bet on it. All those microservos start adding up eventually; you’ve got to have seventy, eighty pounds of shit screwed into your spine.”

Swallowing dryly, James released the panel he’d been looking at, and it floated back into position. “Yeah, took a while to get used to balancing with it. Used to be heavier, back before they replaced the steel with titanium alloys. I think the first one they gave me weighed about double what it does now.”

“Wait, so that’s not the…”

“No. Looked a bit like Dum-E at first, actually. It didn’t have much for articulation, either. The hand was pretty stiff and clumsy.” James waved his hand to push the diagrams of his current arm off
to the side, and started sketching with his finger in the air. JARVIS obligingly painted glowing lines behind his hands. “The shoulder joint was this big gimbal-type thing, I think it had three axes on ring gears or something, maybe planetaries? Upper arm was just a bar, and it had clip-on points for stuff like grenades and magazines here, here, and here. My lower arm had a rotation point here, just below the wrist, and another ball joint at the wrist.

“I only had three fingers at first, like this, and they just clamped down and opened, wasn’t good for much besides foregrips and knives. Couldn’t move them independently for a few years until they gave me a full hand with the hydraulics on the outside.” Next to the first claw, he started drawing another hand, this one with five fingers and articulation mechanisms running down the back of the hand.

“Looks like C3PO’s arm,” Tony muttered.

“I think Lucas might’ve seen a picture of my arm somewhere, I dunno. But yeah, I had this one until the mid-60s, when the KGB took over the Winter Soldier program and gave me the first version of what I have now. They kept upgrading it over the years, giving it more movement as they were able to add more motors and plates to make it more flexible.”

“How’d they manage the neural interfacing?”

James turned back to the blowout diagram, floating patiently to his left, and spun it around. “The control unit lives here,” he said as he tapped the plate that covered it. “They ran some sort of wires or something, spliced it into my spinal cord and whatever nerve fragments I had left over after the surgery. It took a lot of calibration and programming to get it to respond correctly to the signals my brain sent.”

“I’ll bet that was hilarious at first.” Tony’s grin told James that the billionaire was probably imagining a metal arm flying around everywhere, uncontrollable, like a ragdoll model in a modern video game.

James shrugged. “Mostly it just wouldn’t move at all. They had to do some stem cell injections if I remember correctly, get my organic nerves to fuse to the synthetic ones. The serum took over after that.”

“You do realize this was all pseudoscience back then, right? That you’re a walking miracle, even today? Type of shit you’ve got dangling off your left shoulder, that won’t be available in the consumer market for, say, ten years unless I get involved. Seriously considering it, beats making rockets.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” James asked with a grimace. “You helped with the repair, you’ve seen how they attached it. It’s duct tape, chewing gum, and baling wire.”

“Well, obviously, with a few minor adjustments…” Tony’s hands began flying around as he manipulated the model. Bone grafts disappeared, the servos flashed red and vanished, plates changed shape, and the control box shrank. “I’m not sure we can do this without, you know, killing you, but…”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Well, that thing’s hardwired into your spinal column. Extracting it’s going to be risky.”

“Tony…”

“Give me a week or two.”
“Tony.”

“I can come up with something, maybe a vibranium alloy?”

“Tony.”

“What?”

“It’s okay.” James wiggled the fingers of his left hand, servos whirring gently. “I’ve lived with this for half a century already, I think I’ll be able to live with it for another. If you really want to do something, maybe just focus on replacing the plates with something lighter. They’re all removable. It’d be awesome if the motors were quieter but I’m not sure how hard that is.”

Tony walked around him and motioned for him to pull up his sleeve. Hands ghosted over the surface but never touched, Tony’s eyes scanning the worn, pitted surfaces as accurately as any computer. He paused at the shoulder, and glanced up at James.

“The star.”

“What about it?”

“I can take it off if you want.”

James twisted his neck and raised his arm so he could see the dull red star, edges blurred over the years as scratches and scuffs had worn away the anodizing. He tried to imagine the same smooth silver there as the rest of his arm, and, oddly, couldn’t. That star was as much a part of him as the arm.

“No, I think I’m okay.”

Flapping a hand at him, Tony ambled over to a workbench and pulled up some schematics. “Suit yourself.”

The door to the lab swished open and Steve walked in, the look of alarm on his face fading when he saw Tony and James. “God, I’ve been looking everywhere for you two.”

“Could have asked JARVIS.”

“I did, Tony. He said you didn’t want to be disturbed.”

“Good boy.”

“With all due respect, sir, I am not a dog.” JARVIS’s smooth British voice rippled through the lab and James couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Really? I always pictured you as some sort of Pomeranian. Yippy-yappy little fluffball.”

Steve sighed and shook his head, motioning for James to follow as he led the way back up to the apartment. “It’s good that you and Tony are starting to get along. What’d he bring you down to the lab for?”

“Oh, just some ideas he had about the arm, you know how he gets. Wants to lighten up some of the materials so it doesn’t pull on my spine as much.” James didn’t feel like telling Steve about the rest of the Stark assassination, not just yet. He still had to process it himself, had to wrap his head around this new angle.
“Well, that could be handy.” The panel by the door beeped quietly as it accepted Steve’s palm scan. “Got any plans for tomorrow morning?”

“Aw hell no, we are not going running in a fucking blizzard,” James whined as he flopped down on the couch and kicked off his boots. “No way.”

“Relax, Snowball. You can stay bundled up. I go to Saint Cecilia’s for Saturday mass now, was wondering if you wanted to join me.”

James sat up from his slouch and fixed Steve with a hard look. “First off, it’s still around? And second, you know I’d burst into flames if I set foot in a church again.”

Steve hummed softly as he moseyed about the kitchen, pulling out a saucepan, chocolate, and a carton of almond milk. “They went through a renovation sometime around the 70s, I think. And you don’t know that, you haven’t tried.”

“Steve, I tried to assassinate the Pope. My handlers framed someone else for it when the stubborn guy wouldn’t die.”

“I… what?” Turning, Steve gave him an incredulous look. “Seriously?”

“Yeah. ’81. Shot him four times. I know I hit at least one vital organ. If the target weren’t the fuckin’ Pope then I’d be embarrassed.”

“Language, Buck. Besides, he didn’t end up dying, so I’m not sure exactly what you’d be guilty of.”

James rolled his eyes and snorted. “Fine, I’ll go with you, but if I spontaneously combust, it’s your fault.”

“I’ll add it to my confession.”

A few minutes later, Steve pressed a warm mug into James’s hands, rousing him from a half-awake nap. The chocolate was rich, hot, and thick, coating his throat and warming him to his toes. The two supersoldiers stood at the huge window, staring out into the wintery New York night as lights twinkled through the fog and sleet. JARVIS kept the apartment warm and comfortable, but this close to the glass, there was an almost tangible thin pocket of frigid air that leeched its way inside.

James’s breath, warmed from the cocoa, fogged up the window in front of him. On an impulse, he reached out and drew a smiley face in the patch of condensation, glancing at Steve. His friend did the same, huffing a breath out over the glass, and quickly sketched out a cartoon of the Tower. Underneath it, he wrote, ‘HOME’ in small letters.

“Maybe not yet,” James said quietly. “But it’s nice to have a family again.”

Chapter End Notes

Referencing this headcanon, I haven’t been able to track down the original post, I think it got deleted since it comes up as “Not found” :( 

The Pope did actually survive an assassination attempt in ‘81; most of the missions I’ve credited to the Winter Soldier actually happened.
James’s solo dance
James and Nat’s duet (or something like it anyway. I know very little about ballet.)
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings:
- The Winter Soldier goes through some suicidal ideation
- James has a tonic clonic seizure. I don’t go into excruciating detail but there’s enough there. Also, involuntarily messing oneself can be side effects, so here’s a warning for that, too.
- Mickey mentions losing one of her Marines when an IED went off but doesn’t go into detail.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In one of his increasingly rare moments of lucid control, the man who was sometimes the Soldier sat on the edge of a skyscraper, staring down at the ant-like cars below him. The wind whipped around his body but the familiar hollow numbness kept him immune to the sub-zero temperature.

He’d already tried jumping. Zola had collected the heap of bones and rebuilt him piece by piece. He’d tried heroin. Within three days, his body had stopped reacting to any amount of the drug. He’d tried a bullet – in his brain, in his heart. Neither attempt had the blissful permanence he’d longed for.

His skin was now spiderwebbed with scars. Surgical scars, faint and precise; fusion scars, rippled angry flesh mated unwillingly to unyielding metal; scars from old wounds long healed but still ghosting their way across his skin.

The scars were the only way he knew how to mark time. That, and the girls he trained in the Red Room kept growing like suburban weeds.

The newspaper had said it was August 15th, 1993. He’d completed his mission, evaded his handlers, and made his way to the tallest building he could. He didn’t know what city he was in. His feet dangled over the side and his specialized rifle lay crosswise on his lap. Two weapons at rest, silent until their masters called upon them once more.

The dull ache at the base of his skull grew steadily worse as he watched the tiny shapes flow through the streets like blood cells in an artery. Return to base, the mission imperative whispered. The silent tug in his head grew stronger, and he considered just tumbling forward, a tiny shift in his center of gravity the only requirement. He’d only fallen from half the height last time. Maybe this time would do it and the blood of others on his hands would be washed away with his own.

His teeth clacked as his jaw snapped shut, breaths coming in short spurts as he fought against the marionette strings around his brain. Finally, his breathing slowed and jaw relaxed, expression blank.

He stood, calmly swung the long rifle over his shoulder, and began his return to his handlers.

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His breath puffed out in front of him in dense white clouds, and James blinked rapidly to clear his
eyelashes of raindrops as he followed Steve up the steps into the church. He tried hard not to stare; it still looked much like it had when they were kids. Props to the restoration team.

The gracefully arched ceiling took his breath away; a warm, cheerful glow shone from the chandeliers above the pews and the pale blue ceiling gave the illusion of a beautiful summer sky above his head. For some reason, St. Cecilia’s felt smaller than he remembered it. Maybe he was bigger.

He and Steve sat in one of the pews near the back, both trying hard not to draw attention to themselves. Steve had said that a few of the parishioners had figured out who he was – it wasn’t hard – but they respected his privacy.

Once he’d gotten over his surprise that mass was now said in English, James simply sat quietly and respectfully all the way through. He caught himself trying to shrink into the pew when he noticed he was the only one not taking communion, and had to remind himself that Steve had said it was okay.

After the recessional, James sat back down, lost in thought, staring blankly at a point somewhere near the altar. He jumped a little when Steve tapped him on the shoulder. “Hm?”

“You look like you need a few minutes. I’m gonna go to the deli around the corner, come find me when you’re ready.”

He grunted in acknowledgement, and let his eyes wander around the familiar-yet-foreign contours of the church. Eventually, he found himself slowly walking around the perimeter, studying all of the icons and statues, wondering where he fit into the picture, or if he even fit in at all.

His feet stopped in front of one of saints, and his eyes unfocused again, memories of bombed-out shells of ancient churches and the ragged, drafty pavilions with rough Army benches on base. He wandered in his mind through the rubble of a cathedral in Germany that had seen countless centuries, only to fall to pieces with a single well-placed mortar. The rainbow shards of glass, dull and dark now that no sunlight shone through them, had slid and scraped under his feet as he poked through the stones with a rifle muzzle, searching for survivors.

“Can I help you, sir?”

James spun around, arms automatically rising up as he dropped into a defensive stance. As soon as he saw the white collar and black shirt under close-cropped peppery gray hair, his hands fell to his sides and his whole face and neck flushed.

“I’m sorry, Father. I don’t deal well with being startled.”

The priest gave him an understanding smile, his button nose crinkling slightly. “Military?”

“Army.” James rubbed the back of his neck, trying to get rid of the red in his face by sheer force of will.

“Andy Saunders,” the priest said, offering a hand. “Retired chaplain, trust me, I understand completely. No harm done. Are you a friend of Captain Rogers?”

“Um, yeah. Mostly came here because he asked. I’m not really religious any more… lost my faith a bit during the war.”

Father Saunders gave him another knowing look and gestured towards a door off to the side. “Can I offer you some coffee? Anything warm?”
“A cup ‘o joe would be awesome right now, thanks.” The church was warmer than outside, but he still had that bone-deep chill that never seemed to go away during the winter. He followed the priest through the door, down a hallway, and into a cozy office. The door closed behind them with a gentle click.

James took a moment to study the office and its owner as Father Saunders fussed with the small Keurig in the corner. Every inch of wall was covered in shelves, and every inch of shelving proudly displayed an impressive collection of books. Small objects, some innocuous, some bizarre, were scattered among the books. He recognized a kokopelli, several statuettes of African gods, some sailing instruments, and a small brass bowl full of foreign coins.

The room had that delicious, musty smell of old paper and leather, accented with the soothing overtones of dark coffee.

Father Saunders passed him a mug and then sat behind his desk, gesturing to a large, plump armchair positioned on the other side. “Please, sit.”

Humming appreciatively at the rich, bitter taste of headache-be-gone, James let his eyes wander around the bookshelves for a few more seconds before looking back at the man in front of him.

The priest was slight of build, with a lean, clean-shaven, youthful face that framed old eyes. Small crow’s feet formed at the corner of his eyes, and faint toffee-colored freckles dusted his button nose and cheeks. The man’s posture was ramrod-straight, shoulders small but strong under his shirt.

James smiled awkwardly. “I’m sorry, where are my manners? Jim Grant. Didn’t introduce myself earlier.” The name rolled easily off his tongue now that he’d been using it for months; the alias was even starting to grow on him a bit.

“No worries. Believe it or not, we actually get a lot of military folk through here, mostly retired. That’s partly why I found my place here, it helps me find my own peace when I can lead others to it.”

“With all due respect, Father, it’s going to take quite a lot for me to get there. I did some pretty horrible stuff.”

The other man stared thoughtfully into his own coffee for a minute before answering. “Not all of us were perfect soldiers.”

“Well, yes, I suppose so. Even Captain America must have had moments where he wasn’t quite picture-perfect.”

“Even Steve.”

That got a chuckle. “Oh man, never play cards against him. The Invaders tried to fleece him one time and he turned it against them. Everyone slept naked that night, and it was February in Italy. I hope it wasn’t a sin, gettin’ that close together. Had to huddle up tight or things would’ve fallen off.” With a start, he remembered where he was and who he was talking to, and flushed again before he realized that Father Saunders was grinning.

“Sounds like the winters in Afghanistan. Anything dangly would freeze right off if you weren’t careful, but at least there weren’t any camel spiders.”

His gaffe hadn’t been noticed, then. Hopefully it had just passed off as retelling one of Steve’s stores.
“So, Mr. Grant, is there anything in particular that brings you to Brooklyn?”

“Visiting some family and friends. Used to live here, a long time ago. Came to St. Cecilia’s as a kid.” James swirled the coffee in his mug. “I’m living down in DC for now; Steve asked if I wanted to catch up over the weekend.”

“Weather’s certainly warmer down there right now, he must be a good friend for you to come brave the cold.”

A fond smile warmed James’s face. “Yeah. Yeah, he’s a pretty cool guy. I owe him a lot. He and his team helped line up my care after I got back. Got me some really good doctors.”

“It’s good that you’re seeking help.” Father Saunders’s mug made a soft clunk as he set it down on a coaster. “I went through five, six years of therapy myself when I got back, and I still have someone to call if I need it. The boys and girls I laid to rest…”

“You see their faces when you close your eyes.”

A slow nod answered him. “Still do, sometimes. Many of them were barely twenty years old. The nightmares never go away completely. Neither does the panic. We never really slay our dragons, we just have to learn to ride them. I turned my pain and fear into positive energy in my ministry so that it wouldn’t destroy me.

“I’d like to invite you to a small group I do on Thursday afternoons in our parish hall. It’s five or six guys, sometimes seven if one of the ladies shows up. Just a few of us old soldiers helping each other heal.”

“I’m actually leaving to go back to DC later today,” James said apologetically.

That knowing smile made James think that the Father knew something he didn’t.

“Well, if you’re ever in the area, feel free to stop by. Here’s my card, my cell’s on the bottom. Please don’t hesitate to call, any time of day or night.”

“…thank you, sir.”

“Consider it a chaplain’s responsibility to look after those in his care.”

“I’ll let you know next time I’m in town. My friend was in the Navy, I might bring her with me.”

“The more, the merrier.” The priest stood and snaked an arm up to the top of one of the bookshelves, lifting down a dust-covered teddy bear that had seen better days. One of the eyes had fallen off, its faded blue coat was torn, and the once-brown fur had been sun-bleached to a grayish tan over the years. A small, barely visible patch on the shoulder of the coat caught James’s eye: a stylized wing, gray and stained. “I’m not entirely sure why I’m telling you this, but this was my sister’s favorite toy. She’s the reason I became an Army chaplain, you know. She was so brave, always wanted to be a soldier. Just like Captain America and Bucky Barnes, she said.”

With a sinking feeling, James realized what Father Saunders was telling him. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

The smaller man set the bear on his desk and sat back down, smiling fondly at it. “Leukemia when she was sixteen. We had time to make our peace with it, but I still miss her every day. I keep her bear up there so he can see out the window for her. She loved looking for rainbows. Always kept a rainbow of hair ties on her wrist, even after she’d lost all her hair. Never replaced one of the green
ones, though. Mom thought she’d lost it but she insisted she gave it to a superhero.”

James blinked as the Bucky Bear on the desk was suddenly swinging from the hand of a small girl in a spacious museum. Another blink and he was back in the comfortable armchair, coffee finally lukewarm. Suddenly, the odd familiarity of Father Saunders’s face clicked into place.

Slowly, he reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out a limp, faded green band. While it had been better preserved than he expected, time and temperature had taken their toll on the elastic.

Father Saunders looked decidedly confused.

“I’m… older than I look,” James offered as an awkward explanation. “I never got the chance to give it back.” He placed the hair tie next to the bear. “Your sister was the first person in a long while who wasn’t afraid of me.”

“So, you’re…” He trailed off, pointing at the bear, then at James, sitting down slowly.

“Yeah. Or at least, I was. I have to use a different name, now, since I kind of… broke… DC.”

“HYDRA.” It wasn’t a question. James nodded. “They found you when you fell and turned you into the Winter Soldier.” He nodded again. While there weren’t many of his files in Natasha’s leak during the battle in the Triskelion, there were enough that most people knew what the Winter Soldier was, even if they didn’t know it was him. Anyone remotely intelligent could piece it together if they looked hard enough, though.

Leaning forward and lacing his fingers together in front of him, Father Saunders looked solemnly at James. “Your burden is a heavy one, and one that I don’t envy. But you need to remember that while you have a demon inside you, you are not responsible for its sins.”

“The media would beg to differ.”

“The media thrives on sensationalism and fearmongering. They could probably use a few exorcisms, if I’m honest.”

James set the empty mug down on a spare coaster before his hands started to shake. He could feel himself getting tense and tried to subtly work through his relaxation exercises. “I gotta be pretty careful. Turned in all my knives and guns when I surrendered to SHIELD in April. Haven’t touched one since, I’m pretty proud of that. I’m also terrified of what might happen if I end up having to… become him again.”

“So you retired.”

“It’s safer that way.”

“Safer for whom? Who are you protecting, Sergeant? The world, your friends, or yourself?”

James didn’t have an answer for him.

***

Father Saunders’s question continued to eat away at him the entire way back to the Tower and through the flight back down to DC. One of the Quinjet pilots had agreed to stop over on his way to Ohio to set up field ops for the upcoming mission. It had been a relief; James much preferred the spartan comfort of the tactical jet to the cramped, uncomfortable sardine cans on wings that ferried civilian traffic.
The jet’s cargo was mostly communications equipment. Three young technicians played cards quietly at a small steel table on the other side of the cargo bay, occasionally shooting him wary glances. He’d just found out the hard way that the pilot wasn’t much of a talker, so he retreated to an empty corner of the cargo bay and leaned his head back against the gently thrumming wall. Closing his eyes, he tried to clear his mind enough that he might get some rest, maybe even a short nap.

One of the techs had other ideas, apparently. No sooner had James finally gotten the tension to slip out of his shoulders than the soft click of footsteps approached him. He slowly opened his eyes, not having to fake the flat, annoyed look he gave the tech.

The boy looked to be in his very early twenties, still soft around the edges. His hair was dyed painfully pink, and small gauges stretched his earlobes. ‘Out of regs’ didn’t even begin to cover it, but maybe comm techs got some special leeway. Be nice to the cable monkeys and you’ll be able to call home, or something like that. Nonetheless, the standard black field suit was ill-fitting on the tech’s slightly plump frame.

“What.”

“Um… sir…”

“You outrank me, kid. Don’t ‘sir’ me.” James tried not to growl at him, with limited success.

The tech’s face turned nearly the same color as his hair. “The guys and I, we, um, we were wondering if you want to join us? We’re starting the next round, we can deal you in.”

James shifted his eyes to the table. “Poker?” The tech gave him a nervous smile and nodded. “Sorry, kid. Maybe another time.”

Disappointed, the tech ambled back to the table and cut the deck before he dealt the next hand.

Leaning his head back again, James let the thrum of the engines lull him back into his half-meditative state.

He didn’t realize he’d fallen asleep until turbulence jostled him awake.

“Five minutes til touchdown,” the pilot called from the cockpit.

The techs were arguing good-naturedly about the latest round of betting, and James casually glanced over their cards as he stood and walked past them on his way to the cockpit. None of them had a particularly good hand, but the one who’d spoken to him had a chance at winning if he kept up his bluff.

The pilot acknowledged him with a nod, and flipped a few switches. They slid through the clouds, rocking and jolting slightly from the crosswinds. Eventually, the landing lights came into view; James thanked the pilot and walked back to the hatch.

He punched the open button once they’d safely landed, swung his bag onto his shoulder and clomped down the short ramp at the back of the jet, waving as he left. A car was already waiting for him and he slid into the backseat.

Thankfully, the chauffeur didn’t talk to him. James wasn’t in a particularly foul mood, he just didn’t have much of an interest in making conversation with strangers anymore.

The Harley was parked in the carport when the chauffeur dropped him off, and James inwardly breathed a sigh of relief. Mickey was one of two people, Sam being the other, that hadn’t bothered
him about his choice to retire. Of course, she’d only known who he was for a few days, but in that
time she’d never encouraged him to get back in the field. James had the feeling she knew exactly
how he felt.

“Lucy, I’m home!” he called as he pushed the front door shut behind him and threw the bolt.

“Oh, piss off.” Mickey grinned at him from the armchair, tablet on her lap in its keyboard case.
“Good to have you back, Jim. Good flight?”

“Kids these days suck at poker,” he whined as he tossed his bag next to the couch and slumped
down. “You should have seen how they were betting.”

“Tsk, tsk, James. It’s not gentlemanly to look at another player’s cards.”

He grunted at her and kicked off his shoes, placing them under the coffee table. “Not if you’re not in
the game.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not how it works.”

Rolling his eyes, James checked his watch. “Got any plans for the afternoon?”

“Yeah, there’s the weekly pickup basketball game at the gym in an hour. Want to come with?”

He almost declined out of habit, but Father Saunders’s voice echoed again in his head, and he
shrugged. “Sure, why not? Let’s head over early, might as well do some lifting while I’m there.”

“Don’t ask me to spot you.” Mickey flipped the tablet case shut and dropped it on the coffee table.
“The Johnson boys might, but you’ll need both of them. I think you’ve got a few hundred pounds
on anyone else for bench press. You might want to cut it back, by the way, some of the guys are
starting to talk.”

“Oh please, it’s only five hundred pounds. That’s taking it easy for me.”

“Do the words super, soldier, and serum ring any bells, asshat?” Sauntering into the bedroom,
Mickey pulled open a drawer and rifled through her clothes. “You fixed the dryer, right? I’ll need to
do laundry tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I put in the new thermostat on Thursday while you were in class.”

“Awesome.” She emerged from the bedroom in a tank top and loose basketball shorts, tennis shoes
dangling from her hand. “Go get changed, we might as well leave now.”

“Yes, mom,” James muttered, even though he still did as he was told. He swapped his soft, well-
worn jeans and t-shirt for one of the long sleeve compression shirts and – “Mickey, are you wearing
my shorts?”

“Yeah. Laundry, remember? Your sweatpants are like a foot too long for me because you’re a
giraffe.”

Rolling his eyes, he grabbed the sweatpants she’d mentioned, tying the drawstring just above his
hips.

After fishing a set of thin gloves out from the bottom of the basket, James pulled on his running
shoes and joined Mickey in the entryway. Phone, keys, wallet, and watch all went into a thin cinch-
strap bag and he was ready to go.
The late afternoon sun was bright and warm, a welcome change after the blustery, rainy streets of New York. James felt his shoulders gradually loosen and relax back into his Army-straight posture from where he’d been subconsciously hunching them against the bitter cold for the past day. Yeah, he was never moving to New York.

The gym was surprisingly empty, so James decided to take advantage of the open machines as Mickey started up one of the treadmills. Working slowly through the list of exercises the physical therapists had given him, James let himself get lulled by the repetitive motions and counting. He was in the middle of a set of crunches when Mickey waved at him.

“The guys just got here, finish up and meet us at the court.”

He counted off the last of his set and stood, taking a deep breath and holding it for a few seconds before letting it out. Swinging his bag over his shoulder, he followed the signs to the basketball courts and saw Mickey chatting with eight men. Well, rather, six men and two boys.

One of the boys was a full six inches taller than James and about as big around as his arm. The other boy was much younger and smaller but had quick eyes and looked like he could slip around the larger men like a wet seal.

Mickey turned to smile at him as he walked up to the group.

“Hey, it’s Tall, Dark, and Punchy,” one of the men said, spinning a basketball on his finger. “Just keep that right hook off the court, okay?”

“Sean, be nice.” Mickey shot James an apologetic look.

“James Grant. Jim.” He shook a few hands and slid his bag over to the collapsed bleachers. “How’re we setting teams?”

“Shirts and skins?” someone suggested. Even as the others nodded and murmured assent, James felt that familiar chill of unease.

“Jim and I are shirts.”

He caught Mickey’s eye and nodded subtly in thanks. She wouldn’t have brought him here if she hadn’t planned for this.

“Okay, split up.” Sean started dribbling and pointed at a few guys to push them to one team or the other.

“Is he always like this?” James asked Mickey as quietly as he could once they’d taken up their positions on their side of the court. She nodded, mouth pulled into an unamused line.

“He’s always a bit of an ass, but it’ll get better as the game goes on.”

“God, I hope the rules haven’t changed.”

“You’ll do fine. Just act normal.”

“Hah.”

And with that, the game was under way.

He’d been apprehensive at first, unsure of whether this was a good idea. But, within minutes of the game starting, he found himself having more fun than he’d expected. It was easy to join in to the
harmless banter thrown around between the rest of the players, and the tall, red-haired, skinny boy on
his team even started teasing James from time to time.

“Hey, Rapunzel,” the boy called before he passed the ball to James. Spinning neatly around the man
covering him, James lobbed the ball and it whushed through the basket effortlessly.

“Rapunzel? Seriously?” James gave the boy a playful shove as they took up positions at the center
of the court again. “It’s not that long.”

“Dude, you look like a grumpy dumpster prince.”

“Oh, fuck off.” He was grinning, despite himself.

Over the next half hour, James learned more about Mickey’s ragtag group of friends. Sean hid a
heart of gold behind his frosty, snarky attitude, and volunteered at the local animal shelter. Miguel, a
bulky, stocky Filipino, barely spoke English but understood much more than he let on. The two
twins, Adam and Fred, were inseparable and finished each other’s sentences. The red-haired
beanpole was Ian, face covered in a lunar landscape of acne scars. George was Ian’s younger
brother, and their dad, Michael, was trying hard to pass on his fitness mania to his sons. Otto was a
quiet but quick young German man who had emigrated less than a year ago and tried hard to hide his
accent.

During a break, James sat down next to Otto and reached out to touch his toes, trying to loosen the
stiffness in his calves. “What part of Germany are you from?” he asked Otto, switching languages
effortlessly.

Startled, Otto smiled awkwardly at him, the faint crinkles around his eyes deepening. “Cologne. Your
accent, you are from Hannover?”

“No. Well, sort of. The man who taught me German was.” That much was true; his German
was barely conversational and heavily accented when HYDRA had found him, so they’d quickly
remedied that. His teacher had been a soft-spoken, patient, kind old man who delighted in such an
advent student - the serum had drastically improved James’s ability to retain new languages.

“You should ever have the chance to visit Germany, let me know. I can tell you where the tourist
traps are and where to get the best food.”

“Oh, I’m sure of it.” James laughed. “I’ve been to Berlin a few times but that was a while ago. Saw the wall come down, actually.”

“You must have been quite young.”

For the second time that day, James mumbled, “I’m older than I look.”

Otto raised an eyebrow. “I’m sure there’s a story there.”

“You have no idea.” What was it with him and putting his foot in it? Doc wasn’t going to be
happy about this.

“Perhaps another time. Shall we?” Bouncing up on his feet, Otto reached down a hand. James
took it and stood, returning Otto’s grin. “You’re heavier than you look, too. Did you eat rocks for
lunch?”

“No, just some of that ironwood you call bread.” One of James’s favorite breads was thick,
dense, dark, nutty, and decidedly German. Each loaf weighed as much as a small cat and chewing it
was a jaw workout, but the flavors were unparalleled.

Mickey poked James in the side and he jumped, turning to face her.

“Ow. What the hell?”

“Stop talking in languages the rest of us don’t understand.”

He stuck out his tongue at her as he sauntered to his spot on the court. Otto flashed him another grin, and the teams squared off again.

***

Mickey, the less sweaty of the two of them, ran into the small Chinese joint to grab dinner on their way back. The air was beginning to cool as late afternoon turned into night, and James was glad he’d worn sweatpants. Shivering slightly as she walked out of the restaurant with a large, bulky bag, Mickey fell into step next to James as they continued walking home.

“No. Mine.” She pulled the food away from him as he offered to carry it. “It’s freezing out here and I can’t feel my hands. I get to hold the hot food, shove off.”

“You’re the one who said she’d be fine without a coat.”

“You’re the one who didn’t bring one.”

“Since when am I responsible for that?”

“Since your balls dropped,” she said matter-of-factly. “Societal standards say that any and every gentleman should be responsible for the well-being and warmth of any lady around them.”

“Well, clearly, that rules both of us out.”

“You’re hilarious. You should start doing stand-up.”

“Yeah, sure, the one-armed amnesiac who knows more ways to kill a dame than ask her to dance. That’d be great for the kids.” James keyed in the access code at the apartment complex gate and waited for the solid click of the latch releasing before he pushed the gate open. “I can teach them how to dance ballet, clean a rifle, make a soufflé, and set up a stakeout. Their parents will love me.”

“You don’t give yourself enough credit, Jim,” Mickey admonished as she shouldered open their apartment door. “The fact that you’re living on your own and are relatively functional is a medical miracle.”

“Yeah, people keep telling me that,” he grumbled. It was a huge pet peeve; people were so fixated on how well he was doing, they sometimes neglected to understand how broken he still felt.

“Shower call.”

“All yours. I’ll get this on the table so it’s ready when you’re done.” Mickey undid the knot in the top of the takeout bag and reached in to pull the small boxy containers out.

James kept his shower quick since he didn’t want the food to get cold, leaving his hair tied back so that it didn’t get wet. Rather than dig through his laundry to find another pair of sweatpants, he stuffed his face in the ones he’d worn at the gym - and decided that the trip to the laundry basket was worth it. He pulled on one of Steve’s old sweatshirts and followed his nose to the feast on the table.

Mickey had already spooned out what she wanted, and James just ate the remainder directly out of
the containers, swallowing his dinner-time prescriptions with a side of a few painkillers to kill the creeping headache he’d had all day. By the time he was done, every single one of the takeout cartons was clean. There wasn’t really a such thing as leftovers unless he got the portions wrong and ended up cooking or ordering enough for a small army.

After dinner, while Mickey started attacking her homework, James sat down with his latest journal and thumbed through it til he found the first blank page. He tried to add a new entry every day or so, mostly so that he had a record he could look back on if he ever forgot anything. Between his three sets of journals, the nightmare/dream record, the pre-DC record, and his daily entries, he was finally starting to feel like his memory was piecing itself back together.

HYDRA had been surgically precise when they’d electrocuted his brain, regularly shorting out his ability to convert short-term memory into long-term. Well, they’d eventually refined the process enough to allow for such precision. At first, it had been much more of a brute-force method, hypnotizing him and temporarily frying enough of his higher functions to allow the leftovers to be molded into the Winter Soldier. Most subjects had only needed one, maybe two treatments. His brain, enhanced by Zola’s experimentation, fought to repair itself and was always just this side of winning until the chair’s technology had improved.

Most of his therapy involved working to rebuild the connections that had been severed. When they’d started working together, Doc had a hunch that very little information had been truly lost, since the results of his first brain scan had showed a number of dormant sections but nothing dead. Thankfully, she’d been mostly correct. Memories began to resurface almost immediately, first in tidal waves, then in smaller spurts here and there.

The pages in the notebook were marked every so often with small plastic sticky tabs, color-coded for symptom sets. Blue was a depressive or suicidal episode, green was dissociation, purple told him when he’d had seizures, with the type of seizure abbreviated on the tab. Red tabs poked out of the entries when he’d had his danger nights. Orange was language trouble, and yellow was a catch-all for physical symptoms that didn’t match another category. He used pink to mark when his medications changed.

The first half of the notebook was brightly marked with every color tab, with at least one tab per page. Sometimes he’d had to get help writing the entry, when his hands had shaken too badly or he’d lost fine motor control temporarily. Even though his left hand was generally steadier, it still complained whenever the scattered signals from his brain confused the servos.

James smiled to himself when he checked the date of the last colored tab: over three weeks ago. Judging by the decreasing frequency of markers he was, objectively, getting better. Subjectively, he felt he was doing pretty damn well considering everything that had happened.

He clicked his pencil a few times to push the lead out, and started recounting the past two days in neat, steady lettering. Cursive had proven to be too much of a challenge at first so he’d spent time developing the careful, typewriter-accurate shapes he wrote with now. Sometimes, the simple act of drawing his pencil through those well-defined arcs and lines was enough to settle his mind after a rough day.

Focusing mainly on his discussion with Father Saunders, James tried to collect, define, and express his thoughts on how – if – faith fit into his life any more, how he fit into the world now, and whether he was ready for the world to have a place for him. He forced himself to stop thinking about it in terms of whether the world was ready for him, and focused more on whether he was ready to be known again.

Four pages later, he finally looked up from his notebook, twisting his neck slowly to ease the cramps.
Mickey had long since finished her studying and had pulled her guitar out of its case, strings clicking softly as she sat in the armchair, picking at them without an amplifier.

Classic Stratocaster lines were accented with a deep, glossy black enamel, and she absently fiddled with one of the pegs to adjust a string before she noticed him watching. "Oh. I'm not distracting you, am I?"

"No, I should probably finish this up soon anyway. My hand's starting to cramp up.” His fingers were getting tired more quickly than he’d expected, but he chalked it up to a lack of sleep and two very full days.

“What’re you writing?"

“It’s a daily journal. Helps me keep track of stuff if I have trouble remembering it. I also log my symptoms here.” James explained what each of the colors meant and how he used it as a log to track his progress from day to day. “Basically, it’s hard to see progress sometimes when I plateau for a few weeks so this helps me remember how far I’ve come.”

Her eyes were fixed on the notebook as she leaned on her guitar, her lips pulling in as she sucked on them.

“Here, it’s ok if you look at it. I don’t mind.” Leaning forward, James held the notebook out to her. “Might help you understand some stuff better.”

Wordlessly, she took the book and let it fall open to a random page near the beginning. Her eyes widened and the muscles in her jaw pulsed as she gritted her teeth; James’s drawings of the electrode headpiece covered both pages. “They… that’s what they…”

“Yeah.” Without realizing it, James rubbed the left side of his face where he’d always feel ghost bruises from thrashing against the electrode plates.

“Looks like they were sending a lot of current straight into the prefrontal cortex. Makes sense, that’s part of what does your planning and memory processing. It also controls your personality.”

“That’s what the neurologist said. Once I was lucid enough to understand what was going on and why my situation is so unique, I agreed to let the doctors use me as a case study. I’ve been a lab rat before, but at least this time the doctors actually ask me questions and I got to meet some of the people I’ve helped.”

“You must have had a lot of CT scans,” Mickey said as she handed the notebook back. Shallow lines creased her forehead. “Hopefully they got some good information for you.”

“Yeah, I guess. There were a few patients with pretty bad language issues that one of the doctors was able to help using the research they did. One kid was in a car accident that messed up his brain pretty bad. He could understand what you told him, but had to use a computer to talk to you because he couldn’t shape the words any more. The doctor started working with him using the stuff he got from me and now the kid’s slurring words together. It’s still hard to understand him but it gets easier the more you listen.”

“Well, that’s pretty cool.” Mickey leaned back in the armchair and shifted her guitar, idly strumming quiet chords. “You haven’t had any blue tabs for a while.”

“Been doing pretty well,” James admitted with a smile. “The suicidal ideation stopped within the first few months, once it really sank in that I’m safe now. Sam helped a lot with that, talked me down a few times when I was still all over the place. I still get depressive episodes, but the happy
pills help with that. Also means that I don’t get as manic about stuff any more; it just kind of decreases all of the emotions, not just the bad ones. But it’s worth it, I think. Means I’m relatively stable now.”

“Better living through chemistry.”

He snorted and set the notebook down on the coffee table. “Something like that.” Getting up, James stretched his shoulders and popped his neck, ignoring the slightly sickening feeling of the reinforced bones shifting around. A deep breath in made him wrinkle his nose. “Did the neighbors burn something again?”

Mickey sniffed and raised an eyebrow. “I don’t smell anything.”

“Hm. Must just be me.” He walked into the bathroom and tugged the tie out of his hair, loosening the strands with his fingers before working through it with his comb. “I swear, though, something’s fucking burning. Smells awful. What are they cooking there, old tires?”

The sliding door in the living room creaked open, and then closed a second later. “Can’t smell it outside. You sure you’re not just imagining it?”

The comb clattered out of his hand and into the sink. James reached down to grab it, but his hand wouldn’t cooperate, simply shaking and hanging limply from his wrist. The sizzling feeling in his gut and on the back of his neck made him glance up; his face was getting flushed.

“How, hell,” he muttered, and stumbled out of the bathroom, leaning against the wall with his left arm. His heartbeat started to skyrocket, only making the jitters worse, and his legs felt like wooden logs under him as he tripped and barely caught himself against the door frame of the bedroom.

“Jim?”

He tried to speak, but his jaw had locked up and all that came out was a grunt as he clung to the door jamb.

Mickey’s head poked under his arm and she pushed him forward, wrapping her own arm around his torso. She propelled him toward the bed and nudged him into the middle of it, shifting her body pillow so that it cushioned the headboard.

James pawed at his pocket as she rolled him onto his side, and managed to drag his phone out before his whole body stiffened and his eyes rolled back in his head, mouth opening slightly as he lost consciousness.

Mickey grabbed his right wrist and pressed his thumb to the sensor, unlocking the phone. She stared at the apps for a few seconds, unsure what to do, until the screen started moving of its own accord.

“I’m JARVIS, I’m here to help,” a smooth British voice said through the phone speakers. “Please tell me what you need. I can display most of his vitals easily.”

“Um. Let’s have heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature, a timer starting at five seconds, and any brain activity you can chart for me.” Square graphs popped up on the screen, giving her all the information she’d asked for. “Huh. Cool.”

A pained grunt drew Mickey’s attention back to her friend, and she quickly moved around the bed, dragging the nightstand out of reach and checking for any other dangers. The spasms had started, and she watched carefully, noting the differences in movement between his right and left arms. His right arm was going through fairly standard convulsions, but the mechanical left arm was whirring
angrily and the plates clattered in and out at random.

Glancing between the readouts and James, Mickey reached out to tug the body pillow a little further towards the left after James shifted on the bed. A faint jingling sound drew her eyes to his left wrist, where a small silver bracelet with a red MedicAlert symbol rattled against his arm and watch.

An acrid smell and a stain told her he’d lost control of his body completely. A film of sweat covered his skin, his face gray and shining as he grimaced.

After three minutes and forty-six seconds, the convulsions faded and James lay on the bed, panting shallowly. His eyes, screwed shut, gradually relaxed and after another minute he opened them to stare sightlessly at the wall. The pupils were blown wide, gradually contracting as his motor control returned.

Mickey walked into the living room, retrieved his notebook and pencil, and sat down on the edge of the bed next to James. She wrote quickly, as neatly as she could, putting down everything she could think of and using medical shorthand to save time. Picking up James’s phone again, she asked JARVIS if he would send the readouts to James’s doctor once they normalized.

“Certainly. He’s well on his way and should be conscious in another minute if this episode remains consistent with prior ones.”

After flipping through a few entries to learn the color-coding system, Mickey checked both inside covers and found a purple tab, writing ‘TC’ on it before sticking it to the page she’d written her notes on. She added the date, elapsed time, and end time of the seizure, and wrote her name and phone number at the bottom in case his doctor had any questions. Pulling out her own phone, she listened to James’s gradually steadier breathing as she tapped out a message to Sam.

James had a TC seizure. Can you call his doc? Should make an appt tomorrow AM.

After a few seconds, her phone buzzed. Do you need me there? I’ll call Dr. Ellmore and his neurologist right now.

No, I think we’re ok. I’ll let you know. Thanks.

Keep me posted.

She locked her phone and set it and the notebook on the nightstand. Turning back to James, she took his hand and squeezed it gently. “Hey.”

His eyes shifted to her face. “Mickey? Where am I? What happened?”

“Yes, I’m right here, I got you. You’re in your apartment in DC. You just had a seizure. How’re you feeling?”

“Fuggin’ hell.” He pushed himself up onto his arms, locking his left elbow to prevent himself from collapsing back onto the mattress. Something squelched uncomfortably in his pants. “Don’t tell me I shat myself. Aw, man, pissed myself too. Goddammit.” The words were slurred, vowels coming out slightly strange. It took Mickey a few seconds to realize that he was speaking with a faint German accent.

“You’ve got a waterproof mattress cover, remember? I’ll run a load of laundry tonight, we can get everything cleaned up really easy. Going to lift you up and get you into the bathroom, okay?”

When he nodded, Mickey leaned over towards him and wrapped her arms around his torso, half-dragging him off the bed and supporting his weight as she guided him to the bathroom. Even though
he twitched and tensed uncomfortably at the contact, he didn’t pull away. He wasn’t sure he could. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

She helped him pull off his clothes, and made him lean on the counter when his hands wouldn’t work properly as he tried to wipe himself clean.

“I’m sorry,” he said, head hanging forward. “This is so embarrassing.”

“You know, you never did ask what I did in the Navy, James. I wanted to join the Marines, but the Corps doesn’t have its own doctors. My Mum was always sick and my brother and I had to take care of her because our step-dad was always drowning himself in a bottle. Because of that, I wanted to be a doctor so bad, so I joined the Navy and got myself assigned to a group of jarheads first chance I got. Next best thing to being an actual Marine.”

She dropped another wad of paper in the toilet and flushed. “Most of the time I was just treating blisters and dehydration, making sure the boys in my platoon were in fighting condition. Wrapped up a lot of twisted ankles and knees, stitched and glued up a bunch of cuts. Humped more gear across the desert than I ever thought I could, because my boys believed in me.” She kept her voice soft, and James realized she was trying to distract him from his embarrassment.

“I got some shit from my Marines at first. They had to make sure I was up for it, being their medic. After a few weeks I’d earned their respect – hard to do with a group like that, but I managed it. I’d had my surgeries years before I joined, so everyone just assumed I was a cis woman until one of the boys found out and outed me to the rest of them. He ended up cleaning the latrines for the next month, and my boys got so fiercely protective of me that it was a little scary at times.

“When I slipped and fell on a march and twisted up my ankle, the kid that outed me offered to take as much of my gear as he could carry, and the rest of it got split up among the other guys. We got back to base camp and I got off my feet as much as I could for a few days, and the boys spoiled me rotten until I was all healed up. They even started calling me ‘Doc’ shortly after that. Felt pretty good, that.”

“That’s how military guys work. We take care of our girls, especially if they’re wearing the same uniform.” A faded memory of Peggy, with her rosy-red smile and bouncy curls, made James’s own mouth curl upward slightly into a smile. He raised his tired eyes to his reflection and saw deep shadows above his cheeks. His lips were gray and his half-combed hair hung limply around his face, slick and clumped from his sweat.

Involuntarily twitching as Mickey got a little too close to home, James shifted uncomfortably. “There’ve been plenty of times where I would have loved to have a pretty dame’s hands wandering around down there, but this is definitely not one of them.”

“I’m a doctor, James, not a dame. If I wanted to play with a dick, I would have kept my own attached.” Another plop and a flush. “You do have a nice ass though, gotta say.”

“…thanks.”

Mickey flipped down the seat on the toilet and had him sit there while she turned on the tap in the bathtub. She tossed a towel on his lap, letting him cover himself while they waited for the tub to fill.

“Get yourself in there, take a good long soak. You’ve just jacked up your muscles so it’ll do you good to warm them up a bit. I’ll go take care of the bed while you’re doing that, ok? Give you some privacy while you finish cleaning up.”
James nodded as she helped him into the tub, sighing as the gently warm water soothed the aches in his joints. There wasn’t any danger of him slipping under the surface – he was still a bit woozy but had enough coordination to keep himself upright. He quickly scrubbed down as best he could with his hands still weak and shaky. Leaning back as far as he could, James let himself half-float in the warm water, knees poking up through the surface.

Mickey’s footsteps tracked around the apartment as she straightened the bedroom and took care of the soiled linens and clothes. Eventually, she came back in to sit on the toilet, holding his notebook.

“I wrote down as much as I could, and Sam’s going to take you to see your doctor tomorrow so she can look at this. JARVIS just told me he sent off your readings, so that should help. Where do they come from, anyway?”

“HYDRA implanted a bunch of sensors when they upgraded my arm the last time. Tony found out how to access them and made an app so that I can be monitored without any special equipment. By the way, thanks, JARVIS.”

“You’re quite welcome, sir,” the phone said. “Please do not hesitate if I can be of any further assistance.”

“Well, that’s not weird at all.” Mickey stared at the phone in her hand, more than a little unnerved. “He’s not listening all the time, is he?”

“Nah, he knows to only start if I ask him or if I need help but can’t ask for it. He’s pretty useful, for the most part. And thank you, Mickey. I’m sorry you had to see that. Wasn’t expecting one, I’d been doing so well.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Like I got hit by a deuce-and-a-half.” He let his head thunk against the shower wall.

“Sounds about right. Did anything trigger this one? Any prodromal symptoms or auras?”

James closed his eyes as he thought. “Been feeling off a bit today. Maybe the cold from New York shocked my system a bit, I’ve been sensitive to it since I escaped. Had a mild headache all day that got worse during basketball. Had some weird muscle cramps I don’t normally get, too. And that weird smell, the burning one.”

Mickey nodded as she jotted it down.

“I’m a little dizzy, lightheaded, and – move.” He nearly spat out the last word, hauling himself halfway out of the tub and yanking up the lid on the toilet as soon as she’d vacated it. Dinner came ripping out of him, leaving him with his forehead against the toilet seat, gasping for air. He vaguely noticed that Mickey was holding his hair back.

After dry heaving a few more times, James pushed himself shakily back into the tub, splashing water on his face and swishing some around in his mouth to wash out the taste.

He leaned forward in the tub, hugging his knees into his chest. A bottle of water dropped into view, the cap already twisted off, and her palm cupped a few of his pills.

“Get these and some water into you. I’ve got the bed ready, you’re staying in there tonight, don’t argue. Medic’s orders.”

Once he’d drained the bottle, Mickey took it and helped him stand on the bathmat before flipping the
lever for the tub drain. She tapped the rod for the shower curtain and waited until he’d gripped it in both hands before wrapping him in a towel.

“I can dry myself off,” James grumbled.

“Hands on the curtain rod, I don’t want you falling over.”

“I’m not a baby, Mickey. I can do this myself.”

She stopped and looked up at him, sighing. “James, you just had a tonic-clonic seizure. I should be taking you to the hospital. I’m honestly not sure how you’re even standing right now.”

“No hospitals.”

“Which is why we’re still here and you’re going to sit down and let me comb out your hair before you get into bed.”

He couldn’t help but harrumph a little bit as he tied the towel around his waist and plopped down on the toilet seat. Mickey draped another towel around his shoulders and picked up the forgotten comb from the sink, gently working through the ends of his hair before drawing the rest of the tangles out.

“Have you thought about cutting it short again? It’s pretty cute in your war photos.”

“I did, yeah. But during my intake exam the doctor found this.” He reached up and parted his hair behind his right ear, revealing the faint spidery writing tattooed into his scalp. “It’s my serial number from when I was in Kresichberg. None of the other Invaders had them so I think it was just the lab rats. Long hair hides it better. They tattooed it on before the serum, otherwise it’d probably be gone by now.”

Mickey nodded, not pushing the subject further. She asked him about the product he was using, what Tony had put in it, and made some suggestions for how to care for his hair better if he really was determined to keep it long. Eventually, they were chatting about one of her high school chemistry classes where the students had been playing with scent compounds and one of the kids accidentally created something that smelled like a stale dumpster.

Once his hair was smooth and straight again, James stood up slowly, testing his legs. They were steadier now, so he made his way back out into the living room.

“Bedroom. You need a good night’s sleep.”

“She raised an eyebrow and pointed, and James sighed, turning around. There were a pair of loose cotton shorts waiting for him on the bed, and he pulled them on, no longer caring whether Mickey was watching. She’d seen all he had to offer at this point anyway. The sheets were fresh and soft, and James heard the dull rumble as the washing machine spun up to its mid-cycle; she must have tossed the old sheets straight in.

“Thanks for cleaning everything up. Sorry I made a mess.” He pulled back the blankets and slid under them – Mickey had grabbed the ones he liked from the living room for him. The weighted blanket that Sam had given him to help with his night terrors and sensory overloads was spread out on top.

“Seriously, you don’t need to apologize. It’s ok.” Mickey leaned against the door frame. “That’s what friends do, we take care of each other.”
“Been meaning to ask - why’d you leave the service?” As he stared up at the ceiling, his eyelids started to feel heavy.

There was a pause before she answered. “Medical retirement. One of my Marines and I got hit by an IED, that’s what my scars are from. Tore up the right side of my body pretty badly, the other boy died in my arms. Never got cleared for duty after that, got sent home with a purple heart, a messed-up head, and a big fat check. Jack did his best to help with my medical bills, but they ate up so much money that we both ended up in a lot of debt. I was only able to pay it all off with his life insurance.”

“He must’ve loved you a lot,” James mumbled.

“Yeah. Yeah, I really miss him.” Mickey’s voice cracked, and she cleared her throat before continuing. “I’m gonna get ready for bed, grab my things and let you get some rest. You gonna be ok?”

“Mmhm.”

It was only when she flicked the light switch off several minutes later that the panic set in and he called after her. “Mickey…”

“Yeah?” She poked her head through the doorway again.

“Keep your phone on? JARVIS can buzz you if I have another one. I sometimes get partials after these.”

“Of course. Good night.”

“Night.”

He rolled over on his side and pulled his knees into his chest, the soothing pressure of the weighted blanket helping his body relax.

***

In the middle of the night, James woke up with a start, drenched in sweat, mouth hanging open and cotton-dry. He jumped again as a hand pressed against his right shoulder, rolling him gently onto his back.

“JARVIS woke me up. You ok?” Mickey’s face, puffy from sleep, hovered above his own.

“Nightmare.” Pressing the heels of his hands against his eyes, James scrubbed back and forth until spots and stars exploded in his vision. “Bad one.”

Mickey pulled back the covers and nudged him to the side. “Scoot.” As soon as he did, she slid under the blankets and dropped her pillow next to his. “Sam said you do better when there’s someone with you, that you sleep easier.”

Whenever he’d stayed the night at Sam’s house, his friend had pulled out an air mattress and passed out on the floor next to James’s bed, ready at a moment’s notice if anything happened.

“Thanks.”

“Just don’t spork me and we’re good.”

His mouth quirked up in a smile, and he shifted his head on the pillow before closing his eyes, letting
himself fall back into sleep.

***

A few hours later, James woke again, this time because the water Mickey had given him was making itself known. Getting up slowly to avoid jostling her, James padded to the bathroom and relieved himself. When he walked back into the bedroom, Mickey was blinking sleepily at him.

“I’m fine, just had to pee.”

She grunted softly and rolled over onto her stomach, burying her face under one of her arms.

After he slid back into bed, James tugged the blankets back up over her shoulders and rested his hand there for a minute before rolling over with his back toward her. He drew up his knees again, curled his arms into his chest, and focused on breathing deep and slow until he drifted back under.

***

The morning saw James alone in his bed again, Mickey already awake and moving quietly around the kitchen. She’d written a note on a post-it and stuck it to his alarm clock where he’d see it when he woke up –  Appointment with Dr. at 1030. Neurologist will be there too.

He glanced at the time on the clock – 0747 – and rolled over, snuggling deeper into his warm, soft personal heaven. Plenty of time to snooze until the alarm beeped at 0900.

Chapter End Notes

I tried to do as much research about seizures as I could, but please let me know if I got any of it wrong. Don’t want to misrepresent anything. I’m using a tiny bit of artistic license in place given the fact that James heals extremely fast, which would likely let him bounce back from his seizures quicker than most people.

I also feel like I should clarify that Mickey’s asexual (but not sex-repulsed), in case I didn’t do a good job of making that clear in previous chapters. Also, with her experience as a military combat doctor, she’s seen a lot worse than a naked man with feces on his ass.

Also, here's an awesome sketch of Mickey by defilerwyrm:
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

**Trigger warnings:**
- Doctor’s visit
- Visiting an old friend’s grave
- Halloween (nothing scary or horror)
- Mild panic attack

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tired, lidded eyes lifted themselves up, glaring through a curtain of limp brown hair at the four doctors in front of him. If they wanted any more blood samples, any more readings, any more whatever the fuck they needed, they should have just taken it already. Instead, the doctors stood in front of him in a line.

The short one, balding and bulbous, peered at the Soldier through huge round glasses that magnified his eyes to comical proportions. The tallest one, lanky and made up of nothing but angles and straight lines, didn’t hide the fact that she was staring openly at the disheveled man in front of her. To her left was a smaller woman, wiry and woven from whipcord, with curly brown hair and gentle eyes. The last doctor, a middle-aged man with fading auburn hair, tilted his head as he calmly studied the charts on his clipboard.

Without moving his head, the Soldier let his eyes flick from doctor to doctor, almost enjoying their discomfort. He’d been told repeatedly that he’d made the right choice, SHIELD would protect him now, he didn’t have to fear HYDRA any more.

These soft doctors, they didn’t treat him anything like the ones who’d worked for HYDRA. Their hands were timid, hesitant, afraid – afraid of hurting him. He’d certainly never enjoyed his treatment at the hands of HYDRA, but he’d come to expect a certain roughness, a disinterested pragmatism as he was serviced just like the weapon he was.

He hadn’t expected to be treated like he was made of glass. It just felt… wrong.

The curly haired woman cleared her throat, and the Soldier fixed his eyes on her.

“Sergeant Barnes, I’m Dr. Ellmore. This is Dr. Arnolds,” she said, indicating the round, bespectacled man. “Drs. Fowler and Henson are with us as well.” Fowler was the tall woman, and Henson was the one who buried his face in his clipboard. “We’ll be responsible for overseeing your treatment, rehabilitation, and reintroduction to civilian life. There’s also a large staff of other medical personnel able to assist with anything we might need to help you through your recovery.”

The Soldier flicked his eyes between the doctors again, the movement of his chest as he breathed the only sign he was still alive. He sat calmly, cross-legged on the hospital bed he’d become so familiar with, left hand on his knee, right arm in a sling after the surgery to fix his damaged shoulder. He’d been in that position for hours without moving.

Eventually he spoke, the first words he’d said since the Captain’s friend had brought him to SHIELD the day before.
“Who did you piss off?”

The doctors exchanged confused glances, and Arnolds spoke. His voice was soft, wavery, and delicate, but had an unexpected firmness, a confidence behind it. “We didn’t, sir.” Arnolds pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with one carrot-shaped finger. “We volunteered. All of us.”

“Why?”

“Because, sir, you’re… You’re James Buchanan Barnes. You’re the reason SHIELD exists.”

***

In the end, James snoozed the alarm several times before the luscious smell of coffee lured him into the land of the living.

He dragged himself to the kitchen table and slumped into his usual chair, eyes barely open, and reflexively grabbed for the mug that was waiting for him. It took him until he could see the bottom of it before he noticed Sam watching him from across the table, amused.

“How long’ve you been here?”

“About an hour.” Sam took a noisy sip of his own coffee and raised an eyebrow. “Came in to check on you but you were dead to the world.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” James pushed himself up and refilled his mug from the carafe on the counter. “When do I need to be presentable?”

“We’re heading out in forty-five. I’d recommend putting something else on, maybe a pair of pants, or even a shirt if you’re feeling ambitious.”

He glanced down and realized he was still in nothing but his sleep shorts. Sitting back down, he nursed the second cup of coffee now that he was beginning to feel the effects of the first. “Hey Micks, you can hang on to the bike keys for a while, I’m not going to drive anything until I get the all-clear from Doc.” It had been a challenge to get his driver’s license in the first place, but eventually stubbornness had won out after he made the point that he’d ride whether he was licensed or not.

“Probably wise.” She slid a plate of eggs, bacon, and toast in front of him. “Eat.”

“Y’know, I get that you’re not paying rent, and it’s awesome that you’re cooking all the time, but you don’t have to be my personal chef.”

“Yeah, I kind of do. I’ve seen how you cook. Worse, I’ve tasted it. Shut up, take your happy pills, and eat your breakfast.”

Sam just grinned at him.

“I cook just fuckin’ fine,” James grumbled.

“For a bachelor, yeah. But damn, son, if that shit ain’t straight outta basic training. I never want to see shit on a shingle again.” Lacing his fingers behind his head, Sam leaned back in his chair and stretched. “I sure hope you weren’t the one feeding you two back in Brooklyn. Steve’s gotten way better but I had to take him to cooking classes for months.”

“I’ll have you know I did some pretty awesome shit with beans, cheese, and potatoes.”
Mickey made a *hurk* noise and just started laughing after he flipped her off. “You are *way* too much fun to mess with.”

“Fuckin’ assholes that call themselves friends. At least I didn’t have to wrap every goddamn limb in reflective belts back then.” After rinsing off his plate and setting it in the sink, James trudged back into the bedroom and started pulling on the most comfortable clean clothes he could find, some of his most well-worn jeans, a loose shirt, and a big fluffy sweater. As good as he knew his ass looked in skinny jeans, today was *not* the day for that. Not with his hands still dancing the jitterbug and his legs still stumping around like pegs.

Beelining for the couch, James laid himself out on it and threw an arm over his eyes. “Make the sun turn off.”

“Two cups of coffee and he still isn’t a morning person.” Mickey was sipping her usual cup of black tea, laden with honey and milk until it barely resembled tea any more. “I seriously wonder how Reveille ever managed to get him vertical.”

“Yeah, been dealing with this for months. You should have seen him at first. Could barely drag him out of bed before the double digits, and it was well into the afternoon before he was even coherent. Slept like eighteen hours a day for a long time.”

“I can hear you, jackass. And it was twelve. Twelve hours a day.” Pulling himself up so that he could see Mickey and Sam, he yawned expansively. “I wasn’t able to have a normal sleep cycle for, what, seventy years, and people are giving me shit about catching up whenever I can.”

“Pretty sure that isn’t how sleep debt works, Barnes.”

“Well, to be honest, there’s never been a case study on the long-term effects of total sleep deprivation, mostly because of the ethics of the testing,” Mickey mused. “Sleep debt is definitely a thing, but I’m not sure how much it applies to such an extreme case.”

“Okay, fuck you two, I’m taking a nap.” James slid back down the couch and rolled over, stuffing his face in the corner of the cushions so they couldn’t see him smiling. Sam might have a vague idea of how much interaction like this really helped him, but the fact that he actually had *friends* now was something he hadn’t even thought possible at first. No, not just friends. A family.

Despite his best intentions, James did actually fall asleep again for a bit, groggily tottering to his feet when Sam shook him back awake.

“C’mon, man, time to go. Go finish getting ready.”

Rather than attempt to tame his hair, he just scraped the messy mass of brown fluff into a short ponytail and quickly brushed his teeth, slapped on some deodorant, and buzzed his face smooth.

“Dunno why I bother, Doc’s seen me looking a hell of a lot worse.”

“The fact that you *are* bothering says you aren’t worse,” Sam reminded him kindly. “You may not see it every day, but you’re making a lot of progress. Remember that. You got your notebooks?”

“Right, thanks.”

Notebooks retrieved and stuffed in his backpack, James shoved his feet into a pair of boat shoes Natasha had insisted he buy, silently thanking her for her foresight. He didn’t want to deal with laces today.
“Let me know when you’re on your way back, ok?” Mickey reached out a fist and he bapped it with his own before Sam led the way down to the carport.

As soon as the car doors were closed, Sam gave James a piercing look. “You know, she adores you.”

“It’s not like that, Sam.”

“Not sayin’ it has to be.” The engine cranked and they pulled out, Sam spinning the wheel to bring the front of the car around. “You two have gotten pretty close since you walked her out of the bar. I’m saying that’s a good thing. People need friends like that, especially people like us.”

Like us. That ‘us’ meant the world to him, even though he wasn’t sure he could say why. He allowed himself a small, self-conscious smile. “Yeah, she’s pretty awesome. Not entirely sure why she hasn’t run away screaming, yet, though.”

“Maybe because you’re actually a decent guy who’s simply been through a lotta really bad shit?”

“Jury’s still out on that one.”

His only answer at first was the rhythmic click of the blinker as Sam pulled around a corner. “Well… to be fair, you did rip the steering wheel of my old car clean off the goddamn dashboard. That was an interesting claim to file, let me tell you.”

“Oh, for- are you ever gonna let that go?” James complained good-naturedly. “That was one time. And you didn’t die, did you?”

Sam laughed with him, then after a pause said, “You know there’s gonna be a trial when you go public.”

“If I go public.”

“Can’t hide forever, man.”

“I can try.” James stared out the window at the buildings that swept past. “I’ve got a good thing going right now. Awesome roommate, good friends, nice city, finally stable enough to live on my own. I don’t want to fuck this up. It’s been ages since someone’s shoved a gun in my hands, and that feels pretty good. As much as I hate to say it, there’s probably gonna be a day when I have to pick one up again, but it doesn’t have to be any time soon, right?”

“Provided the bad guys don’t get any fancy ideas.”

Grunting noncommittally, James let his forehead thump against the car window. “I just want to feel like a good guy again, you know? Spent so long being a bad guy that I’m not sure I remember how to do anything else.”

“Like I said, you’ve been doing really well. That’s why I cleared Fury to call you in for the briefing.”

“You did that?” His eyes whipped around to stare at Sam, who just shrugged, one hand on the wheel, the other on the parking brake handle.

“They wanted an educated opinion on whether you’re healthy enough to take on some minor non-combat duties. I figured it might help, knowing that you were able to help make sure everyone got home safely. Intel’s hard to come by these days, especially if you want it reliable and accurate.”
“Thanks… I guess. But why not just ask Doc?”

“She only sees you once or twice a week.”

“Yeah, speaking of which, why the shit am I seeing her on a Sunday? That’s supposed to be her day off.”

Sam palmed the wheel as he slotted the car into a parking spot in front of a nondescript gray medical office, ratcheting up the handbrake before shutting off the engine. “She did say any time of day or night, any day of the week.”

“She’s got a family,” James huffed as he got out of the car. “Her daughter has softball games on Sundays.”

“Game doesn’t start til two,” a voice called, and James turned to see Doc walking towards the office, a Starbucks tray with four cups in her hand. “Besides, Sarah told me that an emergency trumps her games. There’ll always be next week’s.”

“This is hardly an emergency.” James followed Doc into the building, Sam trailing behind him. “Mickey took care of everything.”

“Dr. Arnolds took a look at the data Mickey sent over last night; he wants to talk about changing your anticonvulsants.”

“Any particular reason? You said there’s no such thing as a foolproof medication.”

Doc unlocked her office door, and James reached in to hold it open for her while she balanced the coffees carefully. “Thank you. And that’s true, for the most part. But with everything that was done to you, we need to go over every major episode to make sure that there isn’t anything to be concerned about.”

“Are we doing any scans today?” James asked as he swung off his backpack and lowered himself into the comfortable armchair across from the chair Doc usually sat in during their sessions. Sam followed him in and leaned against the wall next to the door.

“Please, Mr. Wilson, sit.” Doc pointed to her chair, and Sam shrugged, then sat opposite James. “There’s not much of a reason to, since Mickey was able to capture most of the data from your sensors. Stark definitely did a good job setting that up, by the way. We got better data than we ever could have by monitoring you after the fact.” Spinning the cups around so she could read the labels, Dr. Ellmore pulled two of them out of the tray and held them out. “I figured you two have already had some, so I got you some lattes with only one shot each, and yours has soy milk, James.”

“Doc, you are amazing.” James double-checked the labeling on his cup as Sam hummed appreciatively. Not only was Doc good at her job, but she went out of her way to do small, simple nice things. One time she’d brought in the leftover muffins from one of her daughter’s baking binges. James hadn’t known he liked cranberry cornbread until then.

“So, give me the rundown of what happened last night.”

He dug through his bag for the notebook Mickey had written in. “Mickey took some notes for you. Here.”

Doc took a few minutes to scan through the entry, and left the notebook open on her desk when she finished. “You never mentioned Mickey was a Navy doctor.”
“Never came up til last night. I think she might’ve hinted at it, but…”

“Our boy here can be pretty dense sometimes.” Sam winked at James as he casually sipped his coffee.

“Indeed.” Doc’s mouth twitched up into a smile. “Well, Dr. Arnolds should be here in about fifteen minutes. Is there anything you’d like to add to what’s written here?”

“Did she note the weird burning smell? Started about twenty-five, maybe thirty seconds before I felt the first big symptoms. If Mickey hadn’t helped me, I probably would have collapsed in the hallway.”

“Yes, that’s in here. You’ve never had an aura like that before though, not one that I know of.”

“Yeah, I think going up to New York messed me up a bit. Mickey got down everything I could think of. Oh, I ended up blowing chunks afterwards. I was fine for a few minutes, then it just all came up.”

Dr. Ellmore nodded and made some notes of her own on one of the yellow pads that lay around her office. “Any more spells of nausea or vomiting after that?”

“No, just that one.”

Dr. Arnolds’s large head popped in through the door. “I hope I’m not too late! Please, forgive my tardiness, traffic was hell.”

“Just in time. Here you go, I think I got it right this time.” Dr. Ellmore handed her colleague the last cup, and he took a cautious sip.

“Perfect, my darling. Thank you.” The plump neurologist gladly took the chair Sam offered him. “Thank you, young man.”

Sam just smiled and leaned against the wall to James’s left.

“So, James,” Dr. Arnolds began, and the next few hours were a whirlwind of discussions, hypotheses, questions, medication facts, and lists of side effects and interactions. Within the first few minutes, James had asked for his notebook back and begun writing down everything he could, not trusting his memory with the information.

Two and a half hours and seven pages of notes later, James and Sam finally walked out of the medical office.

James slotted his notebook into the backpack as they walked towards Sam’s car. Before opening the passenger door, James leaned against the car and let his head drop down onto his arms. “Fuck, man.”

“You ok?” Sam tilted his head, stretching out his arms on the roof of the car. “That was a lot to keep track of.”

“Yeah, wrote most of it down. Just… I want to, I dunno, not be broken any more?”

“Don’t say that. Don’t you goddamn say that. You’re not broken, man. You never were.”

“I’m a special kind of crazy, flyboy. They should’ve stuffed me in the loony bin months ago.”

“You keep talkin’ like that, I’m gonna have to tell Dot.”
James groaned, automatically bracing himself for one of her lectures. “Please don’t. I really don’t want to deal with that right now.”

“Then stop treating yourself like you don’t deserve to get better.”

Grunting emphatically, James opened the car door and dropped into the seat. “I’m just waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

Sam frowned at him through the driver’s door window, and sighed before settling himself behind the steering wheel. “You got any plans today?”

“Not really, no. Have something in mind?”

Sam *mmhmd* at him, and put the car in gear. They didn’t talk for the next few minutes, until Sam carefully parallel-parked himself in front of a florist.

“Um, what...?”

“Relax, man, they’re not for you.”

“Doesn’t help much...”

But Sam had already gotten out and trotted his way into the menagerie of colorful blooms. A few minutes later, he came back with a handful of white carnations. They ended up in James’s hands after Sam got back in, and James spent the next twenty minutes wondering what in the hell they were doing with flowers.

He figured it out fairly quickly as Sam cut the engine in the visitor parking at Arlington National Cemetery.

Following a few paces behind his friend, James let his eyes wander over the endless rows of pale white gravestones. *As uniform in death as in life*, he thought, then mentally chided himself. Every single one of the men and women buried here had a story to tell.

He was surprised to see that some of the markers bore the names of multiple wars. One soldier they passed had served in the Second World War, Vietnam, and Korea.

Sam finally stopped, turning to face one of the gravestones. Snagging one of the small green cones from a stone box, James gently arranged the flowers in the cone and held it out to Sam.

The marker looked almost identical to the hundreds of others they’d walked by. While Sam found the right spot for the flowers, James traced the clean, black letters etched into the white stone.

IAN H RILEY
MSGT USAF
FEB 17 1983
JUL 2 2008
PURPLE HEART
BARNES CROSS

Sam stood, brushing the dirt from his hands on his jeans. He crossed his arms, pursing his lips for a moment before speaking, voice low and quiet. “That one’s named after you, you know. Awarded to those of us that ‘give their lives during acts of exceptional valor.’ You were the first recipient, they pinned it on you in ’46.”
“I… didn’t know that. Um. Okay.”

“We were in Afghanistan. My second tour, his third. Choppers couldn’t get in so they had us suit up. Things went smooth, then Riley got hit with an RPG. Had to listen to his screams the whole way down. Nothin’ I could do.”

Unsure of what to say, James reached out a hand and gently squeezed his friend’s shoulder.

“ Ended up separating not too long after that. Couldn’t find much of a reason to keep serving, you know? Bounced around for a bit, started going to the group sessions at the VA. Started getting more involved, ended up working there. I guess I’m still rescuing people, just in a different way now.”

James shoved his hands under his arms, hunching up against the sudden cold breeze that blew through the cemetery. “I still feel awful about your wings.”

“Don’t. Stark made the EXO-7s, he’s working on an EXO-8 suit for me.”

“I bet Riley would love it.”

Sam chuckled quietly. “Yeah, probably.” Scuffing his shoes as he turned, he set his shoulders against the wind and jerked his head back the way they’d come. “C’mon.”

“You know where Morita is? Steve said he’s here somewhere.”

“Dude, everyone knows where he is. Let’s keep this quick though, I’m freezing my ass off now.” Sam turned left at one of the walkways and led James through another maze of white slabs. After a few minutes, they arrived at a dark granite marker that was broader and thicker than the others, rough-hewn with the front face polished smooth.

Morita’s name, rank, dates, and medals were carved flawlessly into the stone above a large, bold ‘HOWLING COMMANDO’ and the stylized wing they’d used as their unit patch. As he stared at the memorial to his old friend, James felt his throat tighten. He swallowed thickly, and walked up to the marker, leaning on it before his knees gave way.

“Hey, pal,” he whispered. The pit of loneliness he felt was tempered by the simple fact that Morita had a grave here – not just a plain white stone, either, but an honored position, set apart from the rest, a memorial that really did him justice. It was better than any of them could have hoped for, with the Japanese internment and all of the prejudice. He’d been given a simple choice - face the gangs trying to force his family from their farm, send his kids and wife into an internment camp, or enlist. It hadn’t been much of a choice.

Even so, it had been hard when James had to come to terms with how time had passed for the rest of the Invaders. Morita and Monty, gone. Gabe and Peggy, it was a good day if they remembered your face. Dum Dum, blind in one eye, crotchety as ever, wrinklier and smellier than an old prune. Frenchie, well, Steve had yet to find him.

“You gonna be okay, man?”

James took a deep breath, running the fingers of his right hand over the bumpy surface of the gravestone. “Yeah. Yeah, I think so. Just kind of hit home.”

“You need a minute?”

Another deep breath, and he was finally ready to turn and walk away. “I’m good. Really glad he’s
here, got his own spot, special place.” Gabe and Morita had been marginalized at best, frequently openly ridiculed and insulted. As much as he and Steve had tried to stand up for their men, as much as Gabe and Morita said it didn’t bother them, James knew it had taken its toll. Neither of them expected a hero’s welcome when they returned.

It was good to see they’d been wrong.

An image popped into his mind: an empty cigarette box, his face pulled into a grumpy scowl, and a worn, dirty hand offering him a fresh pack.

“I still owe him a pack of smokes.”

“Hm?”

“Ran out right before the train mission. Really wanted a cigarette to steady my nerves and whatnot. Morita tossed me his last pack, said I could owe him, give him one of mine when we got back to base camp. Never got the chance.”

“Steve probably took care of it.”

“Yeah, probably, knowing him.”

They continued the rest of the way in silence, and Sam clicked the radio on during the ride back to the apartment. James passed the time by munching his way through three of the protein bars he kept in his backpack.

Once James had leaned out and punched in his access code, Sam pulled around the complex and had to hit the brakes in surprise when they saw a SHIELD SUV in the carport.

“…do you want me to come in with you?”

James blinked a few times and pressed his lips together. “Yeah. Yeah, this can’t be good.”

Reversing and then stuffing the sedan into the too-small guest space, Sam kept glancing over at the truck. “Wonder why they’re here.”

“Mickey?”

“Nah, Hill ran a check while you were in New York, she came back clean. Report says she had close ties to some of the guys on STRIKE Alpha but that doesn’t really mean much.”

The concrete steps echoed as James trudged up them, digging in his pocket for his keys. Before he reached the door, it opened, and Hill gestured for him to come in.

“Should I even ask how you got in?” James complained as he kicked off his shoes. Mickey was sitting at the table, and a quick look told him that she wasn’t in any danger. In fact, she seemed to be filling out paperwork. “What’s all this about?”

“Apparently I’m becoming a SHIELD agent,” Mickey mumbled.

“Given last night’s episode, a glowing recommendation from your doctors, and her service record, I made the call to fast-track things a bit. Anyone responsible for your care needs Level 3 access or higher.” The maximum access level for a civilian was Level 2. It made sense, but that didn’t mean he had to like it. Hill fixed him with that no-nonsense, deal-with-it look that she’d probably spent a decade perfecting.
Grumbling wordlessly, James walked into his bedroom, dropped his backpack by the door, and laid himself out facedown diagonally across the mattress, lacing his fingers behind his head. Three voices drifted in, the conversation indistinct as he forced himself not to listen. Eventually, the voices stopped, Sam called out a goodbye and left, and Mickey’s footsteps scuffed the carpet as she came into the bedroom.

“Hey.”

“Mmmrmgh.”

The mattress shifted as Mickey sat on it. “You know this is a good thing, right?”

“Mmhmm.”

“But you don’t like it?”

“Mm-mm.”

“You going to tell me why?”

James pushed himself up on his elbows and tried to blow the hair out of his eyes. “A week and a half ago, you started staying here. Three days ago, I show you my arm, Steve comes by, we help you move out. Yesterday, I have a fucking seizure. What part of ‘damn, this is moving fast’ doesn’t make sense?”

“The part where you forget that I’ve known you for a few months now and I don’t abandon my friends because I find out something new about them that I didn’t expect.”

He met her eyes, guilt seeping in through his grumpiness. That was exactly the behavior that had upset her when she’d come out to her family and friends.

“You’ve always been you, I just didn’t know about some parts of you until recently. If this is what I have to do to make sure we’re both safe and okay, then this is what I have to do. You going to respect that, or are we going to have to have a talk about it?”

“No.” He dropped his head back down onto the pillow. “No, we’re good.”

“Good.”

“Do we have to move yet?”

“No, we’ve still got autonomy for now. I’m going to transfer to the program they have here in DC, and Hill’s letting me do online classes for everything else. She’s signed me off to start as a third-year, and she’s given me clearance to act as your primary handler.”

“Do we have to call you a handler? I hate that word.”

“It’s what’s on the job description.” He heard Mickey fidget a little. “Oh, and they’re paying me. I’m starting as an O-2 equivalent.”

That made him look up. “Nice.”

She shrugged. “Hazard pay, apparently. Don’t know what I’m going to do with the money, to be honest.”

“Well, maybe I can stop bumming off Stark and bum off you instead.”
“Oh, that reminds me, Hill had something she wanted to talk to you about, if you’re done pouting.”

“‘m not pouting,” James muttered as he rolled himself off the bed and made his way back out into the apartment. Hill was sitting at the table, waiting patiently, a white sheet of paper with some writing on it positioned where James normally sat.

He picked up the sheet as he eased himself into the chair, scanning over it. “I thought I wasn’t allowed a bank acc… this can’t be right. That’s way too much.” Pointing to the figure printed at the bottom of the page, James tilted it towards Hill. Mickey, sitting opposite him, flicked her eyes back and forth, clearly interested.

She didn’t break eye contact. “It’s correct. That’s your combat pay, plus inflation and interest, from 1945. Director Carter apparently set up two accounts, one for you and one for Steve, in the hopes that any of the next ten years’ search and rescue efforts were successful.”

“Ten years?” James repeated, not sure he’d heard correctly.

Hill raised an eyebrow. “Ten years.”

“Hill, this makes me a…” He quickly recounted the commas. “I’m nearly a billionaire.”

“Indeed.”

“I can’t accept this.”

“Well, it’s either this, or return to active duty. I can’t get a retirement package for you since you never technically served in SHIELD, and if we shift you to disability unemployment then I can’t give you the same medical package and you’ll have to change doctors.”

“You do realize that most of this is probably gonna end up going to a charity or something? Fuckin’ hell, I don’t even know what to do with this kind of money.”

“Buy me a bike?” Mickey grinned at him, her smile only growing wider as he rolled his eyes.

“I just need your signature on that line, Barnes, and then this is all official.”

He took the proffered pen, and scribbled something resembling his given name before handing the sheet and pen back to Hill. She stood, tucking the sheet into a briefcase he hadn’t noticed.

“You’ll receive a card and your first statement in the mail within a few days. Thank you both for your time. Agent Draymond, we’ll be in touch.”

With that, Hill efficiently left the apartment, footsteps rhythmic as she descended the stairs. The truck’s motor thrummed and faded as she drove away.

James leaned forward and let his forehead thunk against the table. “Can we not have anything drastic and life-altering happen for a few days, please?”

“Is now the time to mention that I secretly own fifteen cats?”

He tilted his head to glare at her with one eye. “Not funny.”

“What’s the matter?” she asked with a smirk. “Not a cat person.”

“Badly allergic. Or at least, I was. Haven’t exactly had the opportunity to test it since Zola juiced me up.”
“Well, if it helps, I was joking. I’m not joking, however, when I tell you that we’re gonna binge watch Doctor Who with couch food the whole fucking day and most of next week. Sam brought over one of Stark’s projection pods for us.”

“Mickey, you are a goddess.” James quickly transplanted himself to the sofa bed, still unfolded, and burrowed himself into the blankets and pillows. “When do you start at SHIELD?”

“Hill’s giving me two weeks so that she can get everything sorted out with my transfer from the community college.” She set a small black cube down on the coffee table, spun it so it was facing the correct way, and tapped the top of it a few times. “I figured you and I could get some R&R, have you take it easy for a few days, I can enjoy not having any homework, and we can stay indoors during the cold snap that’s supposed to hit tomorrow.”

Mickey disappeared into the bedroom and came back out with an armful of James’s blankets, pillows balanced on top. “I’ve got a big bag of candy in the cabinet for Friday, the neighbors say there’s a bunch of kids that go trick-or-treating.”

“Man, you got this all planned out.”

“Like Hill said, I’m responsible for you now, whatever that means.”

“I still wish she hadn’t said, ‘handler.’ I’m not some kid in witness protection, and I’m not the fucking Soldier anymore either.”

“No one said you were,” Mickey reassured him as she made her own blanket nest. The pod threw a bright display up on the wall, the season posters for various shows slowly scrolling to the left. “How do we control this thing?”

“Good afternoon.”

“What the fu… of course. Hi, JARVIS.” James was starting to lose his knee-jerk reaction to the AI’s disembodied voice, but it still regularly gave him the heebie-jeebies.

Mickey snickered, and crossed to the kitchen. She came back with two glasses of water and a six-pack of root beer, handing him one glass and setting the six-pack down between them.

“Aw, man…”

“No alcohol for twenty-four hours.”

“Oh, fuck off.” He smiled as he spoke, though, pulling two bottles out and popping the caps off with his metal thumb.

“Now that’s a neat trick. Cheers.”

The first sip of delicious, bitter, fizzy nectar sent him spinning back in time. “Oh, man,” he sighed. “Where on earth did you find the real stuff?” He’d been disappointed to find out that modern root beer was nothing like what he’d grown up with, ever since sassafras oil had been banned. Something about cancer, that was all he understood.

“Had to have it imported. I’ve been trying to get my hands on some for a while now, and Sam called in a favor to one of the guys he knows that’s stationed overseas. JARVIS, start us off at the beginning, please?”

He’d already seen the first few seasons, but it couldn’t hurt to watch them again. At least this time
they both knew enough of the story to have some good laughs about the special effects.

“I’m pretty relieved that some good old-fashioned root beer is all it takes to keep you happy,” Mickey said as they watched Rose go through her day in the shop. “At least it wasn’t bananas.”

“It’s weird, I never really liked bananas before. The new ones, they’re not so bad though.”

“Sam says Steve had an aneurysm the first time he had a banana after getting thawed.”

“I’ll believe it.”

After the first episode, Mickey started to disentangle herself from the blankets. “Sandwiches?”

“Stay put.” When she started to protest, James held up a finger. “I know how you feel about my cooking, but this is one thing I can do really well. Grilled cheese?”

“As long as it isn’t burned.”

“You wound me.” He slapped a hand on his chest, leaning to the side dramatically.

“Goofball. I’m gonna start the next one without you if you don’t get cracking.”

A few minutes later, he brought over plates topped with large, gooey messes. He’d mixed muenster and cheddar, tossed in some bacon and avocado, and used mayonnaise on the bread, a trick he’d discovered ages ago in Brooklyn when they couldn’t afford butter. Judging by the look on Mickey’s face once she’d taken a bite, it passed muster.

Wiggling his way back under his heap of blankets, James asked JARVIS to start playing the next episode.

***

“For the last time, Tony, you know I don’t do parties. Plus, Mickey’s already got this all planned out.” James shifted his phone from one shoulder to the other, pinning it back in place against his head as he shook brightly-colored candies into a large bowl.

“C’mon, man, just say the word and I’ll have two of my suits pick you and your girl up.” Tony never seemed to understand that travelling encased in an autonomous Iron Man suit was quite possibly the most terrifying way to fly.

“No. Fuck no. Never doing that again. Not just a fuck no, a hell fucking no. Also, she’s not… ugh. Look…”

“You’re killin’ me, Starbucks.”

“…what did you just… Chrissakes, Tony, I’ll be there for Thanksgiving, isn’t that good enough?” Satisfied with the heaping avalanche waiting to happen, James tucked the corner of the not-quite-empty bag of candy under his belt and picked up the huge bowl. “I’ll even bring Mickey.”

“I’ll hold you to that. You’re missing out on one hell of a party, though.”

“I know. Maybe next time.” They both knew that next time, or the time after that, or even the time after that, probably wouldn’t be it. After the first violent, catatonic panic attack, James had learned to steer well clear of Tony’s parties.

“I’ll say hi to everyone for you. Seriously, we’re gonna miss you. Have fun!” The phone let out a
dull click as Tony hung up, and James balanced the candy bowl on one hip as he stuffed his phone into his pocket. He used his foot to pull down the handle on the front door and snagged his toe behind it, repeating the motion awkwardly in reverse to close the door after making sure he had his keys.

Mickey was waiting for him on the street side of the admin office, the only spot they could really entertain trick-or-treaters since the complex was gated.

Several parents, grandparents, and childless adults were already there; James counted nine people. Mickey waved to him as he walked up, pointing to the step stool she’d brought down for the candy. He couldn’t help himself but start laughing at her costume for the second time that night; she’d dressed up as Astrid from that cute dragon movie, complete with the dime-store blonde wig.

Setting the bowl down carefully and catching a few of the mini Snickers as they fell off the pile, James smiled cautiously at the other adults. In the almost-six months he’d been living here, he hadn’t gone out of his way to interact with his neighbors. Hopefully none of them had heard him when he’d woken up screaming nearly every night during the first month.

“Nice costume,” one of the men said, an average-height, stocky guy around forty years old with all the signs of Scottish heritage. “Mickey was just telling us you served in the Army for a while. I guess we know what inspired you to enlist.”

For lack of a better idea, James had thrown something together that bore a strong resemblance to his old Invaders uniform. The jacket had arrived in the mail the day before, with a grumpy note from Natasha saying that she’d want it back soon (even though it was technically his). Pants had been fairly easy; boots and gaiters could be had from the local surplus store, and they were even period correct.

He’d been worried that someone would cotton on to him, but Mickey assured him that people would only see a passing resemblance at best. After all, most of the pictures were grainy and old.

“Just doing my duty,” James replied with a grin that he hoped didn’t look fake as he shook the other man’s hand. He couldn’t safely say that he’d been drafted, his world had come crashing down, he hadn’t had a choice. Just one man in a faceless multitude. “Got out not too long ago, brought some ghosts back with me that I’ve been trying to handle.”

Nods and understanding mumbles met his words, and he huffed out a breath as he dropped into the folding chair next to Mickey. She raised an eyebrow at him – you ok? He nodded, trying to hide the apprehension. The costume was a horrible, horrible idea. Even with the synthetic skin on his left hand, covered with a glove, he was terrified someone might recognize him. Terrified that they’d figure him out, run him out of town.

He closed his eyes for a moment and took several deep breaths to calm his nerves, repeating Dr. Ellmore’s mantra of hijack it back, these aren’t your thoughts. Eventually his shoulders relaxed, his heart rate slowed, and he opened his eyes to see a tottering youngster waddle up in a loose black and white skeleton suit.

“Trick or treat!” the kid squeaked, and held out his tiny plastic pumpkin.

The other adults cooed and fawned over him, complimenting his costume and pretending to be frightened. Eventually, the boy picked out a few choice candies from the bowl, and without a second thought James leaned forward and tossed a few more pieces into the pumpkin. He winked at the kid, his face pulling up into a fond smile, and watched the little white bones wiggle their way back to waiting parents.
Over the next hour he studied his neighbors, trying to place faces to names, and names to apartments. Susan from 203 was dressed up as a strangely adorable witch, and her husband Gary was constantly adjusting the itchy straw that poked out of his scarecrow costume. Francisco and Maria, the couple from across the landing at the top of his stairs, weren’t wearing costumes but James could see the longing in their eyes as each child came up to them.

The stocky man, Patrick, had a leather jacket, jeans, well-worn boots, a white ribbed tank top, and some strangely-styled hair including massive sideburns. Mickey quietly explained to James that the X-Men were a set of comic book superheroes loosely based off of some urban legends from way back when. Patrick was dressed as the one called Wolverine, and James had to stifle a laugh when he realized this ‘Wolverine’ was supposed to be his old war buddy Logan.

The last of them, a young man in his very early twenties, was dressed up as Bilbo Baggins complete with pointed ears and wooly feet. He’d introduced himself as Flynn, studying makeup and costuming and hoping to get into the big pictures someday. Flynn was soft-spoken and shy, spending most of the time on his phone. Several of the kids that came by were dressed up as dwarves, mostly Thorin, and Flynn obligingly took selfies with them with a parent’s phone as well as his own. Quiet or not, James could tell the young man was enjoying himself.

James even found himself clapping enthusiastically when a young girl, dressed as an Olympic gold medal gymnast, executed a perfect back handspring right there on the small lawn. He stood, grinning ear to ear, and unbuttoned his coat as she walked up to the candy bowl after her quick stunt.

“James?” Mickey gave him a confused look when he draped his coat and utility belt over her arm. He’d worn a simple black turtleneck under the coat, and unconsciously tugged his gloves back into place even though he had his skin sleeve on.

“I’m fine, promise. Hey, peanut,” he said to the tiny gymnast. “How long’ve you been taking lessons?”

“Nine months.” She hunched in her shoulders and smiled bashfully, dragging one toe along the ground. “Coach says I’m learning real fast.”

“Well I’d say your coach is spot-on. You doing all your stretches?”

She nodded enthusiastically, eyes wide. “Are you a gymnast?”

“Yeah, I am. Want me to show you something?” When she nodded again, he turned, sizing up the area available to him. It wasn’t an ideal surface, but he could make do. Walking over to the spot that would give him the most room, he turned his back towards the others and leaned over, dropping into a bridge, then kicking his legs over like he had at the gym. After a few walkovers, he turned the momentum into open flips and ended the run with a tucked double backflip, sticking the landing with about three feet of grass to spare.

Mickey rolled her eyes as she handed his coat and belt back. “Any opportunity to show off, I swear.”

The smile on the little girl’s face was bright as the sun. “How do I do that?”

Kneeling down in front of her as he tugged his coat back on, James gave her a serious look. “Practice hard, practice smart, and always listen to your coach. Never go without a spotter, and never push it if it hurts. Give it everything you’ve got, and always, always shoot for the gold. Think you can do that for me, doll?”
“Uh-huh!”

He wasn’t expecting the air to whuff out of his lungs as the girl launched herself into his chest for a hug, or Mickey’s peals of laughter as she saw his startled expression.

“Thank you, mister! Happy Halloween!”

And with that, the little gymnast was gone, bouncing off to the houses down the street.

“I thought you said you were in the Army,” Patrick teased. “Didn’t know that was part of the training.”

“It wasn’t. I ended up picking that up elsewhere.”

“Didn’t you want to be an acrobat or something?” Relief washed over him as Mickey gave him a decent cover.

James sat back down, pulling out the tie in his hair and smoothing back the strands that had come loose before retying his ponytail. “Yeah, something like that. Always loved the circus as a kid.”

“Hell man, you could go to the Olympics.”

Laughing slightly, James shook his head. “Nah, I’m nowhere near that good. Just a few party tricks, that’s all.”

“Oh, stop being so modest.” Mickey fussed with her costume, adjusting some of the straps.

Flynn was still glued to his phone, and James noticed with a chill that he was holding it horizontally. “You didn’t take a video of that, did you? Please tell me that’s not online.”

“Relax, man. Wasn’t gonna post it without asking you.”

“Please don’t.”

“Fine, whatever. You ever thought about being a stunt double, though? Plenty of big guys like you out there in the movie industry that need doubles.”

“…no, I really don’t want my face on a screen.”

“Suit yourself. Could make a lot of money.”

James didn’t respond. The familiar worry, tugging at the back of his mind, had returned. He’d been pushing the envelope way too much lately. Never should have worn this costume, shouldn’t have done the flips. Shouldn’t have showed up, should have stayed in the apartment…


“God, I’m a mess,” he muttered, quiet enough that no one else could hear.

“No, you’re a veteran. It looks the same sometimes, but trust me, there’s a world of difference.” She reached out and squeezed his knee gently, and this time he didn’t flinch away. The shock was still there, but it didn’t actively hurt like it had before. “There’s a big group of kids and they’re all dressed up as the Avengers. Game face for me?”
He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders as best he could, and gave her an attempt at a smile.

“No, that’s a wincing frown. Try again. You can do this.”

The second attempt must have been more successful, because she gave his knee another squeeze and stood up. Just as the kids came into earshot, Mickey winked at him and said in her best radio announcer voice, “After all, we can’t let Captain America see his best friend Bucky Barnes down in the dumps, now can we, folks?”

And, indeed, the gaggle of kids was led by a boy who couldn’t have been more than seven years old in a comically muscle-padded Captain America suit. As soon as the boy laid eyes on James, he squealed, “BUCKY!” and ran full-tilt towards him.

James dropped immediately into older brother mode. He scooped up the boy and spun around, shouting, “STEVE!” back at him, grinning from ear to ear. “Captain!” Setting the small blue bundle of joy down, James clicked his heels together and gave him a solemn salute. “Sergeant Barnes reporting for duty, sir!”

Mickey had to hide her giggles behind a hand as James went down on one knee and leaned in, whispering in a conspiratorial tone. “Seen any HYDRA goons around, Cap?”

“No, Bucky, but that’s because Black Widow took care of them all!” The boy grabbed a smaller girl by the wrist, dragging her forward. Breaking character temporarily, he gave James a shy smile and said quietly, “She’s my sister. Isn’t she awesome?”

“Miss Romanoff, it is indeed an honor.” James held out his hand, smiling when a tiny little hand slotted into his and shook it timidly.

The rest of the team was standing there somewhat awkwardly, so James addressed each of them by their characters’ names as he passed out the candy. “I’ll sleep soundly tonight knowing that the Avengers are in the neighborhood to keep us safe.” He stood again and gave them his best salute, trying and failing to not smile when they all returned it.

The little Cap raised his shield and hollered, “ONWARD!” A tiny hammer followed him, and the rest of the group trotted off to the next house.

“Well, you are just full of surprises tonight, Jimmy my boy.” Patrick clapped him on the shoulder and laughed. “Could have sworn you were Bucky Barnes himself there for a minute.”

Oh, shit. Too far.

“Yeah, I’ve been told I look a lot like him,” James replied awkwardly, desperately casting a line for a white lie. “I think he was a great-uncle or something? I dunno. Grandma Proctor didn’t talk about her side of the family much.”

“What’d you do in the Army?”

“Served in the 42nd, mostly did disaster relief but ended up in the sandbox twice. I was one of the riflemen in my squad.” Sam had helped him form that part of his cover story, so he trusted it to be watertight.

James was relieved when Patrick simply stuck out a hand and said, “Thank you for your service.”

He shook it, feeling like he’d just dodged another bullet, one that he should have seen coming.

“Like I said, just doing my duty.”
The rest of the evening passed uneventfully. James hung back, guarding the candy bowl, cracking jokes with the kids that came by. Through the whirlwind of trick-or-treaters, he’d had to top up the bowl with the remainder in the bag he’d brought, and they were nearly out by the end of the night.

“Anybody want these? I’ll eat them all before I go to bed tonight if no one gets them away from me.” James held out the large bowl, seemingly larger now that it was mostly empty, and Susan volunteered.

“I’ll put them out for my students on Monday. Thanks!”

They all said their good nights, and James slung an arm around Mickey’s shoulders as they walked back to the apartment. He was pleasantly surprised when he only felt mild discomfort; Doc was encouraging him to try to gain control over his aversion to physical contact. Maybe this was how it started.

Mickey tugged off the wig and Viking hat, fluffing up her hair with her free hand. “Damn if these cheap wigs don’t itch like crazy.”

“Well, I offered to get you a better one, but no…”

“For one night? Nah, it’s fine.”

Once inside the apartment, she clicked the deadbolt over and leaned heavily against the door. “Well, that was exhausting.”

“Seriously? Just sitting out there, handing out candy?” He didn’t need to admit he was just as tired.

“I don’t really do the people thing, not like this anyway.” She started pulling off bits of the costume and grabbed a paper bag to drop everything into. “I love Halloween, but it’s always super tiring for me. Way too much social interaction with people I don’t know.”

After a moment, James asked, “Did I do okay?” The words came out quieter, more nervous than he’d intended.

“Hm?” She looked up at him, somewhat distracted. “Oh, yeah, you were fine. Honestly, dressing up as yourself was a fantastic idea. Hiding in plain sight and all that.”

James carefully tugged off the silicone glove, tossing it on the table with his leather gloves. “I’m still not convinced. That Flynn kid has my radar going off.”

“Hey, I sent Hill a message about him, she’ll put eyes on him for us.”

“Good.”

“You should wear that coat more. It looks really good on you.”

“Well, I would, if Natasha didn’t keep stealing it.” Hanging the heavy blue wool coat and wide leather belt on the pegs by the door, James unlaced the gaiters and pulled off his boots. “Feels a little weird, being back in more-or-less my old uniform. Coat’s a bit tighter around the shoulders now.”

“You did a good job for those kids there. They definitely had fun. Good acting.”

He thought about it for a second, and scratched the back of his neck self-consciously. “It wasn’t acting, not really. Kind of felt good to be Bucky again.”

Mickey didn’t respond; she just smiled at him, a full smile that made her eyes crinkle and showed off
her straight, even teeth.

Blushing, James looked down at his feet. “That’s a good thing, right?”

“James, that’s a really good thing.” She paused for a few second, then tilted her head. “Do you still want me to call you James?”

“Yeah, for now. I’m not sure I’m there yet.”

“Got it.” Mickey understood his hangups about his name better than anyone else. She’d struggled with her identity too, and while she’d opted for a simple switch from Michael to Michaela, it had still been a rough time for her.

James walked into the bedroom, pulling off his turtleneck as he did. A few seconds later, his pants and socks followed the shirt through the air into the laundry hamper, and he stepped into the loose pair of cotton shorts that were sitting on the corner of the bed next to his nightstand.

Mickey followed him in, slipping out of the tights and compression shirt she’d worn under her costume. His seizure and their increased time together had erased most of what boundaries remained, and after James had slept through the night without waking up several nights in a row, they’d both agreed it was better if they continued sharing a bed.

Most mornings of the past week, James woke up with Mickey snuggled into his chest. Most mornings, he’d pulled away immediately, skin twitching and flinching away from the contact, but the past two had been easier. He was starting to remember what it felt like to touch someone and not have it hurt.

As the Soldier, he’d only ever been touched when he was being serviced, strapped into the chair, or otherwise punished or tortured. He’d been pleasantly surprised when he was able to dance with Natasha, but ballet was one of the few things that the KGB hadn’t been able to corrupt while they’d had him. Dancing with a partner had never been comfortable, but it hadn’t hurt, either.

Out of respect, James turned and busied himself with his phone when Mickey reached up to unhook her bra. They might have been sleeping in the same bed, but neither of them had any interest in taking things further. After talking about it at length, most of it spent with James reassuring Mickey he’d never try anything, they were finally both comfortable with the thought.

Of course, it made it even more difficult to explain the nature of their friendship… relationship… whatever it was to friends. James was almost constantly teased by them, and quickly grew tired of it.

After he was sure Mickey had finished changing, he walked into the bathroom and squeezed out some toothpaste, grimacing a little at the vibrant mint taste that exploded in his mouth and sinuses. “Goddammit, I have got to go to the store tomorrow.” he said around his toothbrush. This stuff is vile. I don’t know how you use it.” He’d run out of his usual toothpaste a few days ago.

“You get used to it.” Mickey hip-bumped him to get him to scoot over before she leaned over and splashed water on her face. A few squirts from one of the bottles near the sink turned into lather in her hands and she scrubbed it all over her skin, eyes closed and lips pressed shut. Once she’d finished, she rinsed everything off thoroughly and blindly fumbled for the towel hanging next to the mirror. “Helps if you grew up with it.”

James leaned over and spat out the froth, scooping some water in his hand and using it to rinse before replying. Another scoop of water helped him down the small handful of bedtime pills. “Well, it beats paste cakes. Those things were disgusting. And the old metal tubes used to crack all the time
“Paste cakes? The hell are those?”

“Looked like ointment, the kind of stuff that comes in a tin.” Picking up his phone, he opened Google and typed in ‘gibbs dentifrice.’ “Here. Feast your eyes.”

Mickey stared at the pictures, mildly perplexed, as she popped the lid on the big black bottle in the corner of where the sink met the wall. She shook out a large yellow pill and swallowed it down.

“What’s that for?”

“Fish oil. Helps with the scarring, keeps my skin healthy. Jesus, this stuff looks nasty, you’d, what, scrub your toothbrush in that shit?”

“Yep. Communal cake for the whole family. Still had real soap in it back then, too. Steve and I shared one of those until he could finally afford the tubes when my Army pay kicked in. Sent most of it home to him, didn’t do me any good in boot camp or on the front.”

“You got drafted, right?”

“Yyyyyep.” He drew out the word, popping the ‘p’ as he started working the ever-present tangles out of his hair. “Had some shit luck with my draft number. Steve had been trying to enlist since the war goddamn started, must’ve had a stack of 4F papers a mile high by the time Erskine took him in. Me, I get called, they send me to Wisconsin for the winter, give me a few days’ leave just before shipping out to Africa with the 107th for special forces training. Couldn’t stomach telling Steve I’d end up sweeping through Italy so I told him I’d be spending the summer in England for more training.”

“And that’s when you and Steve ended up at the Expo.”

“Mnhm.” James had to pull a patch of hair around and stare at it cross-eyed as he teased a knot apart with his fingers. “Figured he’d be safe, at least he’d have enough to live on with my pay and the odd art job here and there. We were in art class together when the Japanese hit Pearl Harbor, you know.”

“I thought it was just Steve that was an artist.”

Chuckling, James picked up the comb again after declaring victory on the knot. “Oh, he’s always been better than me. I just went because the models were cute and very, very naked.”

“Do you still draw?”

He didn’t reply at first, trying to figure out how to answer. Finally, he set his comb back down and walked back into the bedroom, unclipping the small black notebook where it hung from the underside of the nightstand drawer. Mickey had followed him, so he sat down and patted the mattress next to him.

“Here.” Snaking a finger under the elastic strap, James worked it off the front cover and let the notebook fall open in his hands before holding it out to Mickey. “I wasn’t much good before everything, and it took some practice when I came back, but I think the serum helped me with remembering faces.”

Each entry was outlined like a standard mission report, with as much detail as he could remember. Sometimes, he was able to add more information, usually in the margins or on pale yellow post-its
stuck to the pages. Featured prominently on the upper left was always a portrait, sometimes two or three. Some targets he hadn’t been able to draw portraits for, since he’d never seen their face. For one of them, the entire left page was covered with faces from a children’s hospital that he and Natasha had been tasked to burn when an enhancement experiment had gone horribly wrong.

Most of the time he’d written in English, with his normal, blocky, typewriter-neat handwriting. Sometimes the writing turned into a scrawl, when his right hand had shaken too badly to hold a pencil and his left hand was all he could use. And every once in a while, the Roman letters faded into Cyrillic or occasionally had a German diacritic. Once he’d even written in Arabic, which had confused him to no end when he’d happened upon that entry weeks later.

Mickey slowly thumbed through the pages, lingering on some entries and quickly skipping past others. She showed remarkable composure when she turned the page and saw a painstakingly detailed drawing of John F. Kennedy.

“Well, I guess that puts the conspiracy theories to rest.” Her eyes wandered through the mission details. “This is everyone you killed?”

“Yeah.” The word came out roughly, and he almost choked on it. “All of the missions that I can remember. I add to it whenever I remember anyone or anything else.”

“These drawings, they’re…”

“Memorials.” After gently taking the notebook back, James pulled the strap back over the front cover and clipped it back in place under the drawer. “It’s one of the only ways I’ve found to make the ghosts in my head a little quieter. Some of these people, they’re not even footnotes in a history book. I’m the only one that remembers them, now. Maybe that’s how I begin to make up for it all.”

Mickey was quiet for a while, eyebrows furrowed, staring thoughtfully at the floor. “It’s as good a way to start as any, I suppose” she eventually said, reaching up and scratching at her scalp. “How many languages do you speak, anyway? I saw a bunch of different ones in there.”

“I’m not actually sure,” he admitted. “Usually it’s just passable speech with a heavy accent. I know I’m fluent in something like ten or twelve, but I can understand a lot more. They’d always give me a crash course before deploying me somewhere I hadn’t been before.”

“Can you do accents?” She shot him a playful look as she got up and went back to brush her teeth.

“Well, that depends entirely on which accent you’re referring to.” James slipped effortlessly into the smooth, round tones he’d picked up from Peggy during the war. “Most places, I didn’t need to know the language, just had to have the right regional accent.”

Mickey’s head poked around the corner, an eyebrow raised, pointing at him with a foamy toothbrush. “Okay, that’s a little creepy, you legit sound like you’re from London.”

“How about Germany?” Shifting again, he aped the lilting melody of his old teacher from Hannover. “I hear Germans are highly respected in the scientific community nowadays.”

“Oh, okay, point taken.”

He smirked at her, swinging his legs up and sprawling out across his side of the bed. “So far, I’ve got English, German, Russian, Italian, um… French, but I’ve got an accent, Japanese, Farsi, I think I know a little Korean, ghetto Spanish—”

“What the hell is ghetto Spanish?”
“Pretty much every other word is a cuss word, and the standard vocabulary would make a Marine blush.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Well, usually my drop points were in the slums. Easier to go undetected, looking like I do.”

“What, a dumpster prince?”

He grabbed Mickey’s pillow in his left hand and sent it flying towards her when she walked back into the room. “Fuck off.”

She jumped on the bed knees-first and whapped him hard in the face with the pillow. Sputtering, James rolled right off the mattress and landed firmly on the floor with a loud thud, jarring his knee.

“Oh, fuck me. Ow.”

“Nah, not interested.”

Sticking a hand up where she could see it, James neatly flipped her the bird before pulling himself back onto the bed. He rubbed his knee, checking to make sure the kneecap was still in one piece and in the right place, and pulled up his legs to slide under the blankets. Sighing heavily, he crossed his arms under his pillow as he stared up at the ceiling.

“That was actually kind of fun today, with all the kids.”

“Yeah?” Mickey fluffed her pillow back up before wrapping herself up in the blankets.

“Yeah. Reminded me of when Steve and I used to go.” James laughed quietly as he remembered their costumes. “Steve usually ended up as a bedsheet ghost, helped keep him warm while we were out. One year we used some of the paints my parents bought him and painted my face green. Glued some bolts to my neck, and put shoe polish in my hair to turn it black. Mom flipped her wig when she saw me.”

“Let’s do it again next year, then. Invite Steve and Sam, maybe even have everyone in uniform. We’ll be the hottest stop in the whole neighborhood.”

“That’d be fun,” James mumbled through a yawn. He stretched up an arm and pulled the cord for the small lamp next to him. “G’night.”

“Night.”

Chapter End Notes

Toothpaste cakes are disgusting. Like, a special level of ew. Unhygenic doesn’t even begin to cover it.

I did a bit of math to see what Bucky’s combat pay plus inflation and interest could have been, and I got a general range from ‘a lot of money’ (standard Master Sergeant pay rate) to ‘a LOT of money’ (hazard pay/special ops pay rate) so basically… he’s loaded.

Also, ‘Grandma Proctor’ is a nod to the comics-verse Barnses who ended up marrying
into the Proctor family.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

The big reveal! ...sorry, I just had to say that. A few of you might have already put things together with regards to Mickey's family, but I won’t spoil any of it for those of you that haven’t.

**Trigger warnings/summary/etc:**
- Transphobic and hurtful words from Mickey’s former roommate (Shelby)
- Public suicide bombing - no deaths besides bomber
- CPR and resuscitation
- Unexpected reunion in a bad situation
- James loses his temper spectacularly (no one gets hurt)
- Suicidal ideation mentioned

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The gym was surprisingly empty that morning, only five other people there besides his ever-present shadows. Seriously, those agents had to be in peak physical condition, what with all the time James spent working out nowadays.

He and Mickey had set up a regular schedule to meet up at the gym, and had even started hanging out together regularly. Ice cream was one of Mickey’s favorites, and it hadn’t taken long before he’d introduced her to Dottie. The two got along swimmingly, much to his relief – or maybe alarm. He wasn’t sure yet. Dot had spent the whole damn time winking at him, too.

Looking around, he didn’t see Mickey at her usual treadmill or rowing machine. He scanned the rest of the gym and found her quickly, beating the ever-loving shit out of the heavy bag next to his.

Normally, this wasn’t a cause for alarm, but he quickly jogged over to her, calling her name. She didn’t respond.

“Mickey. MICKEY.”

Her form was off, completely wrong, none of the tight, efficient control he’d come to expect from her.

“Hey. Hey, kiddo, STOP. You’re going to hurt something, dammit!”

She whirled around, swinging a wild punch towards him. Deflecting it to the side, he caught her arm and pulled her in tight to his chest, pinning her against him and using every bit of strength he had to hold her still.

“Michaela. Listen to me.” She snarled at him. Actually snarled. So, he growled right the fuck back. “You keep this up the way you’re hitting, you’re gonna go to the fucking hospital with a boxer’s fracture and a broken ankle. You wanna tell me what the hell’s wrong with you, or ’m I gonna need to pin you til you calm the fuck down?”

One of his shadows was not-so-subtly reaching toward the back of his waistband. James caught
eye and shook his head. Not a danger. The agent stopped moving but didn’t stand down, watching him carefully.

“Let go, asshole,” Mickey spat out.

“Not until I know you ain’t gonna jump right back on that bag and hit it til you break every bone in your body. Trust me, I’m an expert on stubborn. Y’ain’t gonna win this one, doll. Now, you gonna behave or am I gonna need to sit on you?” The disorienting double vision of a memory reminded him he’d said nearly those exact words to Steve – on multiple occasions.

Ignoring the steady stream of curses and insults muttered under her breath, James waited until Mickey tapped him on the arm before letting go. She glared up at him, crossing her arms and hunching her shoulders inward. It took her a good minute before she spoke anything mildly intelligible.

“It’s Shelby. I known the bitch for fifteen goddamn years and t’day I fin’ out she’s a motherfuckin’ TERF, she called me a tryke, says I got no place on God’s green earth, and threw a pop can at me.”

“She’s a… she called you a what?”

“Aw fuggin’ hell naw.” Mickey dropped her face into her hands, half in frustration and half in embarrassment at the resurgence of the Detroit drawl she worked so hard to hide. “T’day jus’ keeps gettin’ better.”

“C’mon.” James grabbed her by the shoulder and half-dragged her out the back of the gym to the pool, empty at this time of year. He sat them down on the low concrete wall surrounding the pool deck, took off his sweatshirt, and draped it around Mickey’s shoulders. “Tell me what’s going on. Please.”

Small pink fingers poked out of the ends of her bag gloves to curl into the sweatshirt, pulling it tight around her. Mickey spoke more quietly this time, slipping away from the slurred drawl that had reared its head momentarily. “Shelby’s always been a bit of a social justice warrior. Super passionate about shit, super aggressive about it, too. Really liberal, live and let live kind of type. I thought she’d be cool, she said she was, but suddenly she up and decides I’ve got no place in her modern woman’s world. Says I’m not a real girl, go put the right clothes on, get the hell away.”

“Says you’re… what the shit. Seriously?” James had never exactly liked Shelby, but she’d never struck him as a raging bitch before. “Also, I’m guessing she wasn’t referring to a tricycle.”

“Um… no. No, a tryke is a… well, you know what a dyke is, right?”

“Yeah, o’course.”

“Well, a tryke is a… a trans dyke. Which is stupid because I’m not gay.”

“Trans… oh. Oh.” James reddened a little, involuntarily. “That’s what this is about.”

Mickey didn’t respond.

“C’mon Micks, why would you think I care about that?”

“Why wouldn’t you? Erryone else seems to. ‘s why I don’ talk ‘bout it.” Her voice cracked and roughened.

“I grew up in Brooklyn, remember? Run-down neighborhood, me ‘n’ my best friend sharing a
cheap-ass studio in the middle of the queer district because it was all we could afford. The queers and the trans folk were nicer than the straight folk half the time. Hell, my best friend was bi.” He had to be careful to not place his childhood in an identifiable decade. James leaned forward on his knees, watching the ripples of light on the bottom of the pool. “If you want my opinion, if Shelby really cares that much about whether or not you were born with indoor plumbing, she doesn’t deserve to have someone as awesome as you for a roommate.”

A soft thump against his arm made him jump slightly, and he glanced back to see that Mickey was leaning against him. Swallowing down his hesitation, he reached out his arm and wrapped it around her shoulders. “Come hang out at my place the rest of the day, ok? Get away from her for a bit. I’ve got a fold-out couch, you can crash there for a few nights if you need to. I’ll go with you when you get your stuff, and we’ll get that toxic bitch out of your life.”

Mickey nodded against his shoulder, and after a minute, mumbled, “Thanks.”

“It’s what friends are for. We take care of each other.”

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“Ma’am, stop, he’s dangerous.” A hand gripped Mickey’s forearm tightly, pulling her away. She dug in her heels, twisting just right to rip herself from the grip of the tourist. People cried and wailed, screaming around them. “Don’t you know who that is?”

“He’s my friend! I have to help him! You don’t understand!” Dodging another lunging grab, Mickey shoved her way through the crowd. Her breath caught in her throat as she burst through the ring of people to see her worst nightmare.

The suicide bomber was a smear, a mess of chunky body parts and sticky blood, surrounded by the black ghost of the blast. James lay on his side about twenty feet away, his back to Mickey, and he wasn’t moving. Several patches of skin were exposed, scraped up and bleeding from where he’d skidded across the concrete.

His left arm, visible through where his shirt had torn, was curled protectively around his head.

People were whispering, staring, and pointing; they all knew what they were looking at. Several civilians had leveled guns at the prone figure.

She ran to his side, immediately checking for a pulse, swallowing thickly when she didn’t feel the normally steady, strong beat. Ignoring the stares, whispers, and pointing fingers, she rolled him onto his back, balled up her jacket to support his neck, and checked his airway. Satisfied, she placed her hands, throwing the weight of her whole body behind her shoulders as she pushed down with the heel of her hand. His body would repair itself eventually and he’d wake up gasping for air in a few hours, but… they didn’t have a few hours.

One. Two. Three. So many people were yelling, the words were blending into a constant blur of noise. Some of the bystanders stirred themselves into action, reminded of their duty as they watched Mickey. People who had been knocked over, jostled, hit with debris were laid down, spare layers of clothing pressed against anything bleeding.

Twenty-two. Twenty-three. Ribs shifted and cracked under her, and she counted carefully, timing her compressions. Fifty-nine. Sixty. Sixty-one. “Someone get me an AED!” she hollered.

Seventy-eight. Seventy-nine. No one had moved. Fine. Trying to minimize the time between compressions, Mickey measured out her target and raised a fist up in the air, bringing it down as hard
as she could on his sternum before letting her hand bounce up as she laced her fingers together, preparing to start more compressions.

James’s body spasmed slightly and his chest shook as he weakly tried to cough.

Blinking tears of relief out of her eyes, Mickey pulled him towards her, grabbing his knee and elbow to support his weight as she set him up in the recovery position. His first few breaths were raspy, shuddering, and she pressed fingers to his wrist, timing the heartbeats as they steadied.

“Hey, I’m here. You’re gonna be okay. Keep coughing, give me a good, strong cough.”

Storm-gray eyes fluttered up to hers and blinked a few times. “What happened? What is going on?” His voice was slurred, foggy, sounding like it came from the bottom of a well, tinged with the round, bubbling tones he got when he couldn’t push down the Russian completely.

“You clocked a bomb vest. Got all the civilians clear but you got caught in the blast. Do you know where you are?” Pulling her running pack around her waist to the front, she dug in it for a small flashlight and used it check his eyes.

“Ow. What the hell.” James scrubbed at his eyes with his hand. His voice was still blurry and ragged. “DC, right? The Mall? We were going for a run.”

“Yeah. Day and year.” As Mickey snapped her fingers next to his ear, James blinked at the sudden sound. Pulse, breathing, dilation, speech, hearing, Mickey checked off in her head.

“Fuck if I know, November or something. 2014. ‘s cold as balls out here.” That was nothing new; James always had trouble remembering which day of the month it was, let alone week.

The sound of heavy boots made Mickey’s head snap up. The National Guard was pouring out of transport vehicles, running towards them, guns raised. Tourists and civilians shrank back, self-preservation overcoming curiosity as the police tried to cordon off the area. The steady thupthupthup of helicopter blades announced the presence of news crews.

Mickey scowled. “Jesus Christ people, you can stand down, he isn’t dangerous. Where’s the goddamn medical team?” She unfolded the emergency blanket in her pack and tucked it around James as she helped him sit up, slowly, so slowly.

The guns raised and the men stepped in.

Mickey stood, shoulders back, placing herself between James and the guns. “Stand down. This man is not a threat.”

“We have our orders, ma’am. Containment and escort is on its way.”

“Ord- You know what? James Buchanan Barnes is my legal and medical responsibility as defined by my contract with SHIELD. Right now, my patient needs medical attention that I can’t provide, so I outrank every goddamn officer here. Stand the fuck down or so help me God, I’ll get you transferred to Bumfuck Nowhere, Utah faster than you can spit!”

“Ma’am, I have orders to escort the Winter Soldier into custody and to detain or shoot anyone preventing that. I really don’t want this to go there.”

“Mickey.” James’s voice cut in and he grabbed clumsily her leg. “Mickey, stop.”

Something in his tone caught her attention, and she looked down to see genuine fear in his eyes. He glanced down, and she followed his gaze to see several red dots painting her chest.

Lips pressing into a firm, angry line, Mickey slowly raised her hands above her head as she watched the line of Guardsmen part and a man in black tactical gear walked through, rifle muzzle pointed down and trigger finger straight.

Her knees buckled and she felt James’s hand catch her under the shoulder. The ringing in her ears drowned out her friend’s voice as he grunted when he took her weight, the exhaustion and chest pain catching up to him. Raising her head slowly to stare at the man in front of her, Mickey’s eyes swam as they fixed on his face.

“How, Mickey Mouse,” he said, and raised his gun.

James’s voice was tight and pained. “Rollins? What the fuck?”

Black ropes hit the ground around them and a small army of SHIELD agents rappelled down, forming a defensive circle. Two agents dropped into the center, one of them helping James up and slipping a loose… something… around his shoulders. Voices shouted at them but the words were lost in the din. Mickey stumbled as they shoved her towards James, his usually steady arms shaking slightly as the mylar blanket floated away and he reflexively pulled her tight against him.

The rope jerked upward and James hissed in pain. Mickey pressed her face tight against his chest. A metal hand closed over hers, squeezing tightly. She clamped her eyes shut, trying to shake off the face that danced in front of her, laughing at her with a toothy, dead grin.

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James tried not to flinch as one of the nurses in the medical wing applied a stinging cream to one of the patches of road rash on his back. He dug his fingers into the thin exam table mattress on either side of him, focusing on the feeling of cold, dry air across his shoulders in an attempt to dull the throbbing pain all over his body.

It didn’t work.

Hissing as the nurse worked the salve into another rash, James’s back involuntarily arched away from her touch.

“Sorry. We don’t have a numbing gel that works for you or… Well, I’ll be honest, we aren’t prepared for this at all.” The extraction team had ushered out anyone without adequate clearance and threatened those that remained with a lifetime of prison if they breathed a word about who was about to walk in.

“Yeah, I know. I’ll manage,” he said through gritted teeth. “How’s my friend?”

“She’s fine, last I heard, but she won’t talk to anyone.”

“When can I see her?”

“As soon as I’m done and we get you bandaged up. I’ve got two more spots.”

Drawing in a deep breath, James braced himself for the last two and sighed when the nurse started pressing ointment-coated bandages onto the scrapes.
“You should be healed up in a day or two, maybe a week for some of the worst ones if you’re anything like Captain Rogers. Go ahead and get dressed, you’re good to go.”

Pulling on the SHIELD-issued fatigues went slower than he’d expected as the bandages tugged uncomfortably on his skin. “How often should I change them?”

“Usually I’d say every twelve hours, but for you let’s say six. Apply bacitracin directly to the exposed wound, and put some Vaseline on the bandages if they start sticking.”

“Roger that. Thanks for patching me up.” He smiled at her, waving slightly as he walked toward the door.

“Three doors down, on your left.”

“Gotcha.” Following the nurse’s directions, James stopped for a moment in front of the closed door to one of the small recovery rooms. He waved dismissively to the guards positioned in the hall. “Everything’s fine. Just gonna check on my friend. Status?”

“There’s a jet inbound from New York for you, sir. Arrival expected in twenty minutes.”

Turning the cold aluminum handle, James pushed the door open and shut it behind him. Mickey was curled up in a ball on the bed; she sat with her knees pulled close to her chest and her head tucked tightly in her arms.

James sat next to her and slowly raised up his legs so that he could cross them as he faced her. “Hey, kiddo.”

Sunken, bruised eyes looked at him through her limp hair as she raised her head slightly before letting it fall back down. She hadn’t styled her hair that morning, simply trapping it under a beanie, and now it hung in clumped strands over her forehead. The bleached highlights were dull without the subtle sheen of the goop she normally combed through her hair.

“You okay?”

Her head rocked back and forth slightly.

“You wanna talk?”

There was a long pause, and then a scratchy voice, deeper than she usually spoke, asked him, “Can I have a hug?”

“Of course. C’mere.” James gently tugged her towards him, wrapping her up in his arms and ignoring the small sparks of pain when she brushed against the bandages. “Thanks for getting my heart going again earlier, by the way. Good work. Nurse says everything looks fine.”

“Doin’ my job.”

“Still. Thanks. I think that’s the fourth time you’ve saved my life now.”

“…doin’ my job.” She squeezed her arms around his torso.

“Ow. Ease up. I’ve got skin missing, a cracked sternum, and four broken ribs.”

“Sorry for saving your life, asshole.” The words lacked anything even mildly resembling venom.

Leaning his cheek against her head, James closed his eyes and sighed. “Do you wanna talk about
what happened? It’s ok if you don’t.”

Another long pause, and James almost felt the hitch in her voice. “I told you how Jack died when
the helicarrier hit the Triskelion, right?”

“Mm-hm.”

“That was him. The man with the gun.”

A cold, immobilizing chill seeped its way through James. “Rollins. Jack Rollins. He’s your…”

“It’s Mum’s name, from Dad. Jack kept it, but I ended up taking our step-dad’s ‘cause I was a
minor. You know him?”

The words caught in his throat twice before James could finally choke them out. “Yeah, yeah I did.
He was on my team… before.”

“When he said he’d gotten into a black ops team when I was a kid, I didn’t expect him to go
HYDRA.”

“There were a lot of folks like that, Micks. They’re still sorting through the mess.”

“No, you don’t get it.” Mickey raised her head, her eyes shiny. “He joined the black ops team so he
could pay for my stuff. Brock offered him the promotion when SHIELD wouldn’t approve the
treatment, said he could get us a better benefits package.”

James let his head drop onto Mickey’s shoulder as he tried to remember how to breathe. After a few
unsuccessful trial runs, his lungs figured it out again and he managed to fill them up completely.

“James?”

“Rumlow was in charge of deploying me once Pierce gave the order. Rollins was the gun on my
head if I needed to be put down… they knew I’d just wake up from whatever in a few days but it
made the men feel safer.”

“…that’s what he was trying to do today, isn’t it?”

A bitter laugh tore out of him. “Probably.” He tugged her closer, into his lap, working his fingers
through her hair the way he knew she liked when she was upset. “We’ve got a jet coming in a few
to take us up to Avengers Tower. There’s a private landing pad on the roof so we don’t have to
leave the building. They told me while they were patching me up that there’s already a team
securing all our stuff and shipping it north.”

“…both of us?”

Pulling away slightly, James tilted his head so he could see Mickey’s face. “Well… yeah. Both of
us. I’m not leaving you here alone, you won’t be safe.”

She didn’t respond, simply staring blankly at the wall. James sighed and tucked her head under his
chin, holding her and absently humming something Steve’s mom used to sing when his tiny, pale
body burned with fever. Mickey’s shoulders gradually began to loosen, and by the time the guards
knocked to tell them that the jet was waiting, she had visibly relaxed.

No one spoke on the short walk to the landing pad, James keeping an arm around Mickey’s
shoulders as her eyes stared forward, unfocused and vacant.
She fumbled with the anchored jump harness as they were escorted onto the Quinjet. Wordlessly, James clipped it together for her and settled into the seat to her left, swallowing and gritting his teeth as his own harness dug into the scrapes on his shoulders.

Their pilot wasted no effort on the comfort of his passengers. Once his cargo and their ten-man security team was strapped in, he yanked the jet off the ground and punched it.

James closed his eyes as his guts lurched and forced himself to draw a deep breath. Mickey’s hand clamped tightly over his and he returned the pressure, eyes pressed shut as he listened to her quiet, steady direction through a breathing exercise.

Almost half an hour later, his heart stopped racing and his stomach remembered which direction was up; he opened his eyes, head dropping forward slightly.

“You good?”

He nodded hesitantly. “Think so.”

“Wheels down in five.” The pilot’s voice crackled through the intercom. The room began to spin again as waves of panic washed back up in James’s throat.

“You got this,” Mickey murmured as gravity shifted slightly with the change in trajectory. “Just breathe, okay? In, two, three, four…”

James let his head thunk back against the wall of the jet, focusing on his breathing, Mickey’s warm hand and quiet voice, the tingly, buzzy feeling in the healing scrapes. He managed to get all the way through the landing without incident.

The harness fell away as he unclipped it, lunging toward the sliver of light that sliced through the cargo bay as the rear hatch opened. As soon as he could worm his way out, James practically fell out of the jet, tripping and landing heavily on his side. He pulled himself to his feet, leaning over onto his knees, and sucked in long, deep breaths.

“Flight’s over, you’re gonna be okay.” Mickey walked up to him, eyes still slightly vacant. She slipped under his arm and pushed him up. “Let’s get inside so these guys can get back to base.”

The flight had shaken him more than he would admit, but Mickey seemed to understand. She shook her head quickly at someone who approached them as they walked through the landing bay of the Tower and followed two of the guards to a small debriefing room.

The guards saluted and left, door softly swinging shut behind them. They sat in two of the office chairs around the table, and James leaned forward to cradle his head in his arms on the steady wood surface.

Neither of them said anything for several minutes.

Eventually, Mickey broke the silence.

“For the record, buddy, I’d do it all again in a heartbeat, but next time, can you ask before carting me off somewhere? You just sort of assumed I’d want to come with you.” When James raised his head in alarm, she held out her hands placatingly. “I do want to be here. Please don’t misunderstand. You’re my best friend, and it’s my job to make sure you’re ok, and your job to do the same for me. Just…”

Realization dawned on him and quickly faded to embarrassment. “Right. Choices.” They’d had
several long talks recently where Mickey had – sometimes gently, sometimes less so – ripped into
him about making assumptions and not even bothering to ask about something. She’d given him a
direct order to communicate better, ask more questions. And here he’d just gone and uprooted her
entire life because of a split-second decision he’d made that put everything in jeopardy.

“You understand consent and agency more intimately than anyone else I know. Look at me, Jim.
No, c’mon. Look at me.” He flicked his eyes up without moving his head. “I want to be here, and
this is okay. But next time, I want you to give me the choice, even if you think you know what I’m
going to say, alright?”

He nodded into his arms, and mumbled, “Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m not mad at you right now. We’re gonna get through this together.”

“Are you okay? With Rollins… Jack. Your brother.”

“No.” She bit her lip and studied the grain of the table intently. “I won’t be for a while. But I’ll get
there.”

“Should talk to Steve.” Out of everyone, Steve was probably best equipped to help Mickey through
this.

Mouth quirking up at the corner, Mickey snorted softly. “That’s actually a pretty good idea.
Thanks.”

The door swished open, and Pepper and Hill quickly sat down across from them. One look at the
two ladies’ faces, and James’s shoulders sagged.

“How bad is it?”

“We can handle this,” Pepper replied, at the same time as Hill told him, “Well, it’s a shitstorm.”

Pepper glanced at Hill before continuing. “Most of the coverage is focusing on whether or not you
had anything to do with the bombing, and if so, why is SHIELD, well, shielding you. There’s also a
lot of speculation over how you’re involved, Mickey. Nice to finally meet you, by the way, I’m
Pepper. Most of the news channels have already IDed you and it’s about fifty-fifty whether you’re a
hero or a villain by association. I had a few trusted contacts slip your Navy head shot into the mix so
they didn’t end up using something from before.”

“Thanks. That means a lot.” Mickey’s tight face told James she knew that it was only a matter of
time before her transition was widely publicized and scrutinized. Pepper reached over and squeezed
her hand.

“We’re doing everything we can to maintain your privacy. Tony’s got a huge fund set aside for…
strategic payments, let’s say.”

“She means bribes,” Hill supplied unnecessarily.

“I’ve got a lot of practice with this sort of thing. Everything’s going to be okay.” Pepper gave them
both a soothing smile.

Sitting up in his chair, James crossed his arms self-consciously in front of him. “What’s going on in
Washington?” he asked Hill.

“Well, so far they’re all arguing amongst themselves so much that not a lot’s happening. There seem
to be three main camps: you’re innocent and should be recognized as a war hero; the Winter Soldier is guilty but James Barnes is not; and you should either be executed or spend the rest of your life in solitary.”

“The bombing?”

“Seems to be a fluke. There’s a strong likelihood that it’s a HYDRA remnant but we don’t have any proof. We can’t pin it down to anything related to you though I’ve got a team looking for any leaks or security concerns. There’s a lot of public debate about whether you’re one of the bad guys or good guys there.”

“Speaking of which…” Pepper mumbled, fussing with the tablet that was practically glued to her hands. “There. Tony snagged this from a bystander’s phone for us.” Turning it around so everyone could see the screen, she tapped the play button.

The tablet screen filled with a shaky cell phone video. Someone was filming a young girl pretending to be Godzilla kicking down the Washington Monument. James heard his voice tear through the crowd - “Get out of the way! There’s a bomb! Get down! Run!” - as he streaked through the civilians, shoving them bodily away from an indistinct shape in the center of the square.

The video followed him and the phone bounced as the person taking it zoomed in, the picture becoming grainier as software tried to compensate.

James saw himself pick up a child and shove the wailing boy into his dad’s arms, pushing them both away. It had only been seconds since he’d homed in on the bomb vest hidden under a bulky jacket, wires trailing underneath, but the civilians were all out of harm’s way.

A young girl, distracted, stumbled towards the bomber, and James-in-the-video raced across the square to push her back, bouncing immediately to launch himself at the bomber. The explosives detonated about a second before James would have reached him.

The video jumped as the person holding the phone recoiled, but James still saw his body fly through the air, tumbling, and heard two staccato metallic shrieks as his left arm skidded across the concrete. Mickey’s voice, barely audible through the chaos coming through the speakers, shrieked out his name.

Pepper paused the video, taking her tablet back. “Aaaaand…. Shared.”

“How’d you get that?” James asked, voice rough. He barely remembered what had happened.

“Magic. Should be viral in about- yep, there we go. That should help.”

“Barnes.” Hill called his attention to her. “We can expect a trial. I’m not sure what the charges will be, but no matter what side you’re looking at this from, you’re going to have a lot to answer for.”

“I know.”

“We’ll give you as much time as we can, but you’ll need to be ready for the summons at any moment. Draymond, we’ll need to brief you individually over the next few days. We’re assembling our experts and witnesses preemptively, and you’re one of the best we’ve got.”

“Understood.”

“You’ve got the rest of the day to recuperate, but I’m calling an all-hands in Briefing Room Charlie at 0700. We’re going to monitor this 24/7 until there’s a clear path forward. I’ll have more
Mickey and James both nodded, and Hill visibly relaxed, the hard lines of her on-duty posture and expression easing into something more friendly, more concerned. The release of tension was almost palpable and Pepper set aside her tablet, leaning forward to put her elbows on the table.

“How’re you two doing? You okay?”

“Yeah, I think so. I’m a little shook up and I’ve got road rash where the sun don’t shine, but I’ll be fine in a few days.”

Mickey was quiet for a minute when Pepper turned to her, and then she raised her eyes to Hill.

“How’re you two doing? You okay?”

“How’re you two doing? You okay?”

“Please tell me you got Jack.”

Hill’s reply was hesitant. “We were more focused on getting the two of you out safely. Now that we know he’s alive and active, we’re working to track him down.”

Nodding, Mickey fidgeted with the edge of the table and didn’t say anything else.

“Tony had the staff set up the floor below Steve’s for you as soon as he knew you were thinking of moving. Want me to take you there?” When James agreed, Pepper led the two of them to the elevator, leaving Hill to her work. “I took over most of the design for this one. Tried to make it as comfortable and relaxing as possible.”

“Thanks, Pep.” James reached out and pulled Mickey to his side, and she leaned her head against him as they stood there.

“We didn’t know if you wanted, um, one bed or two. The second bedroom has all your books and whatnot, and I had them set up the third room as a guest room. Just let me know if you want anything changed. Oh, and we brought your bike up here, too, it’s in the spot next to Steve’s.”

Bobbing his head, James leaned against the wall gently, pulling Mickey into a hug as she burrowed her face against his chest. Pepper raised an eyebrow, and he simply shrugged. The elevator hummed quietly as it dropped. Finally, the doors slid open into a small lobby area, with a few chairs and a rather generic-looking houseplant.

“We’ll get this redone if you want, just say the word.” Pepper led them to the main door of the penthouse, James reminded himself - and keyed in a code, motioning for them to press their hands against the flat scanner panel. It beeped once for each of them, and Pepper gently pushed them through the door. “I’ve asked JARVIS to page you if anything comes up. Get settled in and try to relax a little, I made sure there’s nothing on your schedule the rest of today. Let JARVIS know if you’d like any food delivered.”

James and Mickey stood staring at their new home, open-mouthed, as the latch softly clicked over behind them.

He’d been expecting the modern, clean lines Pepper was so fond of, but instead they were greeted with warm wood paneling, a fire crackling cheerfully in one corner, a baby grand piano and Mickey’s guitar in the other, and bay windows with plush built-in seating. The windows were currently milky white with cloud cover, but would be excellent for reading in on a sunny day.

The kitchen was set up similarly to Steve’s, with dark granite counters and cherry wood cabinetry, stainless appliances reflecting the same dull gleam as James’s arm. A short hallway led them to the bedrooms, one set up exactly like it had been in DC, one with a plain but tasteful bedroom set, and the last holding a large desk, two generously sized lockers, and fully laden bookshelves covering the
His books had all been organized exactly how he’d left them, and there was a new, smaller bookcase right by the door with the books Dot had given him last week. *Just put the ones you’re done with on the bottom, housekeeping will take care of running to DC for you,* a note said in Pepper’s flowing handwriting, resting on top of the books.

“James?” Mickey’s voice drifted down the hallway and he followed it into the main bedroom, where she was standing in the door to the en-suite bathroom.

“Oh. Yeah. Tony doesn’t skimp.” The heated stone tiles radiated a gentle warmth that soaked through his running shoes.

“We have a jacuzzi.”

“Yep.”

“And a steam shower.”

“Yep.”

“And a… why do we have a bidet?”

James walked over to the stack of towels and experimentally squeezed them. He nodded, satisfied, and turned to inspect the contents of the well-stocked cupboards. “Because Tony.”

“Got it. Is that Microsilk?” she asked as she pointed at the tub.

“Hm? Oh, yeah. Helps with cleanup after missions, gets the gunk out better than anything else.”

“Are they all like this?”

“Steve’s floor has a smaller en-suite for each bedroom, but yeah, more or less.”

Mickey sat down on the edge of the tub, eyes wide, and James put down the bottle of fair-trade, grass-fed, organic, non-GMO, cage-free, hippies-and-sunshine coconut lotion he was raising an eyebrow at. “Talk to me, Micks.”

“It’s a little sad that all I can think of right now is, ‘Jack would have loved this.’ Is it okay to feel a little overwhelmed?”

“God, yeah. You’ll get used to it, but it takes a little time.”

She paused, forehead wrinkling as she frowned thoughtfully. “There’s a piano in the living room.”

James let out an awkward laugh and ran a hand through his hair as he leaned against the double sink.

“Yeah, I’m not sure why that’s here. I took some lessons as a kid but that’s about it. You just play the guitar, right? Piano isn’t for you?”

“Yeah, six strings is enough. Used to sing a lot though, before the hormones. I started hormones right around the time my voice should’ve changed so it never really dropped, but it messed up my singing voice pretty bad. Couldn’t control it like I used to so I just stuck with guitar and stopped signing.”

“Y’know, Steve and I used to be in a barbershop quartet, way back when. He always had a great voice, usually did baritone, I was tenor or lead, depended on who was working at the docks that day.
Went off to war, Gabe had an amazing voice and Dum Dum could growl out the low notes so we made do. Got easier the drunker we were, even if we didn’t sound any better.”

Mickey leaned back, cocking her head to the side and giving him an amused smirk. Her eyes were still hollow and haunted but light was gradually coming back to them. “Now that’s something that never made it into the books.”

“Doesn’t surprise me. That’s just how it was back then, wasn’t anything weird. Respectable guys, we had to know how to dance, how to sing. Couldn’t get dames any other way. You’d have some drinks, cut a rug, go neck for a bit, maybe a bit of petting, that was that. None of these share crops runnin’ around.” He chuckled, blushing a bit. “First time I got a girl in bed, gave her the time, we were in France. Things got… looser… over there, during the war.”

“…I think I understood that, but damn, Jim, no one talks like that any more. You’re serious, though? The biographies all paint you like some sex addict constantly drunk off your ass until Steve inspired you to enlist.”

“Pfuh. Figures.” Tilting his head to the side, he considered it for a moment. “Eh, it’s not too far from the truth. I did drink a lot, got into a lot of fights. Got to neck with a lot of girls, but never took ‘em home. Couldn’t do that to Steve, and besides, it just wasn’t done back then, not unless you were goin’ steady with someone.

“Now what they didn’t tell you is that every time I got into a fight, it’s because Steve started it and his punk ass couldn’t finish it. God, I lost count of the number of times I had to wade in and drag that scruffy bag of bones back home.”

“Well, that certainly hasn’t changed. He still jumps right in, both feet in.”

“Fuckin’ hell,” James grumbled. “When he showed up in Kreischberg, pulled me out of there, I thought I’d died and gone to heaven. Here he was, big and strong, finally healthy, and… I just, he didn’t need me any more. Spent about a month tryin’a drown myself in booze and broads, that’s when I figured out I couldn’t get drunk any more. Had to pretend. We start going on missions, Steve’s just as reckless as ever. Got myself a fancy rifle, had to pick off the guys he never saw so he didn’t take a bullet. We had so many arguments about that…”

With a wry smile, Mickey drawled, “Gee, he kind of reminds me of someone.”

“I only got that way to keep him from getting blown up or some shit! He’d jump in face first, didn’t bother setting up an extraction plan, never called for backup. Thought he was fuckin’ Superman or something.”

“Well… he kind of is.”

“No, he isn’t.” He looked down at his hands, faded scars whispering fragments of stories in his head. “One mission, one of our first, he got shot three times in the leg. Three. Couldn’t pull himself behind his shield completely. I had to pull the bullets out because we couldn’t get to a medic that deep behind lines. Then I spent two weeks training him with simmies so he’d keep his fuckin’ legs behind cover. Can’t run for shit if you’re bleeding out your thigh.

“He also sucked with that shield, at first. Always used to throw it wrong, never trusted it to bounce back to him. He’d step on it in the middle of the night and we’d hear him cursing when it flipped up to catch him on the shin or the jaw. One time,” James chuckled, “he tripped over it and nearly sliced his balls off. The Invaders were laughing so hard we were crying, and all holdin’ ourselves in because just lookin’ at him hurt.”
Mickey winced appreciatively, crossing her legs together. “You know, that’s something that they never talk about, actually. Who taught him to use the shield? There’s got to be more to it than just throwing an oversized frisbee.”

“Who d’you think? Also, technically, it’s my shield. Won it in a game of cards when I out-cheated him.”

“…seriously?”

“Don’t ever play cards against him. He’ll fleece you for all you’re worth unless you’re just as bad.”

“No, I meant the shield. You trained him?”

“Well… yeah.” James squinted at the floor uncomfortably. “Damn klutz never even had the coordination to slow dance before they juiced him. He pops up in Italy after they bulk him up, and he’s flippin’ around like an acrobat, but he still relied on his left eye too much, never gave him enough depth perception. Carter pulls me aside one day, says they’ve got this new shield for Steve, but he’s got no idea what to do with it, can I help? So yeah, I take it out to the range and sling it around a bit. Give them some ideas for the straps. Then I teach Steve how, it’s like teaching him how to dance all over again, but this time he actually gets it.”

“See, you were useful. He did need you,” Mickey told him gently.

Smiling awkwardly down at his hands, James huffed out a quiet laugh. “That’s what I keep telling myself. It’s just, it was a big change for me, seeing him literally grow up like that. Steve changed a lot during the war. So did I. The two boys from Brooklyn, I think we died that night after Stark’s Expo. There wasn’t much of either of us left by the time the war had its way.”

“War changes people, Jim. We both know that.” She stood, looked around the bathroom, and shook her head. “I’ll be damned if I ever thought I’d end up living with the Avengers, though, with a bathroom the size of my barracks. And it’s still barely sunk in that Jack isn’t dead after all.”

“Yeah, it’s a little much.”

“Come on, you’re gonna lay down for a bit – no buts, medic’s orders – and I’m gonna see what we’ve got in the kitchen.”

As soon as James sprawled himself across the generously sized couch, the warmth from the fire seeped soothingly into his bones. His contented sigh was interrupted by a blanket arcing through the air to flop open across his face. Disentangling himself, he curled up underneath it and pillowed his head on his arm, staring at the small, crackling fire with tired eyes.

Mickey was listing things off to herself under her breath as she clattered her way through the cabinets.

“See anything good?” He waited until she’d worked way through the whole kitchen, and his voice was getting fuzzy as the fire gradually lulled him towards a nap.

“It’s fucking All-Clad. Copper core All-Clad, the whole damned set. How rich is this Stark guy?”

“Actually, that was me,” he admitted, scratching the nape of his neck with mild embarrassment. He’d been trying to think of something nice to do for Mickey for a while, and this was the perfect opportunity. Pepper had given him five excellent suggestions and he’d merely eenie-meenie-minie-moed his way through it. “Happy early Thanksgiving? Is that something you even do presents on? I can’t remember. Pepper must’ve pulled them out of storage early.”
Mickey stared at him blankly for several long seconds before bursting out laughing.

“What? What’d I say?”

She snorted a few times, waving a hand while she doubled over. Eventually, she sighed and shook her head with a chuckle that only sounded a little hysterical. “Sorry, this day is just... absurd. Don’t get me wrong, it’s awesome, totally awesome, and it’s also completely crazy and sometimes I don’t know if I’m dreaming.” Suddenly serious, she asked him, “This isn’t a dream, is it?”

“No, I think I’d know. They’re more, I dunno, shiny.”

“...shiny.” Her voice dripped with incredulity, and he just shrugged at her; there wasn’t much of a better way to describe it. Shaking her head and turning, Mickey tugged open the fridge and freezer. “Well, we’ve got basically everything we could possibly need. Fridge is even stocked up, too.”

“Yeah, there’s a housekeeping staff. ‘s got sensors in it or somethin’. Steve says if you buy stuff and put it in there a few times, it’ll start showing up for you when they do the shopping. There’s supposed to be an app or something, too, but he usually just sticks a note to the fridge if he wants something in particular.”

“Okay, when’re the drugs gonna start wearing off? Did I get blown up too?”

“Mickey…”

“No, seriously. How in the ever-loving fuck did I end up living with you in a Stark penthouse in New York?”

“Um. You knocked me flat on my ass the first time we sparred in August and I decided you were cool?”

She dropped her head into her hands, leaning against the counter. When James pushed himself up into a sitting position so he could walk over to her, she pointed a finger straight at him. “Ah-ah, nope. No. Sit your ass back down. Even if I am awake – jury’s still out – you need to sit down and let yourself heal.”

“I’m fine.” His ribs had finally popped back into place, and most of the sharp spikes of pain had dulled to an ache.

“The hell you are. You got more road rash than a lucky squid.” ‘Squid’ referred to the kids who got themselves sport bikes with far-too-large engines, overestimated their abilities, and firmly believed that safety gear was both uncool and unnecessary. The lucky ones survived their inevitable crashes, usually with copious amounts of missing skin.

James pulled up his shirt, peeling back the bandage on his side. The skin was an angry pink, but already the rough sandpaper texture had smoothed itself out. “Already healing up. I’ll be fine. JARVIS, anything I need to know about on the news?”

A screen winked into existence on the wall next to the fireplace, JARVIS’s avatar looking out at them. “I would not recommend watching it at this time, sir. Some of the coverage may be... upsetting.”

“Show me.” Pushing himself upright, James ignored the blanket as it fell away from his shoulders. JARVIS reluctantly nodded and the image shifted to a newsreel. A black-haired stork of a man sat calmly at a desk, eyes focused just left of center as he read off the prompter. James saw a picture of
himself inset on the bottom right, his intake picture from when he’d surrendered to SHIELD. Curling his lip, James rolled his eyes; could they have used his service portrait or maybe something where he didn’t look homeless and psychotic? Behind the reporter, several screens rotated through footage of the DC attack, security camera footage of him walking around, short clips of him at the gym with Mickey, and cell phone videos of the attack that morning.

“Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes, Captain America’s trusty sidekick during World War Two, was considered as a national hero by many until a terrorist attack at the National Mall this morning. The nation is in an uproar as a treasured national icon has been revealed to be the man behind the terrorist persona of the Winter Soldier, responsible for many of the deaths during the massacre in DC last April as well as several high-profile assassinations dating back to the 1950s.”

“I wasn’t his fucking sidekick,” James growled as Mickey slowly sat down next to him. She held up a hand absently to shush him.

“Some of the bystanders in this morning’s attack claim that a man dressed in jogging gear ran through the crowd towards another man in a bulky jacket right before a bomb detonated. It’s unclear how the Winter Soldier is involved, but an investigation is ongoing.

“Retired Senior Chief Hospital Corpsman Michaela Draymond was seen performing CPR on the Winter Soldier after the explosion, successfully reviving him before SHIELD operatives arrived to extract both of them. Interviews of members at the gym they both attended and other residents at the apartment complex the Winter Soldier lived at think that Draymond may be his girlfriend. Opinions among his acquaintances are mixed.

“We have reason to believe that the Winter Soldier has been living among us under an assumed identity for several months. Given his use as an undercover operative by the Soviet Union, we would caution anyone against approaching him. Report any sightings to your local law enforcement agency immediately, do not engage. This man should be considered armed and very, very dangerous.”

“Armed. Ha, ha. Laughed so hard the first time I heard that, I fell off a goddamn train.”

“James, hush.”

“Preparations for a trial are underway, but there’s disagreement over what charges should be brought against him. Four counts of terrorism and seven of assassination are confi-”

“JARVIS, turn it off.” The slow, bubbling burn of anger rose up at the base of James’s spine, and he jerked away when Mickey reached out to put a hand on his shoulder. Standing abruptly, he stalked out of the apartment, the door slamming shut behind him. He stumbled into the elevator, head swimming and hands clenching of their own accord, blindly punching a button on the control console.

JARVIS must have directed him differently, because he ended up standing in the same gym he’d been in a few weeks ago. He stalked over to the simulation platform and growled, “Give me something to kill violently and repeatedly.” A laser rifle popped out of a slot in the control panel platform and he grabbed it, tucking it into his shoulder with the ease of familiarity as he stepped onto the platform. His hands nearly vibrated with energy as they closed possessively around the familiar shape of the rifle.

The landscape shifted to a rough terrain assault; faceless gray soldiers peered at him from behind makeshift defenses.
He didn’t bother flitting from cover to cover, simply striding forward purposefully, squeezing off shots faster than the simulation could react. Head shot after head shot, two in the center mass, one of them in the knee. The kneecapped soldier writhed on the ground and James reached down to snap its neck, the disorienting lack of sensation almost pulling him out of his murderous meditative state. He picked up two knives and shouldered the laser rifle, breaking into a run and vaulting cleanly over the next barrier.

He cleared the seven soldiers he found in as many seconds.

JARVIS must have kept shifting the floor under him, regenerating the terrain, because he’d counted over two hundred gray bodies before he finally fell to his knees, panting, head drooping forward.

The holograms and hard light faded into a grid of orange hexagons before winking out section by section.

Steve stood in front of him, arms crossed, concern written all over his face.

James raised his eyes to Steve’s, shoulders rising and falling with his heavy breathing, rifle clattering to the ground as his hands twitched open by themselves.

“Mickey called me in a panic and JARVIS told me he was keeping you here until you calmed down. What happened, Buck?”

“Lost my temper.”

“I can see that. What happened?”

James leaned forward, planting his palms flat against the floor in front of him in an effort to keep the room from spinning. The killing drive he’d felt when JARVIS had steered him here had faded into a sickening shame, his stomach twisting itself into knots. “Wanted to kill something. Had to. Would’ve hurt Mickey. Left so I didn’t.”

“You can’t just- oh for fuck’s sake.” Steve pulled his hands over his face, tilting his head back. “You were dead earlier today. Your heart stopped beating. And then you decided you were going to punch your way through a combat sim?”

“Steve, I was going to hurt her. Watched CNN. I almost lost control again.”

“Because you saw the news? Jeezus Christ, Bucky, she called me because she thought you were going to kill yourself.”

“Well maybe I should!” His voice echoed through the gym. “It’d certainly give the newspapers what they want, wouldn’t it? I’m s’posed to go on trial, Steve! They got a list the size of the state of all the shit I’m guilty of, and now they’re trying to pin the bombing on me, too! Maybe all o’ you should be asking how the fuck I’m doin’ instead’a here’s a band-aid and some aspirin, we’ll run damage control, go lie low in your glorified house arrest!”

“Buck-”

“I’m dangerous, Steve. Everyone’s saying it. They’re right. I’m a fucking murderer and I can’t even function properly for more than twelve goddamn hours without takin’ more pills than I got fingers and toes. If I snap and you gotta take me out, how many o’ you are gonna die tryin’? Natalia’s good, but I trained her, I know everything about her. And you? Don’t you remember who taught you to use that stupid metal frisbee? Tony can’t even last a minute against me in the ring before his suit breaks. Bruce is the only chance you got, and he’s probably gonna do more harm
“What’s your plan for taking me out, huh? What’re you gonna do if I can’t get to a sim in time? What if I really do lose it and I try to kill one of you? What if the triggers are still there and we didn’t get them all out? What the hell are you gonna do if that happens? Who’s going to take me out?” James was shouting as he pushed himself to his feet, eyes feral and wide.

“You wanna know why I won’t go back to active duty even though they cleared me? It’s because of bullshit like this. I could have seriously hurt someone that only wants to help. What’s the gameplan if things really do go wrong? Who’s going to take me down?”

“That’s Mickey’s job, you asshat. That’s why she’s fucking here. That’s why Hill had S.H.I.E.L.D hire her. Mickey’s the best qualified, but every single one of us would pull the trigger if we had to.”


“I know. I can’t do it. That’s why it’s Mickey’s job.”

“Keeping me alive, and putting me down if I get dangerous? Some fuckin’ job.”

“…basically.”

“And you trust her to do that?”

Steve gave him a long, hard look. “Do you?” Grabbing his friend by the shoulders, Steve shoved him over to the benches and pushed him down on one. Stepping back and crossing his arms, the blond man fixed James with an unsympathetic frown.

“When are you gonna start trusting any of us? Yeah, not everyone’s thrilled you’re here. When you were in DC, it was easier for some of us to ignore it, myself included for a while, I’ll admit that. But we’re a family, Buck. We ain’t abandoning nobody. Tony’s gone out on missions shakier than Gabe with a dame after he got jumped by the nurses, and we made sure he got back fine.”

Dropping his face into one hand, Steve’s shoulders rose and fell as he took a deep breath. “You can’t just… we’re here for you. All of us. Especially Mickey, Sam, and me. We’re all broken people, pal. I got depression worse than anything my shrink’s seen before, Tony doesn’t sleep, Bruce is terrified of the big green guy. Nat’s got her own issues, Clint’s still dealin’ with nightmares from Loki. Sam, he’s probably the healthiest out of all of us, and he’s still got bad days. Thor’s moppin’ up intergalactic messes after his brother’s little stunt.”

“…you’re seein’ a shrink?”

“Yeah, I started after the mission in Ohio. Saw how much yours was helping you, figured I’d give it a shot.”

“Never told me.”

“Did I need to?”

James shrugged.

Sitting down next to him, Steve stared at the floor, trying to drill a hole through it with his eyes. “He
says I’ve got survivor’s guilt, depression, a lot of bullshit I’ve buried since I woke up. Got easier after you came back, but worse when you didn’t- when you asked for ‘James.’ I gave up fuckin’ everything during the war, I lost you, I lost Peggy, I gave my own life to keep that stupid blue cube away from everyone. I gave up having a future, my kids having an uncle, ever having a normal life. Put that plane down in the Arctic, I had three hours to think about it all before I froze up.

“And then I wake up, they have me in a fake recovery room, and oh by the way, we dug up that Tesseract and a bad guy has it now. Mind saving the world from it again? Yeah, everyone died for nothing, sorry, by the way.” Steve reached up both hands and scrubbed them back and forth through his hair, a stress habit dating back to when they were kids. “I was pissed off, Buck. So goddamn angry at everyone. I woke up to a world where everyone I ever loved was dead or dying, and we’re in the same mess we were in before we went to war.

“And they tell me things are better, but they’re so much worse. Sure, I can marry anyone I want now, but people like Mickey can’t use the right fuckin’ bathroom in Target. It’s like Jim Crow all over again. The Nazis may be gone, but now we’ve got another everlasting war in the desert and everyone’s forgotten why we’re even fighting it.

“I tried to sacrifice my life so that no one would ever be able to use the Tesseract again, so that HYDRA really did die out, so that the world would be safe from everything except the monsters we make ourselves. And here we are, and none of it worked, and I lost everything.”

“Not everything. You still got me.”

Steve snorted and nudged him with his shoulder. “Yeah, like a bad penny. You just keep turnin’ up, don’tcha?”

“Someone’s gotta drag your ass outta the messes you get yourself into.”

“You had my back for a really, really long time, Buck. Let all of us have yours for a while, okay?” Standing, Steve held out a hand to help James up. “You good? Mickey’s pretty worried but she wanted to give you some space.”

“Yeah. I’m good. Um… can you not tell Hill that happened?”

“I disabled the security feeds while you were here, sir, and I appear to have misplaced the past hour’s log files for the simulator.”

“Thanks, buddy.”

“I would caution you against any outside news for now. Having a less controlled relapse could be… disastrous.”

“Noted.” James let Steve lead him back up to the apartment, and stood there waiting until he realized that Steve didn’t have access. “Oh, geez. Here.” Stepping forward, he palmed the panel and walked in. “JARVIS, can you give Steve access please?”

“Certainly. Access granted.”

Mickey was in the kitchen, something delicious filling the air as she cooked. Turning as the two men walked in, she brandished a ladle at them. “No samples til it’s done.” She leaned forward on the counter and turned to James, concern written over her face. “You okay?”

“I will be once we’ve eaten… whatever it is you’re making. Man, that smells amazing.”
“Soup. Tortellini soup. One of my Mum’s recipes.” Mickey picked up her tablet from where it was sitting on a small stand next to a cutting board and passed it to James. Steve craned his neck to read the recipe over James’s shoulder.

“We had all this in the pantry?”

“No, JARVIS had someone bring it up for me. There’s practically a full grocery depot in the kitchens, did you know that?”

“Well, they have to feed superheroes,” Steve said as he shrugged. “Gotta keep things well stocked.”

The soup turned out to be more of a stew, with veggies and chunky pasta floating in a rich broth. The finishing touch was a generous layer of grated Romano cheese, flavors erupting as the hot soup melted it into a gooey mess.

Sated and calmed by four helpings of soup, James finally leaned back in his chair and pressed the heels of his hands to his tired eyes. “I’d offer to help with the dishes, but I can barely stay awake.”

“I got ‘em.” Steve stood, reaching his long arms across the table to clear everything away and shushing Mickey’s half-hearted protests. “You cooked, I clean.”

“Thanks, Micks,” James mumbled. “You gonna make that again sometime?”

“As often as I can, judging by the reaction. We won’t be having leftovers, that’s for sure.” Mickey chuckled as James yawned expansively. “Go get yourself into bed, Steve and I can take care of this.”

James spent several minutes rummaging through the drawers in the bathroom until he found a full medical kit, changing the dressings on his scrapes slowly and carefully. Several of the smaller ones had already pinked over enough to be safe without a bandage, so he left those open to the air.

His hair took less time to straighten out than he’d expected, and whoever had moved their stuff in had already placed a small cup by each sink for toothbrushes. He smirked at the clear his-and-hers distinction and busied himself cleaning the scuzz off his teeth.

The drawer just below the sink on his left held all of his medications, and their mystery mover had found him an interesting flat box with a grid of small individually-capped sections. The top row was labeled with the days of the week, and each cap had a time stamped on it as well. “Huh. Cool.”

James spent the next few minutes filling up the small sections with the right pills before taking the day’s last doses.

Deciding to skip a shower until he’d healed further, James stripped down, pulled on the loose sleep shorts neatly folded on his nightstand, and slid himself into bed. The sheets were already warm and soft – JARVIS, probably – and within minutes he felt himself drifting away.

He woke up a bit later when Mickey carefully slipped in next to him, staying awake long enough to wrap an arm around her as she pressed her back against his chest. The citrusy smell of her damp hair reminded him of Pepper’s calming smile, clean things, safe things, and his eyes slowly drooped once more until his breathing slowed and steadied.
I sneezed and an art fell out:

The technique Mickey uses to resuscitate James is known as the precordial thump. By effectively whacking your fist into the patient’s sternum, a first responder can convert the mechanical energy of the motion into an electrical impulse that can sometimes be enough to convert a v-fib condition into a steady heartbeat. The three conditions required for a precordial thump are 1) no pulse, 2) witnessed arrest where you see the patient drop, and 3) no AED nearby. When in doubt, though, think of it this way: the PT ain’t gonna make ‘em any deader.

Also, the research for the flashback scene was mildly heartbreaking. I think I’m going to have to Steve Rogers anyone that harasses my trans friends. Does it help that I’m a cranky short skinny blonde and one of my nicknames used to be Stevie?
This is the sort of feel I imagine for James and Mickey’s new apartment. A little bit log-cabiny but still open and airy.

Last but not least, Chunky Tortellini Soup is a family recipe. Here you go!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

So I think this is the one chapter out of this entire thing that I'm most nervous about posting. It's also the one I've agonized over the most and it's gotten the most editing/rewriting out of them all, too. Whew. Here goes.

If you want a quick reference for the mood I imagine the trial having, here it is, all credit to the wonderful person who made it.

Also, I know less than I’d like about how an actual criminal trial works aside from my research (some would say that’s a good thing) so if I got something glaringly wrong, please let me know! I try hard to make everything as authentic as possible.

**Trigger warnings:** So, um, basically everything. This is the Big Courtroom Scene, so James goes into pretty gritty detail about his time as a prisoner. Normally I’d advise readers that would affected by this sort of thing to just skip past this chapter, but it’s pretty important to the plot so I’m just going to say, go in with your eyes very wide open.

**Off the top of my head:**
- Police custody pending trial (voluntary)
- Not-detailed discussion of fatal car crash
- Discussion of rape
- Discussion of torture
- Mildly graphic depictions of violence (footage described to the reader)
- Discussion of non-consensual electroconvulsive therapy
- Discussion of non-consensual sensory deprivation
- Discussion of psychological manipulation
- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Dissociation, dissociative identity disorder (temporary)
- Winter Soldier is intentionally activated to prove a point
- Assassination attempt (failed but with consequences)
- Surgery and hospital

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Hey, neighbor." James combed his hands through his hair, smoothing down the static frizz from his helmet. Craig waved a hand distractedly at him from where he leaned into the engine bay of his tiny sports car, elbows deep in it. “Something broken?”

“Nah, just changing the oil. Filter’s a bitch and a half to get to though, there’s this stupid fuckin’ brace in the way, bolts the lower intake manifold to the block. You gotta have arms shaped like spaghetti noodles and the hand strength of a gorilla for this bullshit.”

James walked over, grabbing the flashlight from where it sat nestled between the two humps of the valve cover and using it to peer through the mess of wires, hoses, and metal. “That’s it there?”

“Mmmmmhm.”
“Jesus, this is why we never worked on imports at the garage. Give me a nice, big American engine any day. Filters were the size of a coffee can and you could get to ‘em without being a contortionist. Here, hold this.” He handed the flashlight to Craig, pulling off the armored, thick motorcycle glove on his right hand and pushing his sleeve up. Threading his arm carefully through the narrow gap between the throttle body and the radiator, James fumbled for a few seconds before getting a good grip on the oil filter. “Got ‘er.”

He twisted, skin tugging around on his hand, and felt the filter release. Warm oil spurted over his hand and dripped down the block and subframe, dribbling into an oil pan on the ground below. Carefully extracting his arm, avoiding all the pokey bits, James lifted up the filter in triumph, then deflated when finally got a good look at it.

“Well, I’ll be damned. Never seen one that small. This thing’s the size of a goddamn matchbox.”

“That’s what she said.”

“…really? Ya had to go there.”

“Sorry, sorry. You left that one wide open.” Craig took the filter and dropped it into a plastic bag. Unboxing the new one, he ran a thin bead of oil across the rubber seal and quickly spun it into place where the old one had been. “Yeah, Mazda didn’t give us much there. You can use the filter off of a 626 on it, gives you a little bit longer filter with more media, and all the books started cross-listing them anyway. Gotta change the oil every three thousand or so to keep her happy or she starts gunking up and clattering at me. Here, use this.”

James took the proffered blue shop towel and wiped off as much of the thick, dark oil as he could.

“Is this stuff… purple?”

“Yeah. She likes it better than the other ones.”

Shaking his head, he looked over the car in front of him. “Pop-up headlights?”

“Yep. Don’t lean on ‘em, sheet metal’s super thin.”

“How fast is she?”

Craig laughed. “Oh, she isn’t. She’ll come dead last in a drag race. But give me a mountain, some good twisty roads, and she’ll outpace a Porsche or a Vette any day.”

“With that supercharger, I wouldn’t bet against you, that’s for sure.”

“Yep, got myself the sixty-two. Only decent one that’ll pass numbers at the smog test and has an exemption sticker.”

Squatting down, James peered through the wheels. “Got some beefy brakes there, good pick on the Wilwoods. You know you got spiderwebbing on the rotors?”

“Yeah, drilled rotors do that. Gonna order slotted and curved-vane replacements soon.”

He tilted his head to look past the brakes, and the dull gold dampers gleamed at him, a large boxy O with an umlaut barely visible beneath the road grime.

“I’m guessing you’re a bit of a car guy,” Craig prompted as he finished pouring fresh oil into the engine.
“Yeah, worked in a garage for a while back in Brooklyn. Mostly classics, you know. Hot rods and whatnot, some of the old trucks. Had a lot of Studebakers and Chevys roll through. Big, open engine bays, you could sit right in ‘em as you worked. Loved the rumble they made.”

“Do any racing?”

“Nah.” James stood up, brushing his hands against his jeans, and picked up his helmet from where he’d set it down. “Ended up in the Army instead.”

“Well,” Craig smirked, “if you ever want to take her for a spin, let me know. I can promise you, she ain’t like anything else you’ve ever driven.” He paused. “You… do know how to…”

“Kid, I was rowin’ my own gears before you were born. Don’t insult me.” James tapped his hand to his forehead in a lazy salute as he turned away. “Good luck, and keep the shiny side up!”

“Thanks for your help!”

“Anytime, kid.”

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James couldn’t help but growl slightly as the nurse pulled the data cable out of his bicep, slotted the panel that covered the port back into place, and buckled his now-dead left arm into a sling.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Barnes. It’s just that-“

“I know. Doesn’t mean I gotta like it.”

The police officer that waited in the corner of the small conference room stepped forward, snapping handcuffs around James’s wrists. Hill’s lips were thin and tight as she looked on, scribbling a signature at the bottom of a clipboard-mounted sheet of paper that was held out to her.

The elevator ride to the ground floor was tense and silent, and James felt like he was on the verge of boiling over as the six cop detail surrounding him shifted nervously. Cameras flashed at him like strobes as the officers led him towards the squad car just outside the main doors, one of them holding on to each of his arms. A hand pushed down on his head as he ducked into the back of the car.

Turning, James glanced out through the window to his left, scanning the crowd. Mickey’s bright pink hair made her easy to find; she looked tiny and scared where she stood leaning into Steve and tucked under his arm. James raised his right hand, pressing it to the window as it dragged his left wrist upward with it, staring at Mickey and the rest of his team as the car pulled away.

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Trying to hide his growing frustration, James sat patiently through the arraignment, stony-faced as the judge read the list of charges brought against him. She couldn’t mask the disbelief in her voice when she spoke the words, “Fifty-seven counts of first-degree murder, thirty-eight-“

“Eighty-four, your honor,” James corrected her quietly. The courtroom fell silent, and the judge raised an eyebrow.

“Mr. Barnes?”

“Eighty-four counts of first-degree murder,” he repeated, meeting the judge’s incredulous gaze calmly. “If we’re going to make sure this trial runs correctly, let’s get the numbers right.”
Nelson, one of his lawyers, squirmed next to him.

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James absently tapped his fingers and stared blankly at the wall opposite him while he tried to review ballet variations in his head. A buzzer jolted him into alertness, and the door in the corner swung open.

Nelson and Murdock strode in and settled themselves across the table from James.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Barnes,” Murdock said with a smile.

“Fellas. I’d shake your hands, but…” James nodded his head towards the sturdy cuffs around his wrists, bolted firmly to the table.

Nelson snorted. “Can’t believe they’d actually cuff you down.”

“Come up with any ways to get out of them yet?” Murdock grinned at James, and James bared his teeth wolfishly.

“Seven, and that’s only the ones that don’t involve ripping these things straight outta the table. Honestly, it’s a little insulting. It’s like they’re actively trying to goad me into breaking out for no other reason than to prove a goddamn point.”

“Well, in the interest of keeping things easier for everyone, let’s not do that.” Reaching down, Murdock picked up his briefcase and set it on the table. “Do you know why we’re here today?”

“Plea bargains.”

Nelson nodded, leaning forward on his elbows. “You know the death penalty is still an option, if we lose.”

James couldn’t stop the half-crazed laughter that erupted out of him, shocking the two lawyers.

“They seriously think they can kill me? They really do? Ha! HYDRA’s been trying for seventy fuckin’ years and it ain’t happened yet. Bullet in the brain? Spat it out. Lethal injection? Metabolized it in an hour. Electric chair? Please. Hanging? Broke my neck fifteen times already and I ain’t dead yet.”

Nelson visibly paled.

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“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. Today, you have been tasked with what some might consider an impossible burden: to decide the fate of a man who has defied all odds, fought demons beyond any of our understanding, and lived a waking nightmare for longer than most of us have been alive. Today, we ask not for your mercy, but for your compassion, your empathy. Whether or not his hands were the ones performing these senseless acts of terror and violence… that’s not what we’re here to decide.

“What we’re here to decide is whether the defendant is to be held guilty of actions forced from him by decades of torture, dehumanization, hypnosis, and other forms of illegal and immoral control.

“He led teams. He carried out complex tasks requiring higher functions usually only found in those in full control of their actions. The Winter Soldier is not – has never been – an unfeeling monster, a
machine of war. He is a weapon, but a human one, susceptible to thoughts, feelings, emotions… and control. Through multiple despicable methods of domination, the man who we know as the Winter Soldier was forced to do things that he would never have otherwise done.

“Don’t get me wrong; the Winter Soldier is very, very good at what he does – what he did. The charges brought against him indicate nothing less. If anything, we’re here to decide the fate of the man who has been molded into history’s deadliest assassin. His self-control, his ability to complete impossible missions… many would say this is a man to be feared.

“HYDRA never intended to and never succeeded in wiping James Barnes completely from this man’s mind. All they were able to do was suppress him, overwrite him, scatter his memories frequently enough to prevent him from using past experience to create an identity, or to create a personal code of ethics. He was never allowed to regain his agency. They damaged and twisted and maimed him and his mind so thoroughly that he had no choice but to follow his orders.

“Loyalties can be created – just think about Stockholm Syndrome. Once the Winter Soldier was loyal to his creators, at the very least his primary handler, all they had to do was maintain that loyalty by violently destroying anything that threatened to make him question his orders. But this kind of control, this kind of molding of a human mind… that requires tools, techniques, and trained professionals far beyond that which we’ve ever seen before.

“You all remember what happened right here in Washington, DC, back in April. The ambush and attempted assassination of Colonel Nicholas Fury. The attack on the causeway. The helicarriers and the Triskelion. And, perhaps most importantly, the near-success of Project Insight. The wreckage is still there and likely will be for a number of years, a harsh reminder of what could have been. Entered into evidence today is a short segment of surveillance footage recovered from the facility in which the Winter Soldier was being kept. Alexander Pierce referred to the Winter Soldier’s deployment in that final, fateful battle as ‘the last mission.’

“They were not expecting or even willing to allow the survival of their finest weapon, crafted over decades to exacting specifications. They were intending to retire him – to kill him, if they could, or place him in permanent cryostasis if they couldn’t. Project Insight would make him no longer relevant, no longer effective, simply a monumental drain on resources better utilized elsewhere. They forgot, for one vital moment, that their weapon was – and is – human.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the man you see before you today was the Winter Soldier, but is James Buchanan Barnes. He has taken countless lives through the perversions and machinations of an organization capable of far more than we ever dared dread, but he has saved countless lives as well, beginning with that of his oldest and closest friend, Captain Steven Rogers. This is a man attempting to recover from unimaginable trauma, attempting to reclaim the humanity stolen from him so long ago.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this man – the tragedy you see before you today is not that the Winter Soldier was an unfeeling machine of war. The tragedy you see before you today is that the Winter Soldier wasn’t.

“Thank you.”

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“Please state your full name.”

“James Buchanan Barnes.”
“You may be seated.” James sat slowly, jaw clenching as he swallowed, trying not to let his anxiety take over with so many eyes on him.

“Please spell your last name for the record.”

“B-A-R-N-E-S.”

The clerk seemed to be remarkably disinterested, compared to the quiet titters and whispers that filled the courtroom. “Please state any ranks, titles, or aliases.”

“Master Sergeant, United States Army, 107th Infantry. Second in command of the 107th Tactical Team, primarily known as the Invaders, later known as the Howling Commandos. Serial 32557038. Nickname Bucky or Jim. Alias James Grant. Operating codename Winter Soldier.” James swept through the rows of faces until he found Mickey, sandwiched between Steve and Sam. She smiled at him nervously and gave him a subtle thumbs-up.

Jones, the prosecution attorney, stood and buttoned his coat before turning to give James what was apparently supposed to be a reassuring smile. “Good afternoon, Sergeant. I’d like to start off with a few questions just to establish some basic facts for those of us that aren’t as familiar with your rather unique situation.”

James leaned forward and frowned apologetically. “If I may, please, just use my name. I haven’t earned the right to wear the uniform again, not yet.” Several eyebrows raised, but he felt a knot of anxious tension slip free when heads nodded understandingly in the section set aside for the military presence. Half trial, half court martial; at least he’d taken the first step in the right direction.

“Of course. Mr. Barnes, please state your birth day, month, and year.”

“10 March 1917.”

“What would you consider your age to be?”

“…biologically, or…”

“Both. Humor me.”

“Um. Well, I’m either a geriatric or a millennial, so…” He allowed himself a small smile when chuckles echoed through the courtroom. “I’m ninety-seven years old right now if you go by when I was born. I think my bio-clock got read somewhere around twenty-eight? Maybe thirty? I’m not really sure. Birthdays got kinda fuzzy for a while. Pretty sure all I got one year was a new arm.” Steve’s facepalm made the bad joke so worth it.

“Do you have any family?” Jones asked, with the barest hint of a smirk.

“Mom and Dad died in a car crash in ’38, got T-boned by a drunk driver. One brother, two sisters; Elizabeth was the youngest, Rebecca in the middle, Jonathan a few years younger than me. Lizzie and John died in the crash with Mom and Dad. Becca died a while back, in ’06 I think, no children. Got some cousins, I think, but we were never close even before the war.”

“What is the nature of your relationship with Steven Grant Rogers, also known as Captain America?”

James pursed his lips at the suggestive wording of the question. “We grew up together. I met him when some kids were trying to mug him after school one day. Taught him how to put his fists up properly so he wouldn’t break his hands, how to swing ’em around to keep the bullies away. Ended
up in school together; I went to some of his art classes with him. His mom died in ’36 so I convinced him to rent a room from my folks for a few years. I ended up dropping out of college after the crash - was studying engineering - I got work at the docks, a garage, and a grocer so that I could support me, Steve, and Becca.

“Becca ended up with a good guy, a 4F with scoliosis and an accounting job, moved in with him, so Steve and I got ourselves a tiny little flat. We were roommates until I got drafted and shipped out. When he rescued me in Kresichberg, it was the first time Steve’d been big enough to fight the bullies himself. So, I helped train him, taught him how to move differently now that he was bigger, became his sergeant when the SSR set us up as the Invaders.

“Now that we both took a bit of a roundabout trip to the future, I still consider him my closest friend. He isn’t my superior officer any more though, I’ve retired and plan to stay that way.”

“How many years would you say you were working for HYDRA?”

“Sixty-eight years of active conscription, if I did my math correctly. They took a few years to break me, and I didn’t get the first prosthetic arm until ’49. It’s a little fuzzy, so I don’t have a pinpoint on when I became an active operative.”

“Well, you don’t look a day over thirty, young man.” Jones had an easy, friendly smile. “I’m assuming that has something to do with the cryogenic chamber seen in the files leaked in April?”

James pulled his lips to the side, chewing on the inside of his cheek as he prepared himself for the first inevitable bombshell of information. “There… well, that wasn’t... It’s not a cryo tank.”

The silence was almost palpable before Jones asked for clarification.

“It’s a sensory deprivation chamber. Used as part of the torture. Only got frozen once when I got a bullet in my heart.” He didn’t mention that he’d been the one that put it there. Not the right time, not yet.

“The technology existed, though, correct?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t completely frozen when they were operating on my heart, though, they just used the cooling as a way to stabilize me until my body started to heal, I think.”

“As well as the technology to provide you with a complete cybernetic arm?”

“No, this is Mark IV or V, and Stark’s already taken a look at it and made some changes. Lighter plating and better circuitry, to name a few. The first few prostheses were pretty rudimentary and a lot heavier. Even with the improvements, though, airport security’s a bitch, I’ll tell you that.” Scattered laughs rewarded another half-assed joke.

“I feel that it’s safe to make the assumption that the current model can’t be detached. Is that true?”

Jones gestured sympathetically at the sling used to support his left arm while it hung from his shoulder, deactivated, seventy pounds of dead weight.

“Yeah, it’s kind of… fused into my spine. There’s a lot of bolts and whatnot. Torques things around something fierce, my physiotherapist calls it functional scoliosis. I think we’re gonna have my doctor talk about that more later? He knows more about it than I do.” In truth, he knew almost everything there was to know about the metal arm and everything involved with it in intimate, excruciating detail, but he couldn’t play those cards yet.

“How were you kept between missions then?”
“Mostly in a cell, in solitary. Food was usually a liquid diet, sometimes in an IV. 24-hour guard. I got books if my handlers were happy, sometimes one of the guards would bring a radio.”

“And if your handlers weren’t happy?”

Pushing down the mild wave of confusion, James glanced over at Murdock and Nelson, both of whom shrugged slightly. The prosecution wasn’t supposed to be helping them, but they wouldn’t turn it down. “That usually meant, um, torture. The chair, that was in the file. They cut open my brain a few times. Lots of waterboarding, firehoses, um, Jesus.” He leaned forward, right hand on his knee, sucking in a slow breath as a lump of panic took hold at the base of his spine. “Can we, um… Give me a second. Sorry.” His eyes flicked up to Mickey where she subtly raised and lowered her hand to guide him through breathing for a minute. He took a deep breath in and held it for a few seconds before continuing.

“Waterboarding. Electroconvulsive treatment, mostly, with the chair. Um, some of the more… adventurous guards, they’d let ‘em into my cell and I’d, uh… they’d… they’d make me do things and hold a, a gun to my head. Threaten to shoot me if I didn’t… Fuckin’ hell, sorry.” Sniffing wetly, he clumsily wiped a hand across his face. A thin film of sweat coated his forehead. His hand was visibly shaking and he fixed his eyes on a small knot of wood in the railing in front of him, taking a few more deep breaths.

“It’s perfectly okay, Mr. Barnes. Take your time.”

He nodded, thanking Mickey for having the foresight to suggest she tie his hair back for him before the trial began in earnest. “Your Honor?” He turned his head slightly and looked up at the judge. “If I’m gonna talk about this, it’s gonna be with words some people here aren’t gonna want to hear.”

“Noted,” she said, and nodded, turning to address the court. “Anyone sensitive to such topics is advised to leave, you may wait outside and we’ll let you know when it’s done. Please continue, Mr. Barnes.”

Another deep breath. He could do this. “One of ‘em would hold a gun up to my head, Russian Roulette. Old revolver from the Great War, some sort o’ relic they kept around for just this. Every time I wouldn’t do it right, he’d pull the trigger and spin the cylinder. I, um… well, I got really good and suckin’ dick and eatin’ ass, let’s just say.” His face flushed and he looked to the side. “It was a power game, to them. I’m not sure how much of it was about the sex.”

Several people had hands over their mouths, and a few of the uniforms had bright red faces above them.

“Made me feel helpless. Didn’t even own my own body enough to fight ‘em off. I got numb, just kind of, I dunno, retreated into my head. Doc calls it dissociating. Easier to deal with it when I could just go on autopilot. Bunch of sick bastards. Their SO used to watch as his men would… um.” He reached out and gripped the edge of the table to try and steady his hand.

“They used me as a whore for nearly sixty years. Got worse when I got an American team. The new guys would place bets on how long it would take me to pass out. Dress me up, paint me like a doll, have their way. I got so scared of bein’ taken that I just let the puppet strings do their job; if I was good, did it right, I’d get treated like a dog sent to his kennel for the night instead of get used as a- a damn blow-up doll.”

Jones kept his composure remarkably well. “Was this form of… I’m not even sure what to call it. Let’s just say sexual torture, dehumanization, I don’t have a better word. Was this routine?”
“If you’re asking about frequency, I honestly can’t tell you. I’m still missin’ a good portion of my memories, and there’s some that I don’t wanna get back.”

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James sat stiffly on the wooden bench, right hand clenched in his orange-clothed lap as Nelson tapped the folders on his desk to straighten them before walking up to face the court. The shorter man glanced over at Murdock, then James for a moment before he opened the folder.

“I’d like to present some evidence detailing Mr. Barnes’s treatment while imprisoned and used as a human weapon. Those of you that are sensitive to violence, torture, gore, sexual abuse, anything of the type may wish to leave the courtroom for the next hour. Refreshments will be provided in a hall to the left, and security personnel will escort you back in when we’ve finished reviewing the evidence. Thank you.”

A quiet shuffle told James that a few people were leaving, but not as many as he’d expected or hoped. Several of the military officers craned their necks to look at him.

Nelson looked back at James, waited for eye contact, and nodded subtly. Tilting his head back, James drew in a deep breath, eyes fixed on the intricate texture of the stucco on the ceiling, steeling himself for what was coming. When he was ready, he lowered his head and nodded to Nelson.

“Let’s dim the lights, please, can we get the projector on? Perfect, thank you.”

The next twenty minutes consisted of a chronological slideshow of all of the pictures they’d been able to glean from recovered HYDRA files. James felt sick as he saw himself, thin and maimed, documented on an operating table like a biological specimen. Sections of his abdomen and left rotator cuff had been cut open, the skin pulled back and pinned in place as if he was a cadaver being dissected.

One picture showed him cowering, curled in the corner of his cell, naked, covered in dirt and grime, hair matted into thick clumps, snarling at the camera. The misshapen stump of his arm was pulled upwards towards his chest, the ghost of his missing limb wrapped protectively around himself.

He had to look away during the pictures of the operations on his arm. Screwing his eyes shut, he forced himself to breathe. **In, out. In, out. In, out. Just like Bruce taught you to do in yoga.**

“We have some footage I’d like to present as well. Again, I’m going to issue a warning. These clips are violent, graphic, and clinical in their approach towards a dehumanized torture victim. If you don’t want to see this, now’s the time to leave. Translations were provided by a third party mutually agreed upon by both prosecution and defense.”

Voices in German rippled out of the speakers, translated in subtitles for the majority of the court. Even starved, beaten within inches of his life, and missing an arm, Bucky had still managed to knock out three guards and wrap a fourth in a wrestling hold. More guards dragged him away as he screamed and howled, using a firehose and something resembling a cattle prod to force him into compliance. The date stamp glowed at the bottom of the frame. 1946.

The next video showed a small cell, one wall made up of floor to ceiling bars. A blanket was all the bed he was given, and a hole in the corner was all he had for relieving himself. The door rolled open, and a body flew in to smack thickly against the smooth floor, making a squeaking noise as it slid. A guard stomped in, kicking him brutally in the ribs, the groin, any place that Bucky left open as a target. Hauling him up by his hair, the guard punched him square in the nose and then let him fall ungracefully to the floor, cheek making a *thwap* noise as his head landed. The guard spat,
turned, and left, the cell door groaning shut behind him. 1948.

Screaming, again. More screaming. And begging, in five different languages that he rotated among without noticing. Zola’s team was attaching his first arm – without any anesthetic. It wouldn’t have worked anyway. The first thing he did with the new arm was crush the neck of the doctor testing his motor control. The test was considered a success. 1949.

Several more clips flashed by until James found himself staring back into a memory that he’d hoped – prayed – was more than a fevered dream left over from decades of hallucinogens dripped into his veins.

Four men stood in a small room, three of them uniformed. The fourth stood with his back to the camera, but the harsh reflections off of a metal shoulder disappearing into black leather tactical gear gave away his identity. A fifth man was seated, bound, staring up at the Soldier with wide, bloodshot eyes.

"<We need information, Soldier. You did well with the extraction, but the mission parameters have changed. The files we were promised were not in your possession when you returned.>"

The Soldier shifted slightly, resting his weight on his right leg as he changed position to better balance the heavy metal arm.

"<Soldier. You have your orders.>" The men filed towards the door in the background, stopping and spinning in surprise when the Soldier moved again.

"<No.>"

There was a stunned silence as the men looked at each other with varying degrees of amazement and alarm.

"<Soldier, you have orders. Information extraction.>"

The Soldier’s elbows pushed out as he crossed his arms. "<I said no.>"

"<Are you questioning orders?>" one of the men hissed, his hand slowly moving towards his sidearm.

"<I am an assassin, a knife in the dark, your pet ghost.>" The disgust was barely there, but… noticeable, if one was looking for it. "<If you want information, get Lebedev to do it.>"

A rapid stream of words lanced through the room and the gun shot up, trained on the Soldier’s chest. "<Soldier, comply!>"

Slowly, deliberately, the Soldier sauntered across the small room, ignoring the terrified prisoner and the piss stain spreading across the man’s pants. The Soldier raised his left hand and grasped the pistol, metal shrieking as he crushed the barrel and slide without any noticeable effort.

Turning so the camera could finally see his profile, the Soldier stepped forward until he was level with the Russian’s shoulder, still holding the twisted remnants of the gun.

"<I make my kills quick and clean, and I do my best to make them painless. I do. Not. Torture.>"

A quick flick of his wrist sent black metal fragments clattering to the ground out of the limp hands of the Russian. “Do yer own goddamn dirty work. You want that bird to sing? Play the tune yourself.” His Brooklyn drawl was unmistakable, thickening his English, and the Russians traded meaningful looks as the Soldier strode out of the room.
James retreated inwards into that numb core deep within himself, the one that he hadn’t had to go to in months. The courtroom faded away from him and the printed wood grain of Nelson and Murdock’s desk filled his whole frame of view. He stared blankly in front of him, his breathing finally calm.

A hand shook his shoulder, jolting him into full wakefulness. The videos were done. Murdock tilted his head towards the stand, and James’s face crumpled into anguish as he saw Mickey there.

She sat straight and proud, hair neatly coiffed, dressed in a blue skirt suit from Pepper’s tailor. She’d just finished being sworn in and Jones was facing her.

“So, Agent Draymond, can you please elaborate on the nature of your relationship with Mr. Barnes?”

“Officially, I’m his handler. I’m also responsible for overseeing his medical care. For the most part, he’s very self-sufficient and I’ve only needed to remind him to take his medications once or twice. I also help him coordinate with his doctors. In the event that he has an epileptic seizure, I record symptoms before, during, and after, the total duration, provide any necessary treatment, and assist with recovery. I also provide emergency medical care as necessary.”

“Yes, I understand that you served in the Navy as a Senior Chief Hospital Corpsman, is that correct?”

“Yes, sir. I was deployed with the Marines during Operation Enduring Freedom. I was medically retired after I was hit with an IED in 2009.”

“Thank you for your service and sacrifice, Agent Draymond. Now, if I might go back to my previous question. You said, ‘officially.’ How about unofficially?”

Mickey hesitated, her eyes flicking over to James. “Unofficially, I’m his roommate. We share an apartment; previously that was in DC, but now I live with him in the Avengers Tower.”

“Is this cohabitation necessary to his treatment?”

“He only has about twenty or thirty seconds’ warning before a tonic clonic seizure hits. The two that he’s had while I’ve been caring for him, we were at home. My duties as a caregiver sort of mean that I have to be present at all times. He moves through the postictal phase of seizures much quicker than most due to his enhanced healing, but there are still periods of confusion, coordination problems, memory gaps, and other common symptoms. So, yes, cohabitation is necessary.”

“Thank you for the clarification. To expand upon that, I believe you were sharing a one-bedroom apartment in DC, is that correct?”

“…yes, sir. There was a pull-out couch that he slept on while we were there.”

“Are you currently or have you ever shared a bed?”

Mickey’s shoulders tensed and the tiny muscle below her eye pulsed as she worked hard to keep her voice even. “I’m not sure how that’s relevant, but yes. Sometimes he has paralytic nightmares, and can’t fall back asleep unless there’s another person in the room that he can trust to keep watch. Also, after a full seizure, there’s an increased risk for partials and it’s easier to monitor him if we’re in the same room.”

“Are you currently or have you ever engaged in sexual activity with Mr. Barnes?”
“That is entirely irrelevant to the case, sir,” Mickey said, voice taut. “I will not be answering that-”

“Answer the question, Agent Draymond.” The judge’s voice interrupted Mickey, and her face drained of color.

“No, sir.” She cleared her throat. “We have not been and are not sexually active with each other.”

“Has Mr. Barnes ever made any effort to touch you, spoken to you suggestively, or otherwise initiated sexual contact, with or without your consent?”

“No, sir,” she replied through gritted teeth. “If you must know, I’m asexual, and he’s enough of a gentleman to respect that. He’s never expressed any desire to… can we move on, please? This is making me uncomfortable and I don’t feel it’s necessary.”

“Mr. Harrington stated earlier that he thought you and Mr. Barnes were a couple.” Sean, from the basketball game, James reminded himself. Sean Harrington. He’d been called as one of the prosecution’s witnesses. “Is there any truth to this statement?”

“No, sir.” James couldn’t ignore the tiny jump in his chest, not entirely pleasant. “No, we are not a couple. I would consider us close friends. With his history of being abused and my asexuality, among other things, any relationship would be complicated and…”

Jones was caught off-guard, and paused for a brief second before asking, “Complicated? Can you please clarify?”

Mickey swallowed thickly. “I’m, um… Well, the name on my birth certificate is Michael Edward Rollins. Mum remarried when I was still a kid, so I had to take my stepdad’s name.”

“…ma’am?”

“I’m transgender. Completed my surgeries when I was twenty-one before enlisting in the Navy. I wasn’t publicly out until Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell was repealed.”

“I… see.” Jones glanced at the section where the brass was seated. The attorney chewed his lip for a moment. “Would you feel that your… gender… status… has in any way-”

“Objection, Your Honor,” Murdock cut in, rising to his feet. “Mr. Barnes is on trial, not Agent Draymond.”

“Sustained.”

Mickey gave James a put-upon look as she chewed on the inside of her lip.

Jones looked genuinely annoyed for the first time that day, but he collected himself and set the folder he’d been holding down. “Agent Draymond, can you give us more details on Mr. Barnes’s current medical status, physically as well as psychologically?”

“I can, but you’ll get more in-depth information directly from his primary doctors. If I may, I’d like to recommend you question them directly.”

“Thank you, Agent Draymond.”

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“Please describe the man you saw that night.” Jones stood in front of a small woman, neatly groomed, her auburn hair swept back in a fashionable updo.
“He was… tall. Big. Muscular. Wore all black, I think it was leather. He had a mask on, covering his mouth and nose. Long hair, black or brown. Cold, dead eyes. He moved robotically, like he was a machine.”

James wished he could have reached up with both hands and plugged his ears as the senator’s daughter stared at him with badly disguised loathing.

“And, Miss Baxter, in your opinion, is James Barnes that man?”

The woman tilted her head, studying James. “I… I think so. I didn’t get a good look at his face, it was covered up. It’s hard to tell.”

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“You said you’ve been in therapy ever since your mother’s death, Mr. Szynski. How would you say her death affected you?” Szynski’s son was a wisp of a man with haunted eyes and limp, flat brown hair. His small eyes darted around the courtroom as he sat facing everyone.

“It was almost impossible for me to make friends. No one wanted to talk to the boy whose mom died, no one knew what to say. It got even worse when someone started spreading rumors that it was a hit, not a suicide.”

“And was it indeed a murder?”

“The police could never decide. They’d find one tiny scrap of evidence and then discount it just as easily. That was most of the problem – her case was kept open for almost ten years. I never got any closure.”

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“Were you aware at the time, Mr. Stark, that your parents were murdered?” Jones asked, his eyes triumphant. He must have considered Tony his star witness, and James almost smiled as he thought about how wrong the poor attorney was.

Tony laughed. “No, god no. Definitely not. You think I would’ve let it go if I’d known? I’m such a paragon of impulse control.”

“When did you become aware of it?”

“About a month after Barnes was released from SHIELD custody. I stumbled across some old security footage from a few days before they died. Here, let me play it for you.” Tony raised his phone and tapped the screen.

“No, Mr. Stark, that really won’t be-”

The feed from the Stark’s living room the night the Soldier had spoken with Howard and Maria popped up on every screen in the courtroom. “Aaaaaaand we’re live. Enjoy. You’re welcome, Snow Cone.”

***

“With all due respect, Captain Rogers-”

“Respect?” Steve cut Jones off flatly. “Respect ain’t got nothin’ to do with how you just decided to out me in front of the whole nation – no, the whole world. Yeah, my friends’ve known I’m bi for as
long as I have, but you don’t seem to have any interest in a man’s privacy.

“You know what? I went to war to stop this exact kind of bullshit from happening. That’s the same reason Bucky did. He got drafted, but we all fought – and died – for what we believed in. I tried to make the world a better place, maybe free some of the Jews and Poles and gypsies and queers that Hitler tried to burn alive. And you know what? We’re still being shamed for what we are. Science has told you, repeatedly, that it’s in our blood, just like the color of our hair and our eyes. And now, you’re trying to publicly shame me?”

Curling his lip, Steve stared down the stunned attorney. “You’re trying to ask if Bucky made me like this, made me into a queer. You’re trying to imply that he’s morally corrupt, that he somehow convinced me to – you know what? Here’s a question for you. That serum that Dr. Erskine gave me, it fixed everything wrong with me. It fixed my eyes, my ears, my lungs, my muscles, my bones, everything.

“So, if it fixed everything wrong with me, then why am I still bisexual?”

***

James sat at the stand for the second time, fiddling with the hem of his hideously orange shirt as Murdock faced him.

“Agent Romanoff mentioned just a few minutes ago that HYDRA and Department X used the same machinery that they used on you on some of their other operatives,” Murdock reiterated. “Is there anything you’d like to add to that?”

Drawing in a deep breath, James nodded slowly. “We, uh, we were close. Romanova – Romanoff and me. Got too close for the Red Room’s liking, they took her away and scattered her brain just like they did with me. She doesn’t – can’t – remember, her brain don’t heal like mine. You become terrified of the chair; you never remember what happens after you sit down, but you know you need to be scared of it.” James ran his hand over his hair, brushing back the loose strands that were falling into his face.

“Here’s the thing about mind control, the chair, everything they did to you. The part that nobody talks about. It’s… you’re still in there. Some piece’a you is awake, watching… it’s like being a passenger in your own body. You struggle to break free, but you lose… over and over again, you lose. And it makes whatever you’re force to do, whatever you see your own hands do, it makes it that much worse.”

“Were there any other operatives that you were aware of that they used similar control methods with?”

James swallowed dryly, the muscles around his eyes tensing.

“Um. Yeah. There were… um. The mission with the Starks. I had a case that I took from the trunk of the car. Five bags, bright blue. Like, bright fuckin’ blue. They, uh, Karpov, he hooked them up through IVs and-”

James jumped when the judge’s gavel came crashing down. “Order!” she barked out, and waited for the intense whispering to die down.

“Five bags of what?” Murdock prompted, eyebrows drawn together.

Voices erupted into chaos as James replied, “Super-soldier serum.”
It took several minutes before he could continue. He took the time to do a set of quick drawings, five faces, with a sheet of paper and a pencil that the judge gave him. The bailiff slid the paper underneath a projection camera, and James’s sketches filled the screens.

Without prompting, James began to speak quietly.

“Five soldiers – assassins. Mercenaries at first, then they became HYDRA’s top death squad. They were some of the best trained killers that history’s ever seen, and you know how much weight that carries when I’m the one saying it. They spoke thirty languages between ‘em, could hide in plain sight. Infiltrate, assassinate, destabilize. They could take down a whole country in one night and you’d’ve never seen them coming.”

James raised his eyes to the largest screen on the other side of the room.

“Josef. Czechoslovakian. Codename: Borov. He was the leader, if there even was one. Hand-to-hand combat specialist. I mean, they could all kick my ass, but he was the best. Angry sonuvabitch, had a big problem with authority but he did his job and did it better than anyone else.

“Lana. American. Codename: Orel. She was an unparalleled acrobat. Infiltration specialist. Quiet, professional, she was… heh, she was the only one that ever smiled at me. If you could call it a smile. Um, she was really good at disguising herself, accents, languages, that sort of thing. Really fast, too. Hard to hit in a fight.

“Fisayo. Nigerian. Codename: Yaguar. Probably the best knife fighter I’ve ever seen, and he might’ve even had a shot at beating Barton at darts. Sorry man, just the facts. Fisayo never spoke, I think they did something to his voice before he ended up on the team. He had this Y-shaped scar over his voicebox.

“Christoph. German. Codename: Medved. Guy was a fuckin’ juggernaut, he was unstoppable. Probably the strongest one on the team. Really good with computers, technology, anything like that. Could hotwire anything.


Murdock pursed his lips for a moment. “Where are they now, Mr. Barnes?”

“Dead.” Chewing the inside of his lip, James stared at the table in front of him. “Karpov juiced ‘em up with Stark’s serum. Thing about the serums, any of ‘em, is that it magnifies what’s already inside. Steve, he’s always been a good man. Maybe not a perfect soldier because God knows he never follows his goddamn orders, but he’s always been a good man. Schmidt – the Red Skull – he was twisted and evil, and he got a half-done version anyway so it just fucked him up inside and out.

“Me, well… I was Steve’s shield before he ever picked up that stupid trash can lid in the back alley, before he ever took that sheet-tin prop shield into an active war zone to rescue the remnants of the 107th. I’ve always been a protector. It’s what I do. HYDRA, the KGB, the Red Room, Department X – they had to torture that outta me. Torture me until I became the killer the Army started to turn me into. It’s- it’s not who I am.

“But these guys. This team? They’re killers, through and through. Assassins of the highest level. Karpov didn’t do his research, or didn’t read the fine print, I don’t know, but he didn’t count on it taking their aggression, their adrenaline, their killing drive, and amping it up a thousand times. Before they got the serum, I could still hold my own against them for the most part. After it, I was a
goddamn ragdoll.

“Stark managed to crack the code, make it right. Josef’s team got pretty much what Steve did. Me, I got something like twenty doses of various hack job versions so I’ve got stuff Steve doesn’t and I’m missing stuff he has. But these guys, theirs was perfect. It made them the perfect killers.” James pressed against his eyes with his thumb and forefinger until he saw stars. “Josef got the upper hand in an eval session, threw me into the wall. Karpov just told him, ‘Good work,’ and motioned one of the orderlies over. The soldiers, they… they killed everyone in the room in about thirty seconds.

“I got out of there as fast as I could. Karpov held a gun to my head so that I’d take him with me. Locked everyone in, gassed the room so the Soldiers passed out. Put ‘em each in cryo tanks – that’s the only time I know of them actually being used. There’s this giant underground bunker in Siberia, huge base, has a missile silo in it. They converted it into the facility they used to train and house us. Six chambers, even though cryo didn’t work on me.

“They froze all five of ‘em. Kept the gas in their lungs til the tanks sealed. Karpov and the other top brass spent something like six months arguing about what to do, until they finally handed me a gun, sent me in there alone, opened up all the tanks. Single bullet to each of their heads. They died in their sleep. I think it was painless. I hope it was.”

***

The doctors kept their testimonies clinical and impersonal the following day, using diagrams and charts to display staggering amounts of information. James looked with interest at the 3D renderings of his brain over time, seeing places where it had healed beyond the point of normal human capability.

Next up to the stand was an expert in the effects brainwashing and torture. James was a unique case, one they’d never seen before and likely would never see again. It was impossible to know the full damage of his imprisonment, and it was clear from the repeated shocks and surgeries that he was healing from the damage in an unprecedented way and had been all along.

The final part of their case waited until the third day. James had to force himself to walk into the courtroom that morning, drawing on the same strength that had let him walk onto the ship to Africa with his head held high and his heart shattering. He was directed to a wooden chair placed in the open space in front of the judge, and seated next to Mickey. She gave him a halfway-reassuring smile as he sat down, pulling his left arm around with his right to shift it into position.

Murdock had told them that this was a huge deviation from how things normally went, warning them to be prepared for anything the prosecution might try to throw at them. James wasn’t remotely worried about that. He couldn’t even let himself think past a few minutes ahead.

The day’s opening statements were given, and the judge gave Murdock the floor.

James felt himself veering away again, drawing back into that quiet place inside his head. Without anything to ground himself, he didn’t hear the speech Murdock gave, didn’t see Mickey stand, walk, turn and face him. Didn’t notice the dome of sensors arranged around his head, the compact fMRI setup that sent a live feed to several screens set up around the courtroom. Didn’t feel the straps and stabilizing restraints arranged around his shoulders. Didn’t remember what they’d all reluctantly agreed to do until the first word rocketed through his brain.

“Желание.”

He’d spent hours coaching Mickey on her pronunciation, on the edge of throwing up the whole time.
She’d begged him and the lawyers to find a different way, there had to be another way without hurting him like this. She was one of two people James trusted with this power, and the other had flat-out refused.

“Ржавый.”

The world spun around him. Mickey’s voice splintered as she tried to stand firm in front of him. Dr. Arnolds calmly narrated the changes in his brain patterns in layman’s terms.

“Семнадцать.”

Mickey was the only person he trusted to do this. The only one who wouldn’t abuse this power.

“Рассвет.”

Natasha finished training Mickey when James had become too sick to speak.

“Печь.”

The swirling, omnipresent stillness started to creep in at the edges of his head, washing him away and tugging on the monster deep from within him. Dr. Arnolds’s voice, constant and smooth as he named and described the areas of James’s brain shutting down, repurposing, lulled him further into oblivion.

“Девять.”

Blinding white light lanced through his eyes and he felt his head snap back a fraction of an inch against the restraints that held him in place.

“Добролюбный.”

“No, no…” he heard himself say. “Please. I can’t do this again. Please don’t make me.” But he knew Mickey couldn’t stop. They’d agreed, no matter how much he begged in his delirium, the world had to see what happened.

“Возвращение на родину.”

“Micks… Mickey. Myshka… nyet… p- please…”

“Один.”

Her voice was thick and wet.

“Грузовой вагон.”

The stillness covered everything.

“Доброе утро, Солдат.”

The last thing he felt as he drifted backward in his head was his lips moving of their own accord. “Я готов отвечать.”

***

James stood in a huge, empty room. Every surface was a dull, flat gray and he guessed it was a giant cube, edges rolling in to each other to distort his sense of space and distance. He turned around
slowly, and jumped out of his skin when he found himself standing face to face with... himself.
Two of him. Well, three, total.

The man on the left was young, head tilted to the side, an eyebrow raised, brown hair fluffed up with pomade and pizzazz. The tall collar of his royal blue wool coat was popped up around his ears.

The man on James’s right stood eerily still, icy gray eyes staring out at him from above a black mask.

They looked at each other, and the young man spoke first.

“Well, I think we all know what’s going on here.”

The Winter Soldier flicked his eyes to the right but didn’t respond.

“Oh, sonuvabitch,” James muttered.

“Careful, Jimmy boy, she’s your mom too.” Bucky crossed his arms and smirked.

“<Report, Soldier.>” James addressed the... him in the mask. Maybe the Soldier knew something he didn’t.

“<Go fuck yourself.>”

James sighed, dropping down to sit cross-legged on the floor and holding his head in his hands.

“Well, that settles that. I’m officially cracked.”

“<Negative, I’m just protecting us until mission extraction. Current mission parameters are to answer any questions directed to me, in English. You’re welcome.>”

“What’s he sayin’?”

“...right, you hadn’t learned Russian yet. He says he’s protecting us.”

“God’n’country, that’s how I look?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck this bullshit.”

“Yeah.”

“So, you makin’ time with that girl yet?”

“<Oh for fuck’s sake.>”

***

“Добрый ночной, Солдат.” The words echoed softly in the vast room, and Bucky looked around frantically before he faded away. The Soldier’s eyes lifted up to the ceiling, and James thought he saw the subtle crinkles of a smile before the Soldier closed his eyes, tilted his head back and faded as well.

James opened his own eyes back in the courtroom, just as he heard Jones say, “The Prosecution withdraws their case.”

Hands pulled him up out of the chair but his knees buckled and he tumbled forward, catching himself
awkwardly with one arm. He rolled onto his side, vaguely hearing voices echo down at him as the floor swayed alarmingly.


Holding up his hand, he managed to gasp out, “Gonna be sick.” A janitorial bucket rolled into view and someone hauled him up so he could empty the contents of his stomach into the murky water.

A few minutes later, he sat leaning against the leg of one of the desks, Mickey kneeling by his side, pencil skirt stained from some of the water splashing out of the bucket. Steve and Clint had helped him change into the suit they’d brought for him – it was heavenly to finally be rid of the scratchy orange clothes he’d been issued while in custody.

Mickey helped him hold the bottle of water as he drank it, wiped the sweat off his face with a towel – where did she get that from? – and spoke to him soothingly. Someone had taken the sling off, but his left arm still rested at his side, dead until reactivated.

Another ten minutes passed before he could stand without help, and Steve still ducked under his metal arm to support him. The rest of the Avengers circled around him, and they walked slowly from the courtroom.

Mickey’s hand slid into his and she laced their fingers together, squeezing gently. He smiled slightly, returning the pressure, not caring anymore what anyone else thought.

Barely noticing the Avengers running a perimeter to keep the throng of protesters and reporters back, James focused on making it down the steps to the car waiting for them without tripping over his own feet.

Steve stiffened under his arm, head swinging to the right. Sluggishly, James raised his eyes up to follow Steve’s sight line, and his blood ran cold when he saw the distinct, barely-there silhouette poking over a rooftop.

“Sniper!” Steve hollered. “Everybody-”

“James, get down!” Mickey shoved into him.

The shot cracked through the air and James fell back against the steps, the impact rattling his teeth. He immediately tried to suss up the damage, and with a nauseating jolt he realized that Mickey’s beautiful blue suit was quickly turning red.

She half-gasped, half-choked, arms curled around her stomach. Repulsors whined and fired and Tony streaked towards the rooftop.

James checked Mickey’s back – no exit wound. A suit jacket, vest, and shirt, hastily folded, were pressed into his hand. Steve knelt next to them, already yelling into his cell phone, goosebumps appearing around his thin undershirt.

Together they tried to put pressure on the wound, using Steve’s expensive suit as bandages. Mickey reached up a hand and gripped his bicep tight – painfully tight. Her lips were pale and she sputtered, grimacing and taking shuddering breaths through gritted teeth.

The ambulance rolled up; paramedics mercilessly shoved James and Steve away from her. Oxygen mask, emergency transfusion, is she stable, she’s fibrillating, get me adrenaline.

Steve had to hold James down as the ambulance pulled away. Mickey’s blood cooled on his hands,
and he stared sightlessly after his friend, the ringing in his ears drowning out the roaring of the voices around him.

***

James heard a hoarse voice shouting, couldn’t tell what language, realized it was his voice. Something impacted the bottoms of his fists. Someone pulled him away from the window to the operating theater, wrapping him in a too-strong hug.


***

Her skin was so pale, so white against the medical blue and blood red. James leaned against the window, forehead resting on his arms, shoulders slumped. A haggard, sunken face reflected back at him.

“<Dyadya, you need to eat.>” A small, graceful hand slipped a sandwich in front of him. “<Please.>”

He ignored it.

***

He pleaded with her, in every language he knew, so quietly, under his breath. She coded for a second time. His hands shook no matter what he held on to.

***

One of the nurses led the broken remnants of James into a private recovery room. He let himself be guided into an armchair and reflexively took the bottle of water he was handed. The nurse wheeled over a tray table and set some food on it.

“Eat something, sir, or we’re going to need to admit you for treatment as well.”

Something stirred in his mind and he mechanically began shoving the tasteless hospital food in his mouth. Satisfied, the nurse left.

After finishing his bland meal, James looked over at Mickey. She was lying peacefully, arms resting at her sides, as if she was sleeping. The tube under her nose, needle in her hand, and pulse-ox on her finger told him a different story, though. There was a bulge of bandages and pins around her left hip; the round had lodged itself firmly in her pelvis and cracked the bone.

The monitor beeped softly, a steady, calming rhythm that he thought he’d never hear again.

He pulled the armchair over next to the bed and wrapped his hands around hers. Leaning over onto the mattress, he set his head next to her arm and closed his eyes, breathing in deeply and dismissing the various hospital smells until he finally managed to find Mickey’s faint, sweet, orangey scent. Focusing on that, he let the steady blips lull him into sleep for the first time in days.

***

He woke up with a jolt when the door to the room shut loudly. Hill stood there, looking at him with tired, sympathetic eyes. She hoisted a heavy black case and set it on the tray table. Knowing how
he must have looked - suit jacket and tie draped over the back of the armchair, shirt rumpled and untucked, sleeves sloppily cuffed at his elbows, shoes removed and shoved in the corner - James groaned softly.

“How is she?”

James rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and pushed his hair out of his face. “Stable. She’s not out of the woods yet, but the doctors think she’ll be okay.”

“Good to hear. How are you?”

He tried to laugh but it came out choked. Hill sat across from him on the small folding chair and leaned forward. “Barnes… James. You need to take care of yourself. Sitting vigil won’t do her any good if you get sick.”

“I know, I just… every time I try to leave, I get panic attacks. I’ve been eating, I promise.”

“When’s the last time you had a shower?”

“…there’s a shower here?”

Hill closed her eyes and sighed. Unclipping the latches, she opened the case and tossed him a change of clothes: black combat pants, underwear and socks, a t-shirt, and one of Steve’s sweatshirts that he’d stolen months ago. “The bathroom in the corner, it’s got a wheelchair shower. Do you need me to show you how it works?”

So that’s what that was. He would have been embarrassed, but it was going on three days and he’d barely slept except for fitful catnaps in the armchair.

“No. No, I think I can… thanks. Um, be right back.”

The controls were different than he was used to and he spent a good minute shivering under the water, fighting down nausea, flashbacks, and panic as he blindly fumbled with the temperature knob. Eventually, warm water rained down on him and the rigid tension in his muscles eased.

The hospital soap smelled like antiseptic. He used it as little as possible.

Hill was waiting for him, reading something on her phone when he emerged, a towel over his shoulders to catch the drips from his hair. “Feel better?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Nodding and locking her phone, Hill pulled a layer of black foam from the case. James bit his lip and frowned when he saw the three gleaming guns.

“Hill…”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, Barnes, someone tried to assassinate you. We apprehended the shooter, but the truth is, you’re a walking target now. I’m reinstating you to active duty, effective immediately, and you’re required to have a weapon on you at all times.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, ma’am, I am a weapon. Also, I’m retired. Thought I made that clear.”

“That’s an order, Agent.”

He bit down on his reply and simply said, “Yes, ma’am.” Sitting in the armchair, he picked up the
guns one at a time. The COP 357 was familiar in his hands, heavy and solid. Too firm of a trigger for double taps, but reliable and easily concealed. The SIG P220ST, quick and responsive, his primary for many years. And last, the TEC-38, small and rare, more of a point of pride and a collector’s item than anything else, but it had gotten him out of a pinch many times. They’d all been properly cleaned and the action felt smooth on each.

Under the guns on a new layer were the knives he’d turned in: both Gerber Mark 2s, the Yari II, and his Benchmade SOCP, blades freshly oiled and sharpened. A new knife with heavy plastic leaves and a brutal tanto tip lay next to his, encased in a durable plastic sheath.

Another layer of foam removed revealed holsters, slightly different than what he’d used before but complete with slots for all of his knives. He stood to strap them on, the SIG and TEC-38 on his right thigh, 357 on his left. Moving around experimentally, he adjusted the belt straps and dropped his hands down a few times to make sure the guns were within easy reach.

“You’re on leave for now, until Draymond is self-sufficient. I’m altering your directives to be mutual support now that she’s been wounded.” Hill stood, packing up the case and snapping it shut. Something in her eyes shifted. “And… James, let me know if you need anything. I mean it. Anything.”

“Thank you, ma’am. It’s much appreciated.” He saluted out of reflex and she nodded, turned, and left.

The familiar weight and bulk of the guns should have helped him relax as he readjusted himself in the chair. Instead, they whispered to him of long-ago missions, bullets flying through the night, every life they’d taken with his hands.

Swallowing thickly, James reached out for Mickey’s hand again and rolled his shoulders back, cracking his neck gently. He could do this. If it meant keeping Mickey safe, he could do this.

***

Later that day, one of the guards stationed outside knocked softly and poked his head in. “Sir? Someone here to see her.”

“Who?”

The guard glanced into the hallway, then gave James a confused look. “It’s… Jack Rollins, sir. He’s in custody. They’re telling me he agreed to talk if he could see Agent Draymond.”

James chewed his lips for a minute, then said, “Bring him in.”

The suave, clean-cut operative he remembered was not the man that walked through the door. Rollins’s arms were secured together behind him, his shoulders slumped forward and his hair, normally slicked back, fell loosely around his face.

The man’s eyes were haunted, wide, and sunken in his face. When they landed on Mickey, the anguish that filled them almost made James feel sorry for him.

Almost.

The guard hesitated at the door, and James waved him away. “I trained him, I think I can take him out if I need to.”

It took Rollins a full minute before he turned and acknowledged James.
“…Asset.” The word cracked out of Rollins, his voice low and hoarse.

“I have a name, you know.” It was so hard to resist the urge to fuck with Rollins, but somehow, he managed.

“How is she?”

“Cracked pelvis, not an insignificant amount of soft tissue damage. She nearly lost a kidney. Doctors say she’s gonna pull through, but she’s gonna need physical therapy for a while for her hip. They were keepin’ her under for a few days to let everything heal up, she should be waking up soon.”

Rollins almost fell over as he swayed in relief. Taking a step back, he sat down heavily in the chair Hill had used. “Oh, God…” His head hung forward, light brown hair hiding his face.

Studying the broken man in front of him, James pursed his lips. “Why didn’t you run? You could’a made a clean getaway.”

“She… I froze. Saw my worst nightmare, right through my scope. Had to watch my baby sister die.”

“Who ordered the hit?”

“…Lukin.”

“Old codger’s still around?” Lukin had been one of the officers on the team that had taken delivery of the Soldier when he’d been transferred to Russia.

“Barely. Orders came via a video conference. No one at our level’s seen him in person for several years.” Rollins raised his head again to look at Mickey as she breathed, slow and steady. “She’s really gonna be okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Good,” he said, quietly, almost to himself. “Good.” Suddenly, Rollins fixed James with a piercing, intense gaze. “Barnes.” The name sounded wrong, unfamiliar from his mouth.

James crossed his arms, tilting his head back.

“Take care of her. Please.” Rollins spoke urgently, voice low. “Look, I’ve fucked up. I got no right to ever speak to her again. I’m gonna spend the rest of my life rotting in a cell, and I goddamn deserve it. But please, I’ll be able to live with myself if I know she’s gonna be safe.” He paused, taking a deep, shaky breath. “Honestly? You’re the most terrifying motherfucker I know. I’ve seen you in action, I know what you do. So if you promise me you’re gonna keep an eye on my baby sister, keep her safe, I can believe you.”

James felt the small knot of tension just below his sternum ease a bit. “You have my word.”

“Thank you,” Rollins whispered. He stood, awkward and off-balance, and squeezed his eyes shut as he turned away. Pausing at the door, he looked over his shoulder at James. “…she loves you, you know.”

Biting the inside of his cheeks, James glanced up at Rollins and then fixed his eyes on the corner of the floor. “Didn’t you hear what she said in court?”
“Yeah.” The smaller man chuckled, sad and quiet. “She’s never been able to lie to me, I can always tell. One last thing… don’t tell her I was here. Tell her I was killed or something. I don’t deserve her anymore.” Without waiting for James to respond, Rollins bumped the door with his knee, and the guards let him out and escorted him away.

James released a breath he hadn’t known he was holding in and leaned forward, pressing his hands against his eyes until stars erupted across his eyelids. *I can do this. I can do this…*

***

He woke up as Natasha quietly closed the door behind her, unsticking his face from his arm where he’d been leaning onto Mickey’s bed. Shivering, James shrugged on the sweatshirt he’d draped over the back of his chair.

She gave him a one-armed hug as he mumbled a groggy greeting, and glanced over Mickey’s monitors.

“<Have you eaten?>” Natasha didn’t bother asking him how Mickey was; she knew he’d tell her if there was any change. Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a boxed salad and a fork for each of them. “<I brought you lunch.>”

“Chickpeas?” Turning over the salad in his hands before opening it, James studied the smattering of… things… with a quizzical look.

“<Shut up and eat it, it’s good for you.>”

“<If you say so.>”

They shared the small tray table, and Natasha cleaned it off afterwards with a paper towel from the bathroom. Walking back into the room, she stopped behind James’s chair and gently pushed him forward until he had his elbows on his knees.

“Wha-”

“<You haven’t taken care of your hair properly in days, it looks like shit and it’s starting to smell.>”

“<Wow, don’t hold back.>” Nonetheless, he relaxed into her hands as she gently scraped her nails over his scalp, loosening up days’ worth of gunk. A brush slowly tugged through, easing out tangles and smoothing the strands back into place.

“<What did you put in here, hand soap?>”

“<It’s all they have. No worse than what I did in the Army.>”

Her red curls bounced into view as she leaned around to give him a stern look. “<Next time, text me. Long hair, real shampoo. No buts. I’m going to spray your hair with something.>” She pulled an aerosol can out of her bag and thoroughly coated his hair with it.

“<Jesus, what’s in that stuff?>” James coughed.

“<Dry shampoo. This’ll keep you another day or two before one of us can get back with the stuff Tony gave you.>” Her hands massaged the spray into his hair, strong and deliberate in their movements but never pulling or tugging too hard. A few minutes later, she hummed, satisfied, and began gently pulling clumps this way and that on the back of his head. A small pack of bobby pins appeared in her hand and she shook a few out before telling him, “<Hold this.>”
"<What’re you doing?>"

"<Braiding it.>"

"<…why?>"

"<You’ll thank me later.>" she said around the bobby pins she had between her lips.

He’d learned better than to ask questions when she used that tone of voice.

Finally, she held her phone out in front of him, selfie camera turned on, and let him look over what she’d done. Two braids, starting at his temples and joining at the nape of his neck, smoothed down the mass of brown hair that had become increasingly unruly and tangled in the past few days. She’d tucked the short stub of braid back under itself and secured it with a tie where he normally twisted it into a bun.

"<I look like a girl.>"

Natasha leaned in, kissing him on the cheek. "<Girls don’t have three days’ stubble, you scruffy ox. Brought your razor, by the way. Go get cleaned up.>"

"<What’s all this about? Am I going to be seeing someone?>"

"<More like several someones are going to be seeing you, and you need to be presentable.>"

"<And French Braids are the way to do that?>" James clicked on the shaver and quickly buzzed off the fuzz on his face. "<I’m the Winter Soldier, not some fashion model.>"

"<Trust me, these people aren’t going to care. Come take a look.>"

Running a hand over his face and jaw to check for any missed spots, James followed Natasha to the window overlooking the street. They’d kept the blinds shut until now, when she smoothly yanked on the cord to collapse the slats.

James’s jaw dropped. There were throngs of people standing, waving flags and banners, bundled up in thick coats and scarves against the November chill.

"<Who are they?>"

"<That flag over there, the pastel striped one? That’s the transgender flag. Those guys to the right, they’re some of her old Marine unit. They’ve been helping with crowd control. You aren’t the only one holding vigil.>"

Something in him burst through the wall of numbness he’d been behind and his vision blurred. Biting his lip to avoid choking out a sob, James pinched the bridge of his nose. He took in several deep breaths until they were steady again. "<I can’t leave right now, sorry. I start panicking if I get more than a few steps out the door.>"

"<Okay, I won’t push you. I’ll handle the news crews. What do you want me to say?>"

"<Um… she’s stable, full recovery with some down time, don’t give any details about the gun or the shooter. We don’t want to start another witch hunt. Thank everyone for turning out, and, um, point them up to the window? I’ll wave, if that’s good enough.>"

"<That’s perfect. I’ll be back in a bit with some coffee.>"
“<Thanks, Lisichka.>”

She smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck for a brief hug before grabbing her bag and leaving as quietly as she’d come.

James watched the crowd outside erupt into cheers a minute later, his fingertips brushing lightly against the glass. When he saw heads turn and eyes shift up to the window, he raised his hand and waved nervously, grinning when several tiny hands waved back. He turned away and sat on the foot of the bed, careful not to jostle Mickey.

Natasha returned as promised with two bland but drinkable coffees, and five men in their sharp Marine dress uniforms.

The room got quite small with that many bodies in it, but they all pressed to the edges as best they could. The Marines snapped to attention and saluted. James returned the salute after a moment’s hesitation - *I’m not an officer, why are they saluting?*

“…at ease, gentlemen.” He retreated to the bed and slid back, pulling his knees into his chest and wrapping his arms around his legs.

“It’s an honor, sir,” one of the men said, reaching forward to shake James’s hand.

“Please, no ‘sir,’ Major. You outrank me for days. Doesn’t sit well with an old sergeant.”

Natasha hid an amused smirk behind her hand and turned away to busy herself with giving Mickey’s hair the same treatment she’d given James.

“Well, um…” The Marines exchanged looks, and the major laughed, embarrassed. “You’re a hero, sir… Sergeant. Please consider it due respect.”

“Humor me. It’s just James. And seriously, y’all are stiff like boards. She’s right here, she’s fine, you can relax.”

Shoulders slid slightly away from ramrod straight, and two of the Marines sat down. Major… Thompson, that’s what it said, stepped forward to rest a hand on Mickey’s arm.

“Doc’ll be okay?”

“Yeah, kid, she’ll get there. Here, give me your phone. Everyone get around her, yeah, you too, Nat. <Stay put and stop making faces, Tashka.>” He stepped off the bed and walked to the edge of the room, trying to get everyone in the shot. “Okay, smile, one, two… three.”

Thompson took his phone back, showing the picture to the rest of the men. Their big, toothy grins were satisfying, and James felt his eyes crinkle slightly as each of the Marines stepped up to salute her and give her hand a quick squeeze. A few of them leaned forward and whispered something in her ear.

“Well, James, thank you - for everything. We can’t begin to repay the debt this country owes you.”

James tried to return the smile but found himself half-frowning instead. “I’ll try to keep everyone updated. Mickey’s got a Twitter, I’ll have her post on that once she’s up and about.”

A last round of salutes - “Really, boys, we’ve been over this.” - and the three of them were alone once more.
“<Sorry about that, they were badgering me for days.>”

“<No, it’s fine.>” James dug through Natasha’s bag for the bottle of water he knew she always had, and downed half of it. “<No more visitors today, please? I’m kind of running out of people energy.>”

“<They were the last ones, I promise.>” Natasha finished cleaning Mickey’s hair and smoothed it back, tucking it in place with a thin black headband. “<Steve’s going to come down at some point tomorrow, I’ll have him bring your shampoo and some more clothes. Are you going to be ok? Doctors being nice?>”

“<Yeah, yeah… just, it’s weird, everyone knowing who I am. I still feel like I have to hide, even though I don’t any more. It’s going to take some adjustment.>”

“<Well, hang in there, we’ve got your back.>” Natasha gave him another hug and waggled her fingers at him over her shoulder as she left.

Alone with Mickey once again, James sat back down on the edge of her bed, tracing slowly over the scars on her hand with his fingers. *She loves you, you know…* Rollins’s words echoed in his head. He hadn’t dared admit to himself that he’d become painfully attached to her, and the hole in his chest he’d felt during the trial opened back up.

Her hands were cold; he carefully, so carefully, took them both between his own hands to warm them. Thin, strong, pale fingers rested between his as he gently rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand. The ghosts of scars dappled her skin, tiny white and pink marks.

James was so lost in thought that he didn’t notice the subtle change in her pulse until her fingers weakly squeezed his. His head snapped up as her dark brown eyes fluttered open, lidded and sluggish through the fog of drugs.

“Hey,” he whispered, cupping her face with his right hand. “Welcome back.”

She smiled open-mouthed, still only half awake. “Jim.”

“Thought I’d lost you, babydoll. You coded twice on us.” His thumb stroked over her cheek, brushing back a loose strand of hair. “Next time, just let me get shot, okay? I heal faster.”

“Ungrateful ass,” she smirked as she leaned into his hand. “How long’ve I been out?”

“Three days. Five hours in surgery.”

Mickey rolled her head to the side, saw the folded clothes that the hospital staff had washed for him. She reached up and ran her fingers over his hair, biting her lip in amusement at the bumpy braids.

“Hair’s cute.”

“Nat did it. She cleaned up yours, too.”

“D’you sleep here the whole time?”

Ducking his head, James tried to fight back the fuzzy, hot, wet feeling in his nose. *Don’t cry, dammit.* “Didn’t do much sleepin’.”

“Hey, hey, c’mere.” Her arms, thinner and weaker than they should be, slowly tugged him down into a hug. He supported most of his weight with an elbow on her pillow, trying not to jostle the...
healing wound in her side. “I’m gonna be okay. Everything’s gonna be fine.”

And yep, his eyes pricked and lungs hitched as he tried to breath in. Pressing his face into the pillow, he shifted one arm above his head and reached over his shoulder to grab Mickey’s hand with the other.

“Don’t ever fuckin’ do that to me again,” he choked out. “Ever. Those were the longest five goddamn hours of my life.”

“I’ll try not to,” was the wry response. “It’s ok, let it out. I’m here.”

“Fuckin’ hell. I really thought we was gonna lose you.” Damn but his grammar fell away when he was upset. Pushing himself up a bit, James wiped his face with his hand.

“I’m right here, ‘m not goin’ anywhere,” she mumbled, blinking lazily. “Not for a while, anyway.”

Giving her a watery smile, James told her, “You damn well better not.” With a tiny rush, he realized that her face was inches from his, mouth open slightly as one corner quirked upward. Tentatively, he reached out, sliding his hand against her cheek, and gently pressed his lips to hers.

Mickey stiffened for a fraction of a second, just long enough for panic and alarm bells to ring through James’s head, and then she relaxed, one hand on his shoulder and the other playing with the braid behind his ear. Her lips pulled tight as she smiled, pulling his head down so their foreheads touched.

“That’s a bit overdue,” she whispered.

“Wasn’t sure how I felt until I saw you getting cut open, couldn’t do anything to help you.” His thumb worked its way over her cheekbone in small, gentle circles. “God, I was so scared.”

“Mm.” Closing her eyes, Mickey sighed. “Startin’ to get sleepy again. You still gonna be here when I wake up?”

He kissed her again, once on the lips, once on her forehead. “Always.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaagh I’m sorry for putting you through the courtroom scene here have an adorable bit of Overprotective Bucky Barnes as an apology.

Seriously, though, this chapter is quite possibly the hardest I’ve ever written for this entire work. (The whole thing’s done, just in the editing phase) The research was nauseating and oh god I wish I could unsee some of the stuff I saw. Doesn’t help I’ve got a vivid imagination. I didn’t sleep for like two nights while I was writing this.

By the way, during our regularly scheduled flashback, the car that they’re working on is an NA Mazda Miata, for my curious gearhead readers. I happen to have one, so… yeah. Kind of had to give her a cameo :}
Another chapter with some heavy stuff in it, but it has a happy ending.

**Trigger warnings:**
- Bucky/James swears… a LOT. Probably don’t need to put this here, but still
- Severe panic attack/flashback with catatonia and hallucinations, deaths of children hinted at
- Borderline addictive exercise to self-treat panic attack
- Recounting trauma (flashback, not detailed)
- Sexual + asexual relationship awkwardness
- Mentions of sexual trauma affecting James’s endeavors to get laid pre-Mickey
- Natasha has some internalized issues with allowing herself to love and want things for herself
- Bucky gets sloppy drunk (flashback)
- Steve has some Bad Feelings about Peggy’s Alzheimer’s
- Bucky panic-fires at Steve after Zola messes with his head a bit (flashback)
- Joking use of slurs and insults

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James swept his fingers across the trackpad of his new laptop, purchased several days ago in an attempt to better familiarize himself with modern technology. So far, he’d mastered his smartphone, credit card, and the various, subtle ways in which he found himself living in a sci-fi novel, but he had yet to actually use a computer. He’d never needed to learn how to use technology more advanced than a basic flip phone while HYDRA had him, so while he wasn’t that far behind, there were still modern skills he was lacking.

Mickey promptly fixed that for him, dragging him all the way to the ground floor and out of the tower despite his protests, one hand curled in the front of his shirt, the other quickly clipping along with her aluminum cane.

He’d lasted five minutes in the Apple Store before having a panic attack, abruptly ordering the confused and bedazzled employee to give him whatever had the most kit, and left to calm his jittering nerves by watching children zip through the playground in the center of the mall.

It hadn’t worked, and he’d jumped clean out of his skin and sworn loudly when Mickey suddenly stepped into view with a bag in her free hand. Several parents had fixed him with the most terrifying glares he’d ever seen, and he’d simply grabbed Mickey’s elbow and steered her towards the nearest exit.

Once home, she had refused to let him use the computer until she’d set it up, discretely disabling the built-in rudimentary AI, microphone, webcam, and any other systems that might pose a security or trigger risk.

The smooth aluminum body was cold beneath his hands at first, gradually warming to his touch as he stretched his fingers across the keyboard. Getting used to typing on his phone had taken him a few months, and the adjustment to a full-size keyboard thankfully only took a few minutes. The sound of
his fingertips on the keys distracted him at first, a mixture of soft taps and sharper clicks as he forced
himself to learn how to ‘touch-type,’ as Mickey had put it.

Now, laptop conquered, James sat at the kitchen island, legs tucked up underneath him on the rungs
of the barstool. His shoulders were hunched and starting to ache, and he blinked bleariness away
from his eyes as he clicked on yet another headline on the seventh page of search results.

“I swear t’God, Frosty, if you’re torturing yourself with news articles again, I’mma beat you over the
head with my cane.” He turned to see Mickey leaning against the opening to the hallway, arms
crossed and a tired, annoyed expression on her face. “It’s two in the morning and bugnuts cold
outside, and the electric blanket’s still getting cleaned.” She reached up and rubbed her forehead.
“Come to bed. Please. This is the fourth night.”

He winced inwardly; one of his nightmares last night had dragged him kicking, screaming, and
violently nauseous into wakefulness and he’d promptly spewed his dinner all over the blankets.

Looking back at the article in front of him, James sighed heavily. Captain America Bisexual –
Corrupted, Consensual, or Coerced? stared back at him from the glowing, glossy screen. “They’ve
got an excellent dissertation on how my sexual freedom broke Steve’s brain. It’s really quite
interesting; they’re even citing their sources.”

Mickey limped over, keeping her steps even but making no effort to hide the off-balance roll in her
hips. Draping an arm over his shoulders, she peered at the screen. “Is that the FOX logo? Can’t
see, don’t have my eyes on.” Her glasses usually stayed on the nightstand now, dropped
unceremoniously on top of her tablet.

“Yeah. These guys really have it in for me,” he muttered, trying to keep his voice calm but unable to
completely mask the frustrated growl.

“And they’re a bunch of nutcases who write sensationalist clickbait.” Leaning past him, Mickey
gently pushed the screen of the laptop down until it sat closed, the glowing apple on the back fading
as the computer went to sleep. “They’re trying to tear you down as a sex-crazed coward, but the
whole damn world knows that isn’t true. What you did at the trial, that was incredibly, stupidly
brave, and the prosecution lawyer scurried out with his tail between his legs.”

“You mean, what you did. I just sat there and twitched.” He spun on the stool slightly, pulling
Mickey between his knees and placing his hands on her hips as he rested his forehead against hers.
“You saved my life twice that day.”

“You’re worth it.”

“You’re a hopeless sap.” He couldn’t hide his grin, and flicked his eyes up to meet hers. She
smirked back at him, and he tilted his head to brush his lips over hers. “A hopeless sappy cheeseball
goin’ steady with a basket case.”

“Well, right now, I’m also freezing my ass off, so if it’s sap you’re looking for, you’re gonna have to
help out or wait til the summer when it thaws back out.” Turning, Mickey grabbed his hand and
tugged him toward the bedroom. “Seriously, it’s November in New York and I’m in shorts and a
tank top. I want my human furnace back.”

Chuckling as he shucked his clothes, James tugged the tie out of his hair and rolled it onto his left
wrist – no chance of it digging into his skin and leaving that weird, pink ring behind. He traded the
boxer briefs he normally wore during the day for the deliciously soft flannel pajama shorts Clint had
given him and stretched his arms as far above his head as they would go. Twisting around just right,
he popped as many joints as he could before sliding under the thick layer of blankets and curling himself around Mickey.

By this point, they fit together like jigsaw pieces, her back pressed firmly against his chest, head pillowed on his right arm, his left arm protectively curled around her. James buried his nose in the fluffy bleached fuzz on the back of her head and inhaled deeply.

“Wha’d I do to d’serve you?” he mumbled through her hair.

“Broke a guy’s hand in the world’s shortest bar fight and called me a lady. Before that, you beat the stuffing out of so many heavy bags that I thought the gym was going to run you a tab."

“Straightest way to a sailor’s heart, good ol’ fashioned brawling.”

“You know me too well. Now shut up and try to get some sleep, Jim.”

He hummed softly and kissed the back of her head, squirming slightly to settle himself better. Her presence usually helped calm and soothe him into sleep, but for the past several nights, nothing had been able to do that short of Bruce’s tranqs.

So, he settled in for another sleepless, haunted night as the ghosts from his past lined up in his head and listed off his crimes as his heart dipped lower on the scales.

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“Captain Steven Grant Rogers, for fuck’s bleedin’ goddamn sake, get your stupid fuckin’ legs behind that giant dinner plate before someone shoots your pecker and turns it into a pussy!”

Bucky raised his hands, spraying Steve with another biting swath of some of Stark’s simmies. The Thompson didn’t buck as much with the training rounds as it did with FMJs and definitely not as much as the heavily modified Johnson he used to pick off the goons Steve either ignored or didn’t notice. His head still ached from the plates on the machine Zola had strapped him into, his skin still squirmed on his body when he remembered what they’d done to him. He wanted nothing more to curl up in a ball in the back of Stark’s lab, drinking enough liquor to pass out, screaming silently at the voices that echoed in his head.

But booze didn’t work anymore, and while Steve was bigger, stronger, faster than he’d ever been before, the stupid goddamn punk still rushed headlong into picking fights with bullies, never stopping to watch his back.

That was Bucky’s job. It had always been, and always would be.

So, he swallowed his shrieks of terror at night, bit his pillow so hard he tore holes in it, pretended to be drunk, smoked out of habit, waved away the nurses that offered to tend his wounds, some sincere and some with a suggestive glance. Spent his sleepless nights in Stark’s lab, a sometimes-steady set of hands able to follow directions from all his experience rebuilding engines, gearboxes, and differentials.

Steve needed him.

That’s what he told himself, anyway, that Steve still needed him, but this big, strong ox of a man wasn’t anything like the waif he’d left behind in New York. They’d even erased the tiny scars that Bucky had used to point himself north like he was looking at a star chart.

Steve dove, rolled, stood up, and ran, but stumbled when his legs gave out from the simmies
pounding into his knees.

“I swear to God, Steve, I’ve seen whores who spent less time on their knees!” The insults were harsh, crass, and fully intended to goad his friend into a murderous rage. Maybe then Steve would finally learn, and Bucky wouldn’t have to drag that brick shithouse across Switzerland for a second time.

Steve snarled at him from underneath the emotionless cowl he wore, and ran straight for him.

Bucky, a trained soldier, a trained killer, and a remorseless asshole of a friend, pursed his lips tight and unloaded the rest of his magazine at that horrible, awful, stupid shield. The shield that represented everything that had been ripped away from him.

Jumping, tucking, and rolling, Steve managed to spring up and slam a fist into Bucky’s jaw without taking a single round anywhere but his shield.

The rifle went flying from Bucky’s hands, landing with a thump in the soft dirt, and he spun neatly on his foot twice before losing his balance and faceplanting into the ground. A heavy boot pressed into the small of his back, and he felt the weight shift as Steve leaned down.

“That’s entirely unnecessary, Sergeant.” Steve had his Captain America voice on, and Bucky’s grin at his friend finally dripping off his face.

“It worked, didn’t it?” Shoving his friend away, Bucky stumbled to his feet and rubbed his jaw, hand scratching over yesterday’s stubble.

The cowl helmet came off and Steve hung it from his belt. “Buck, I can take a bullet. I already have. The rest of the Commandos can deal with HYDRA goons, I have to be in there taking out what no one else can.”

“Mad science may have given you a new body, but it didn’t make you immortal.”

“I healed from that shot in the leg in a few days. If I’m not, I’m damn close.” Steve tried to sound sure of himself, even cocky, but his voice caught in his throat. They both knew how terrified he was after the offhand comment Erskine had made about Steve outliving them all.

And as much as Bucky tried to hide everything that burned in his head, all of his nightmares, the shaking, sobbing fits he had when no one was there to watch except for Stark standing guard, understanding all too well, Bucky’s shoulders slumped and he stepped forward to pull his friend in for a hug. Hesitating, biting back the words several times before he said them, Bucky grated out, “There’s something I need to tell you about.”

Later that night, the two of them shared a watch shift, sitting with their backs to the low fire, blankets pulled tight against the chill that even the serum couldn’t dispel. Bucky took a deep breath, felt the wet rattle in the base of his lungs from the humid air, and finally, slowly, haltingly, told Steve everything.

He told him about how the HYDRA tanks had shown up and massacred Nazi and Allied troops alike. How the prisoners had been formed into teams, how men went missing and all that was left was their high-pitched, inhuman screams that made his ears throb and pound. How he’d coughed and wheezed as he’d tried to fight off the pneumonia that was slowly filling his lungs. How he’d managed to lead a nearly-successful revolt and escape, and had only gotten over a hundred men disintegrated, executed. How he’d been pulled from his cell in a half-awake stupor once the drugs in his meager rations kicked in, how Zola had rubbed his hands together with glee and bounced like
a fat kid in the sweet shop.

How he’d been cut and burned and had his nails yanked out and his brain shocked, how they’d pumped him so full of so many different things that he couldn’t tell what was real anymore. How they’d killed him and brought him back so many times that he wasn’t even sure if he was alive anymore. How the only things he remembered were his name, rank, and serial number, the special forces training barely saving him.

Seeing Zola on the walkway in the collapsing factory. Feeling sick, weak, and shaky, pulling himself upright and trying to stand strong like the half-stranger next to him as Zola studied him with a clinical, scientific eye.

They both knew he should never have survived.

How his broken ankle had realigned itself, popping into place with a sickening crunch, and had healed overnight. How the scars, scabs, and bruises from the factory began disappearing. How he never seemed to need as much sleep any more, a blessing in disguise since the nightmares kept him awake anyway. How a gallon of moonshine did no more to him than a single drop. How his eyes were sharper, his senses heightened, the constant cacophony of noise and light sending him into panicked overdrive.

Steve sat silently next to him as Bucky talked until his voice was a hoarse whisper and the sun was rising.

Finally, Bucky ran out of both words and voice, and dropped his head forward, drawing in a shuddering, rattling breath. A large arm settled around his shoulders and pulled him in for a sideways hug.

Steve’s smooth, rich voice rumbled softly, so quietly that only Bucky could hear him. “End of the line, pal, remember? We aren’t there yet. I won’t say it’s gonna be okay, because that’s not how it works. But we’ll get through this, and we’ll get through it together.”

Nodding against Steve’s shoulder, Bucky’s haunted, sunken eyes stared out over the wan morning light as it tinged the landscape around them with gold. He didn’t trust himself to speak.

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James shuddered awake; he must have drifted off at some point. Chest heaving and jaw aching, he clumsily extracted himself from the bed and staggered into the bathroom. Flashes of tiny faces, pale in the moonlight with blue lips and glassy eyes danced before him, blinding him.

He fumbled for the toilet, banging his shin on it before he collapsed and flipped the lid up, resting his forehead against the cold seat. The turmoil in his gut bubbled and churned but nothing came up; he stayed there on the floor, limbs splayed out, one arm supporting his head as he breathed in the strange smell of toilet water for several long minutes punctuated by the occasional dry heave.

Eventually, the light flipped on and he snapped his eyes shut, groaning. The involuntary twitch when he felt a hand on his shoulder ended up jolting him sideways and he slid to the floor, curling up in a ball.

“James? C’mon, darling, talk to me.”

Mickey’s voice cut through the static in his head, but the only result that had was breaking open the floodgates and sending him spiraling into teeth-rattling shakes.
“JARVIS? Vitals?” She was trying to keep her voice steady.

“Elevated heart rate and blood pressure. Body temperature is dropping but still within safe parameters. I feel it’s safe to presume mild dehydration and shock. Brain activity is… significantly increased in the hippocampus and amygdala.”

His shuddering, wet gasps echoed through the bathroom.

“Any risk of a seizure?”

“None that I am able to detect. This appears to be a relatively standard panic attack.”

“Continue to monitor and record.”

“Of course.”

A heavy blanket draped over him and his hands reflexively clutched at it, pulling it tight across his shoulders. Eventually, the shaking stopped, and James cradled his head in his arms, struggling to take a full breath without his lungs catching.

Tentatively, he felt Mickey’s hand thread into his hair, and he jerked away when his scalp erupted with static. He grunted wordlessly.

“No touching?”

Rocking his head from side to side, James slowly pushed himself into a sitting position, rearranging the blanket around him as he leaned his back against the wall next to the shower. Mickey was on her knees in front of him, one of her puffy eyes more open than the other, her normally perfect hair sticking out all over the place. One of the straps for her tank top had slipped over her shoulder.

“Can you talk?”

James shook his head again after trying to get words out past the steel trap in his throat.

“Food?”

No.

“Water?”

No.

“Back to bed?”

A pause, and he shook his head again.

“Need some time?”

Yes.

“Lights off?”

No.

She gave him a tired smile and stood, padding quietly out of the bathroom and pulling the door behind her, leaving about six inches of a gap. The bed creaked softly as she climbed back in, and
within minutes her breathing and slowed and steadied again.

James buried his face in his shaking hands and tried not to wince when one of his arm’s plates squeaked, loud and high-pitched.

The lights dimmed gradually to a level low enough to be restful and just bright enough for him to see clearly, and very faint white noise started to fade in at the edges of his hearing. Several long minutes later, the tight knot in his shoulders eased and James let his head fall back against the wall. His hair fell away from his face and he closed his eyes, focusing on sucking in full, deep breaths through his nose.

Finally, he was steady enough to stand, slowly stepping his way back into the bedroom. After pulling a pair of thick, heavy sweatpants over his shorts and stuffing his feet into the first pair of shoes his size that his hands found, James folded the blanket and set it over Mickey’s feet before tugging on a heavy wool sweater.

As much as he’d hated wool as a child, for some reason the scratchy warmth helped ground him now. Mickey thought it had something to do with the micro-sensations across his skin cancelling out the static his brain generated. This particular sweater had been hand-knitted for him by one of Thor’s friends (the short, spunky, flirty brunette) and had a thick, ribbed cowl neck that he folded down and pulled tight around his face, focusing on the tiny plucks of the wool fibers catching on his stubble.

He shuffled out of the apartment as quietly as he could and stepped into the elevator.

“Would you like me to notify Miss Draymond of your whereabouts when she wakes up, sir?”

No.

“I would advise informing her that you are still in the Tower and safe.”

Yes.

“Very well. Where would you like to go?” A small list of options appeared on the elevator wall, and James poked one of them. “Certainly, sir. I’ll prevent entry until you’re ready.”

The elevator hummed to life, starting and stopping more slowly than it usually did with a soft ping to warn him each time. He could always trust JARVIS to help. He could always trust Tony to quietly set up the Tower for each of their friends’ quirks and disabilities, and then pretend it was a coincidence. The man really did have a heart of gold - of red and gold, really, but… still.

The combination dance studio and gymnasium was silent at this hour of the night, dark and open without anyone to occupy it. Lights gently faded up to a comfortable level, and a box slid out from the wall with a set of ballet shoes, a hair tie, and clothes. Foregoing the shoes for now, James changed into the form-fitting outfit that still somehow allowed him full range of motion – spandex, Steve had called it – and swept his eyes across the expansive room.

A polished wood floor, enclosed on three sides with mirror walls, defined the generously-sized dance floor that he and Natasha frequently visited. The rest of the gym was taken up with state of the art gymnastics equipment, and after a moment’s pause, James made his way to the uneven bars.

He dropped to the mat and worked through a long set of stretches, loosening every muscle that he’d be using. His left arm didn’t need it, but the familiar tug of the mounts and brackets in his chest helped pull him back to the present out of another swimming, disorienting mild hallucination.

Standing, he rubbed and clapped chalk into his hands, set himself on the mat, squared his shoulders
Swing, jump, spin, feet up, snap the heels together, flip and land, absorb the clatter of the bar. He spun through the various forms rapidly and effortlessly, continuing well past the length of a standard routine. When he found himself repeating certain sets, he turned himself around on the upper bar and swung around it several times before launching himself into the air.

He didn’t bother sticking the landing, simply rolling out of it and walking over to the trampoline.

He continued this way for several hours, switching between stations whenever he ran out of things to do. The noise in his head was finally dying away.

The face of the little girl from Halloween, so proud and standing tall in her glittering leotard, flashed in front of his eyes. Her smile turned into a grimace, then a wide-mouthed scream as her face morphed into a thin, bony Russian orphan with a gleaming metal hand over her neck.

James’s hand slipped off the handle for the pommel horse and he crashed to the floor, groaning and rolling slowly sideways. A quick inventory told him that nothing had been broken, but he’d have a nasty bruise on his sternum for several days, a swollen mark just below his eye, and he’d bitten his cheek, thick blood already starting to fill his mouth.

“Sir, are you alright? Do you need medical attention?”

Yes. No.

“Very well.” JARVIS didn’t sound happy.

There was a small bathroom near the entrance to the gym, and James used it to clean the blood out of his mouth and towel his face dry. The white powder all over his hands and forearms washed off quickly, but left a strange, tacky feel to his skin that he definitely hadn’t missed.

His mouth quirked up at the irony of it all – Russia’s best male gymnast, and he couldn’t even dream of competing. Karpov had been livid when the Soviet leader of the week had demanded that the Soldier be put on the national team for the next Olympics. “<The Asset isn’t one of your primping, preening acrobats in leotards,>” Karpov had hissed. “<It is a finely tuned weapon, crafted and honed to superhuman capabilities.>”

“<And yet you teach him ballet and make him wear tights.>”

Finally clean, James spat out a last sticky, gooey glob of pink and washed it down the drain.

“Sir, Miss Draymond has just asked me if she might come to find you.”

He hesitated before shaking his head.

“She is quite upset.”

Sighing, James rubbed his hands over his face before nodding. Let her in.

“I’ll let her know, sir.”

Within minutes, Mickey rushed through the door, hair still a mess but fully dressed. She found James hanging from the rings, muscles bulging as he slowly rotated himself around to drop to the floor. Rolling out of the fall, he stood and met Mickey’s eyes.

“Rough night?” She pointed to the welt on his cheekbone.
He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the pommel horse and then held one hand out, smacking and brushing his other over the back of it.

“You fell off?”

Yes.

“You okay?” She must have seen his eyes roll because she smirked. “Gotta ask. I’ve seen enough gymnastics to know accidents can be bad news.” Pausing to scrub her eyes with a knuckle, Mickey leaned over on her cane. “Bubble day, no talking?”

Yes. He shrugged: for now.

Bubble days were the days where physical contact became uncomfortable or even painful. He’d quickly learned to establish a bubble of personal space around himself, and nothing compared to the relief he felt when the rest of the team instinctively understood.

He pointed at Mickey and then held up his hand, index finger and thumb curled in a circle with the other three fingers pointing up. Are you okay?

“Yes. Just a little tired. I might take a nap after PT, got that with Jake at ten.” He smiled a bit, satisfied. Jake was patient, perceptive, and knowledgeable, pushing Mickey just far enough without risking reinjury. When James nodded and turned away to re-chalk his hands, Mickey asked, “Do you want me to leave?”

No.

“Okay. Just let me know if that changes.”

Yes.

He heard her click over to the small array of benches by the door and settle into place, pulling out her phone and busying herself with it.

It took another hour and a half, whipping himself through the air as he flew off the vaulting board, balancing carefully as he rolled end over end down the balance beam, and turning momentum into dizzying, stabilizing motions as he pounded across the large blue mat diagonally.

Exhausted and panting slightly, James made his way back over to Mickey and took the towel she held up for him. He swallowed and tried his voice again, managing to croak out, “Thanks.”

“Always. You good?”

“No. Will be.”

“I gotta go get changed for PT. Why don’t you head up to the roof for a bit?”

Yes.

Depositing the clothes back in the box that still stuck out from the wall, James dragged his sweater and sweatpants back on. When he saw the shoes, though, he stared at them for a few seconds before bursting out laughing.

Bright pink fluffy bunny slippers waggled their ears at him as he picked them up and gave Mickey an accusatory look.
“Swear to God, I didn’t switch them out.”

“Why the hell do I even have these?”

“Because Tony.” She gave him a stretched, sympathetic half-smile, half-grimace and tapped two fingers to her temple as she turned. “Let JARVIS know if you’d like me to bring food up.”

His stomach growled; he hadn’t eaten breakfast.

“I’ll have something waiting for you, sir.”

Staring at the fuzzy slippers awkwardly, James gave JARVIS a distracted thumbs-up. He sighed and resigned himself to his fate, stuffing his feet in them and trudging out to the elevator once more.

Thankfully, no one saw him on his way to the roof, and there was a small table with a folding chair waiting for him, every inch of the table covered in James’s favorite breakfast foods.

“Thanks, bud,” he whispered. He never understood how food could be prepared and set out within minutes, but when he’d asked Tony he’d simply been given some vague mumbles about predictive algorithms and machine learning.

“You’re most welcome.”

Somehow, Tony had also managed to rig the balcony to have a delicious bubble of warmth, despite being over seventy stories in the air and exposed to the early December chill. Basking in the comfortable heat, James let it soak through his bones as he felt the fatigue from his stress workout start to fade.

It took him around half an hour to polish off everything on the table, pouring himself another glass of water and sipping it slowly as he watched the late morning sun reflect off of the modern, spiky New York skyline.

“JARV?S?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Is it… can you… show me…” Even though he hadn’t articulated it well, JARVIS seemed to understand.

The view before him fizzled, shifted, and suddenly he found himself staring out across a memory, brought to life in front of him.

Rising to his feet, James reached out a hand tentatively and the picture in front of him shimmered, faint orange hexagons flashing briefly. Nonetheless, the view was perfect in every way as he turned his head and walked around, staring down at the ghost of old Manhattan. Drinking in the nostalgia, the gut-wrenching loss, and the homesickness, James leaned forward on the railing and let the breeze ruffle his hair for nearly an hour until he was ready to let go.

“Okay.”

He blinked, and the projection was gone, replaced with the busy streets and shining steel and glass of modern-day New York.

“Mickey.”

“She is currently napping in your room, I’ll send her up. Do you have any requests for lunch?”
“Surprise.”

“Certainly, sir.” JARVIS knew his tastes well enough to avoid anything he didn’t like at this point.

A quarter hour later, one of the kitchen staff rolled up with a small cart and cleared away the empty dishes, replacing them with large, hot paninis. James smiled and waved; he had yet to learn the name of this particular attendant, but JARVIS seemed to favor her whenever James made a request for food.

The attendant gave him a warm smile and a thumbs-up, pointedly ignoring the fuzzy bunny slippers, and rolled her cart back to the elevator. Mickey stepped out when the floors opened, reaching out to give the other girl a quick squeeze on her shoulder before slowly walking over to James.

He glanced at her hip, and she interpreted his gaze, telling him, “It went well. We had an X-ray done down in Medical, looks like the bone’s finished stitching itself back together. The muscle damage is going to take some more time and I’ll probably be in PT for at least a year, but Jake thinks I’ll be back on two legs around Christmas if I’m smart about it. Earlier if I don’t push it too hard.”

Cautiously, nervous about another skin shock, James reached out for her. When all he felt was the comforting warmth of Mickey’s shoulders, he guided her next to him and draped his arm over her, tucking his nose into her shower-damp hair.

“Doing better?”

Yes.

“He asked me to show him the view as it would have appeared during his childhood. The remaining out-of-range brain activity stabilized shortly after that.”

Mickey smiled up at him. “Bit of a change, huh?”

Yes.

A fresh gust of wind blew across the balcony, and James squinted his eyes shut against it. Turning, he led Mickey to the table and they sat, savoring the crisp paninis in companionable silence.

Once he’d squished all the crumbs into a little ball and tossed that in his mouth, James used one of the little toothpicks to fish out the crud between his teeth. “Had these in Italy once.”

“During the war?”

Yes. He chuckled. “Better than SPAM.”

“Won’t argue with that one, that’s for sure.” Mickey grinned at him, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms comfortably. “Spandex looks good on you, by the way,” she said, wiggling her eyebrows.

Blushing slightly, James looked away. They’d talked at length about Mickey’s asexuality, particularly since it confused him when she talked about things being attractive or cute, or how she actively gravitated towards him in bed whether she was awake or not. Many questions were asked, and answered, and he’d spent quite a bit of time on Google after that.

The first few times she’d woken up with a hard-on pressing into her back had been decidedly awkward – for him. Mickey seemed to find it amusing more than anything else, but made an effort never to laugh at his embarrassment. What she hadn’t seen was the results of it washing down the
It wasn’t that he’d never tried, never ended up with a girl from the bar pressed up against some wall somewhere. His body had remembered everything and it felt good, genuinely good, some of the only touch that didn’t hurt. But, when the time came, the flashbacks had ricocheted through his head, killing off every urge he felt and sending him slumping against the wall next to a very hornyp and very annoyed barfly. He’d given up trying after the fourth time.

Sam had said it was perfectly okay, normal even, and encouraged him to be patient, but James had quietly decided that he wasn’t going to pursue sex any further. The memories that came roaring up every single time were unequivocally horrid. Even his years-long affair with Natasha had been tainted, twisted, maimed into something he’d had to work hard to reclaim and remember as it had actually happened.

“James.”

Mickey’s voice pulled him back to the present, and he jumped slightly, blinking and shaking his head from side to side. “Sorry.”

“Where were you?”

“Russia. Natasha.”

She nodded, understanding. James had kept it no secret, but had also made it clear that the past was in the past. Natasha had no interest in rekindling anything closer than being good friends and dancing partners. Love is for children, she’d told him, and looked sadly at the barely-visible tan line across Clint’s left ring finger. No one else on the team knew about either Clint’s family or Natasha’s love for him, and James had gripped her hand in a silent promise. She’d come to adore Clint’s children and wife, and would never risk that for something as selfish as seeking her own happiness.

After studying James intently, Mickey broke into a soft smile and then began to chatter about her day, the other students in her classes, what movie she wanted to see next. Sometimes, conversations with James were significantly more one-sided, especially so on bubble days. She’d also figured out early on that he didn’t mind; sometimes just being able to listen was enough to help ground him, keep him from drifting away in his own head.

She watched him carefully as she talked, eyes on his shoulders and the tilt of his head. When he began to hunch inward, ever so subtly, Mickey sat back in her chair, finished her story, and waited for him to look up at her.

“Need some time?”

Yes.

“Okay, I’m going to go hang out with Perry for a bit. You remember him, right? One of the kids from the shooting range, has a mild flinch reflex and favors his left.”

Yes.

“I’ll have my phone on me if you need anything.” Standing slowly, carefully, Mickey centered her weight and clicked over to his chair, holding out her hand for a fist bump. “Take care of yourself, love.”

James gave her the best smile he could, and watched her until the doors closed into the elevator. Once they closed, he finally let himself fall from the semblance of calm and leaned forward on his
knees, hands pressing stars into his eyes in an attempt to cover up the yawning, shrunken faces glaring at him in his head.

JARVIS let him sit there for another half hour before recommending James move to his quarters. Robotically, he stood and let JARVIS take him there, the door swinging open before he reached it, and sprawled himself across the oversized couch.

Exhausted, he gave up and let his mind wander aimlessly, memories flashing through his head like pictures on a screen. The temperature in the apartment and the ambient light both lowered gradually, and faint white noise permeated his hearing until his eyelids drooped and fitfully, muttering, he began to sleep.

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“All due respect, ma’am, but tryin’ to drink me under the table? It ain’t gonna work.” The rest of the Invaders had long since retired – maybe not to their own racks, but at least the large, cluttered workshop was finally silent. Howard’s frustrated grumbling brought a smirk to Peggy’s face as she filled each of their tumblers again and fixed Bucky with a challenging stare.

He shrugged, picked up the glass, and downed it. The liquid fire burned all the way down, settling warm and solid in his stomach. The dull clink of the glass on Army steel must have caught Howard’s attention. Peggy, ever the lady, took slightly more time with the liquor and even made a pretense of savoring it.

“What’d they make this giggle juice with, old socks?” Bucky croaked.

“I believe Corporal Dugan contributed a healthy share towards the materials.”

“Of course.” Dum Dum’s feet were possibly the most rancid thing Bucky had ever smelled – not that his were much better after a week’s marching.

One more tumbler thunked down between them as Howard entered the fray, holding the lovechild of an overgrown test tube and a vacuum chamber.

“Do I wanna know?” Bucky was decidedly grumpy now that he’d noticed the pink flush on Peggy’s neck and felt nothing himself. Flashing him a pearly, cocky grin, Howard uncapped the strange bottle with a hiss and poured something bright... purple... into Bucky’s glass.

“On the rocks, Bucky Bear?”

“You gonna tell me what it is, first?”

“Yes, Howard, do tell. I’m going to need something to put in the obituary once I keep Steve from-”

“Keep me from what?”

All three of them turned abruptly to see Steve standing in the door to the lab, silhouetted against the camp lights, arms crossed. Bucky didn’t have to see his friend’s face to know those piercing blue eyes were fixed on him. “You weren’t in your bunk.”

“Couldn’t sleep,” he muttered to his glass.

“We’ve got a mission tomorrow, I can’t have you being hung over.” Steve strode over to them, raising an eyebrow at the shockingly neon color of the liquid Bucky swirled around. “Especially not on some experimental moon... Mars-shine.”
“Mars is red, punk.”

Peggy snorted and Howard pulled his lips in to keep from laughing as Steve rolled his eyes. “Seriously, what’s in that? You trying to poison my sergeant, Stark?”

“Here.” Stark tipped the bottle once more, handing Steve his own glass of the stuff. “Bottoms up. Stuff’s strong enough it should even give you a buzz.”

An experimental sniff made Bucky’s nose burn and he could have sworn he saw the smoke rising from his singed nose hairs. “Damn, Stark, I could run an engine on this.”

“Absolutely not. Mission. Tomorrow. No hangover.” Setting down the glass, Steve reached over to grab Bucky’s arm just as Bucky shrugged and tossed his own drink back. The fluid was smooth, both oily and slippery, almost sweet-tasting… for the first two seconds. Then, his nose, mouth, lungs, stomach, goddamn everything lit on fire. Coughing and hacking uncontrollably, Bucky doubled over and fell off his stool. Hands reached to catch him but he still landed hard on the concrete floor.

“Fuckin’… Stark… killin’ me…” he gasped out between coughs, desperately trying not to laugh as Steve’s face turned nearly the same color as the drink, hands dangerously close to Howard’s throat.

“I swear to God, Howard, if you poisoned him…”

“Relax, Cap. It’s just supercharged tequila.”

“Ohhhhh no no no. I remember the last time tequila got in the mix. No. This… no.” Steve scooped Bucky up, grunting as his friend leaned limply against him.

“Steeeeeeve,” Bucky drawled, head lolling, a sloppy smile on his face.

“Well, that was quick.” Peggy raised her eyebrows and took a delicate sip of her whiskey. “Drinking him under the table, indeed.”

Cursing and muttering under his breath, Steve unceremoniously dragged Bucky back to their quarters. Normally, a sergeant bunked with his own soldiers but Steve had insisted, and Captain America always got his way. Two low cots lined the walls on either side, and small desk sat between them opposite the door, covered in field reports and memos. Steve practically threw Bucky onto the cot on the left as he stalked into the room.

“Wha’ the hell…”

“Gonna kill him,” Steve growled as he removed his belt and unbuttoned his dress uniform. “Gonna bring back a fuckin’ HYDRA bomb and set it off in that goddamn junk heap he calls a lab…”

“Steeeve, c’mon pal…”

“No.” Steve swatted Bucky’s hand away. “You’re drunk. God knows how, but you’re drunk.”

“Feels nice.” His mind was too floaty and fuzzy to think too hard about how quickly the super juice had hit him.

“I’ll bet it does.”

Bucky made another clumsy lunge towards Steve from the cot, hands closing on empty air as his entirely too sober friend danced away. “C’mere, gorgeous.”
“Nope.”

“No’ be like las’ time. Promise.”

Even though his back was turned, Bucky could see the clench of Steve’s jaw in the stiffening of his shoulders. “No, Bucky. Get changed and get some rest. Bugle’s at 0600 tomorrow.”

“Fuggin’ wet blanket.” But Bucky did as he was told, dragging off his fatigues and pulling on thick woolen trousers and something Stark had called a thermal shirt before clumsily sliding his way into his sleeping bag.

Whether it was several sleepless nights finally catching up with him, or another wonderful feature of Stark’s supercharged whatever-it-was, Bucky was snoring quietly within a matter of minutes.

Steve studied the softened lines of his friend’s face, pulling out a small sketchbook and a stub of pencil to do a quick drawing before he tucked the sketchbook back into his rucksack and carefully slipped off his uniform. Folding it neatly on the desk to avoid wrinkles, Steve smoothed it flat as best he could and then stepped into his own set of thermals, wrapped his sleeping bag around himself, and closed his eyes.

As much as he wanted, needed to hear Bucky’s steady, strong heartbeat to sleep properly, Steve kept his distance. Bucky had said no, many, many years ago, stone cold sober and fixing him with a face that wouldn’t lie. And sober, it wasn’t a problem. Their boundaries were set, much closer than most other friends but still firm and clearly defined. But this was the first time Bucky had actually managed to be drunk since Steve joined the war, and it was… alarming.

Rolling onto his side to stare at the tent wall, Steve focused on deep, deliberate breaths to distract himself. A violation of trust like that could never be forgiven, so he’d swallowed his words and turned away. Boundaries. A line in the sand, drawn by them both. He only hoped that Bucky’s hangover wouldn’t compromise him.

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James spent the rest of the day rattling around their quarters like a pinball, alternating between various sitting surfaces, trying to take a nap, read a book, watch some TV. Eventually he gave up and simply sat on the floor by the huge windows, turned with his back to the fire, and stared sightlessly out into the city.

The sun glinted off something, maybe a plane, and he reflexively sneezed. When his head snapped up, his eyes trained on the Steinway in the corner.

What the hell, why not.

Unfolding himself from the floor, James padded over to the piano and perched, awkwardly, on the bench. He vaguely remembered what the pedal on the right did but couldn’t begin to guess what the other two were for.

When he reached for the keyboard, his hands settled automatically into a particular place – Middle C, something in his memory told him. His right thumb on Middle C and his left pinkie an octave lower.

Brow furrowed, he stared at the keys and tried to make sense of the pattern of two, three, two in the black ones. He pressed down with his right thumb, tentatively, unsure how much force to use, and a note dragged itself out of the piano.

Right, the lid. Standing, he folded back the front section and lifted the lid, pulling up the prop to
support it. Pianos sounded better when they were open. He didn’t know how he knew that, it was just there.

His hands fell back into the same position and he paused for a moment, something fluttering in the back of his head but eluding his grasp. Shrugging, he slid his fingers back and forth across the keys a few times, feeling the slight dips between the white keys and letting his fingertips brush against the black ones.

Almost of their own accord, when his hands hit the right spot, his fingers began to move, pressing down the keys in a pattern that he vaguely, almost remembered.

Steve found him like this some time later, hands flying through complex chords and arpeggios, eyes half-lidded and hair hanging into his face. The blond man paused at the door, almost considering leaving when James spoke, his hands continuing to move flawlessly.

“It’s okay. Come in.” The words were easy, smooth, a relief after his relapse.

The rich waterfall of notes wound down until James finished them out with a soft, round chord and finally raised his head, brushing his stray hair back behind his ears and glancing up at Steve.

“I didn’t know you played the piano.”

James gave him a wry smile. “Neither did I.”

The meaning sunk in, and Steve’s face fell.

“No, no, not like that,” James said in a rush, raising his hands. “No, I think this was something… good. It wasn’t… I mean, I remember having to play for Brezhnev. They took out my old arm, the old model, gave me this one, and Brezhnev wanted to make sure it worked as well as a normal arm, so they taught me piano and ballet and gymnastics.”

“…ballet.” The distress turned to amused incredulity, and heat rose in James’s face.

“I’ll have you know I danced at the Bolshoi,” he replied, turning his nose in the air and attempting to be haughty. All it did was send Steve into peals of laughter. “No, seriously. Natasha and I. We did Swan Lake.”

Steve snorted, sitting on the table. “Somehow… I just can’t see you in tights.” He glanced up at James again, and burst out laughing once more, doubled over and clutching his sides.

“Fuckin’ taught you how to dance, didn’t I?” James muttered darkly, reaching up to close the piano back up.

“No, Buck… leave it open. I, um… you’re really good. I’d like you to play some more if that’s okay.”

Surprised, James raised the prop back up and settled the lid carefully, tilted up the cover that rotated down over the keys. “Um, sure.”

He stared blankly at the keys for a minute, wondering how to start again, when something clicked into place in his mind. The corner of his mouth rose up in a smirk and he laid his hands on the keys, dropping quickly into a version of Benny Goodman’s “Peckin’.”

“Remember this one?” His hands moved on their own, somehow knowing where to go without him telling them.
“Yeah, you tried to teach me the jitterbug to it whenever old man Halverson would put it on the phonograph.” Steve grinned at him.

“Didn’t work too well. Not before they made you into human popcorn, anyway. After that, though…” Catching Steve’s eye, he wagged his eyebrows and gave him a sly smile.

Steve blushed a little, looking down. Finally successful in his quiet, secret dancing lessons, Steve had taken his newfound knowledge to the dance floor multiple times, every time bringing home one girl or another – sometimes one of the other soldiers – and pleading with his eyes until Bucky had cursed softly, gathered up his kit, and bunked in the barracks for the night. The tables had definitely been turned.

James’s hands faltered over the keys as he saw Steve’s smile slip. “Hey.” He stood, walking over, and stopped a few feet away.

“I’m fine,” Steve said, waving him away. “Just missing Peggy. Our Peggy. It’s… it’s hard, seeing her like this. Seeing any of them like this. They all went and lived their lives, and now we… we cheated, and here we are, still young and, and strong, and…” Steve’s voice cracked and he screwed his eyes shut.

“Steve.” When he didn’t get a response, James reached out and put his hands on his friend’s shoulders. “Steve. Talk to me.”

“She’s got about a year, Buck. Maybe two. Her Alzheimer’s getting worse. Sometimes she doesn’t even remember meeting me.”

James’s jaw clenched, muscles working under his skin as he remembered his first, and only, visit to Peggy. She’d known him, remembered he’d died, seen his arm, and calmly leveled a gun at him until he left.

“She’s kicked cancer once already, hasn’t she? Maybe she’ll be fine.” He knew his words were hollow, but he said them anyway, hating the defeated, old look on Steve’s face.

“She’s, what, ninety-eight now? There isn’t a such thing as ‘fine’ any more for her, Buck.”

“This is Peggy we’re talking about, right? The firecracker who shot at you four goddamn times just to prove a point? Remember?” Catching Steve’s jaw with a finger, James forced his friend to look up. “I’d say she’s had a good run. She’s led a ridiculously long, full life, she had kids, she’s got a gorgeous niece, who you should ask out, by the way, after you stop makin’ moon eyes at Sam. Pretty sure he’s steady with someone.”

“Oh, Christ, not you, too,” Steve groaned.

“You’re the most eligible bachelor in New York, Steve. Time to start actin’ like it.” James gave him an affectionate slap on the shoulder and walked over to the kitchen. The ghosts from the morning seemed to be satisfied now, staying dormant in the back of his head.

An uncomfortably large amount of food stared back at him from the shelves in the fridge, and he closed the door and awkwardly laughed. Mickey had completely reworked their grocery list now that they could have anything and everything they wanted, and he didn’t even recognize most of the ingredients that she used now. “Um… I’d offer you something to eat, but I’ll be honest, I have no idea what to do with any of this.”

“Well, dinner’s in an hour or so if you want to wait. Everyone’s here for the first time in a while, so Tony’s kind of insisting.” Sensing James’s hesitation, Steve backpedaled immediately. “Um, only if
you want to. Mickey sent out a group text saying it wasn’t a good day for you.”

James groaned and dropped his head into his hands. “Of course she did. She say anything else?”

“…no? Just that you’d woken up pretty early and weren’t really much for talking today. I’m surprised you’re doing so well right now.”

“Piano helped, I think.”

“Well, if you want to come, you’d be welcome to. Just the team, no one else, you already know everyone there.”

Thinking about it as he walked back to the piano bench, James shrugged. “I can always leave if it gets to be a problem.”

“Yeah, of course.”

The lacquered finish was glass-smooth as James trailed his fingers over the curve of the wall around the sound board. “Whose idea was this, anyway? I never told anyone I played.” He glanced up when Steve didn’t immediately respond, the blond scratching the back of his neck.

“Well… Pepper put a lot of effort into making this as good for you as she could. One of the pictures in your file has you sitting at a piano in a dress uniform, sometime in the 60s, I think. She probably just went off of that.” Steve glanced down at his hands, suddenly quiet. “Tony didn’t think it was the best of ideas because, you know, you were… with them… but then Pepper showed me the picture and- and you were smiling, Buck. One hundred percent James Buchanan Barnes’s lopsided, toothy grin.”

“Huh.” Reaching in and tapping some of the strings, James let the soft pings echo through the piano as he lifted up the dampers by hand. “Only ever had an upright as a kid, I never got the chance to see how these things work.”

On an impulse, he went to grab Steve by the hand and dragged him over. “C’mere. I’ll teach you a duet.”

“Buck – wait, no, I can’t – stop-”

“Shaddup.” He shoved Steve down onto the left side of the bench and sat next to him. “Okay, hold your hands like this. Put them here, good. Now, this is finger one, this one’s two…”

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Shivering, shaking, barely able to hold his pistol straight, Bucky crept through the ruined hallway. He shuffled his feet through the debris, not trusting himself to fully step over some of the chunks of plaster and concrete that crumbled into the floor.

He’d ripped off his coat and shoved it firmly into Dernier’s chest and jumped right in after Steve when that idiot, that reckless, suicidal numbskull, hadn’t seen the HYDRA kraut with a bazooka and got knocked clean off the embankment and into a lake.

With his gear soaked through and the hard, dense muscle Erskine had given him, Steve must have weighed a solid ton. It took three of them to haul his limp body up out of the water, and Bucky had planted his hands firmly on Steve’s chest, pumping the water out, flipping his friend over, pounding on his back until Steve coughed weakly just like he had in the cold winters in Brooklyn.
The goons had hit them while Steve was down, splitting the Commandos up before Bucky was able to get his coat back.

He’d taken refuge in part of the warehouse, worming his way into a corridor and throwing a grenade blindly over his shoulder at the hobnailed boots behind him. While he waited for the dust to settle, crouched into the only cover he could find, the radio speaker on the wall crackled and, softly, began to whisper to him.

The voice had made him nauseous, shaky, terrified; after dry-heaving up the breakfast he hadn’t eaten, Bucky managed to get his gun in his hands and stumble to his feet.

The cold air bit at his arms as his wet mid-layer clung to his skin, his boots squelching and crunching as he tried to keep his gait smooth and sure. He couldn’t hear a sound other than his own rapid heartbeat and uneven breathing.

Something darted into his sight line and without thinking, he squeezed off three shots. When they all pinged off a huge red, white, and blue shield, Bucky fell to his knees and retched again.

Steve’s voice barely cut through the screaming in his head, and he felt an arm haul him to his feet and practically drag him out of the warehouse. When his knees gave out again, Steve slung his shield onto his arm and hoisted Bucky up, carrying him piggy-back to where the Invaders were waiting.

No one said a thing as Steve set Bucky down, helped him strip and change into dry clothes. The campfire’s warm crackle was the only sound as the Invaders ate their beans and potatoes, throwing discreet glances at the slumped shoulders underneath three blankets, Steve hovering protectively just to the left.

It took Bucky four days to come back to himself, slowly shaking off the ooze that seemed to fill his head whenever he heard Zola’s voice. He’d almost shot Steve. He had shot Steve, but the shield had been there. His training had worked, he’d just never in his wildest nightmares imagined that he’d be the one to test it with live fire.

***

Dinner actually went much better than James expected; everyone seemed to be working hard to keep things low-key. Even Tony was more subdued than usual, foregoing the affectionate slap on the shoulder for a more comfortable fist bump. Pepper immediately checked in, quietly asking James if he’d liked the piano, JARVIS had told her, did it need to be tuned?

“No, it’s… it’s awesome, Pep. Thanks.” He even managed a smile. She squeezed his hand before standing up, leaving him sitting in the soft armchair in the corner that had been dubbed the Bucky Bear Chair during his first stay at the Tower.

Mickey, already emphatically adopted by the team, threw her head back laughing at one of Thor’s jokes. As he scooted more food onto his fork, James smiled softly. That little crinkle her nose made when she laughed, her easy smile, he’d never get tired of that.

A soft swish caught his attention and he turned to his right, looking up to see Hill lean against the wall next to him. They’d all gotten in the habit of scuffing their feet to telegraph their approach when James wasn’t looking.

“I’ll just cut to the chase. You ready to take on some duties starting next week? We need you in DC.”
James pursed his lips and chewed thoughtfully. “Depends on what they are,” he mumbled around his food.

“Young training, mostly. Evaluation.”

“Area?”

“Unarmed and armed combat. Firearms.”

Turning so that he could face Hill squarely, James tilted his head to the side. “You do realize that I can kill most of those kids if I don’t pull a punch properly?”

Her smirk and eyebrow pop told him enough, and he turned back to his food, sighing.

“Yes, ma’am. Anything I need to be aware of?”

“Fresh class. Most of them know which end of the gun to hold.” Hill walked away, grabbing a plate and serving herself from the cooling buffet as James dropped his head into his hands, groaning.

“Oh, fuck me,” he muttered, dreading the first day already.

Later, after dishes had been cleared and the leftovers packed away, Tony hopped up onto the coffee table and struck a pose, declaring that this was now a dance competition. The wink that he sent James’s way couldn’t have been coincidental, explicitly confirmed when the supposedly random names in a hat just happened to pair James and Steve together.

At least they got to choose the music.

“You in the mood for some Glenn Miller?” Steve asked him, a conspiratorial smile widening across his face as they walked out into the large open floor. Without waiting for a response, the opening chords bounced their way through the room and James reached out a hand.

“What brings a pretty dame like you to a place like this?” Steve’s overplayed wince was greeted with raucous laughter, and James smoothly led them through the first few steps before – dammit.

“Stop leading, Steve.”

“I’m taller.”

“I’m older.” They jumped away, spinning, then James swung Steve neatly around and pivoted back and forth on his foot. “And you still can’t lindy hop for shit, you dead hoofer.”

“You got girl’s hair.”

“You’re a fairy.”

“Fop.” As James led Steve in towards him, he had to jerk his head to the left to avoid a playful, wet kiss aimed for his cheek.

“Bank’s closed, pal.”

Steve wagged his eyebrows up and down. “You ain’t swacked yet.”

“Wait, he’s been drunk enough before?” Tony hollered above the cackles and hoots.

“Right before Prohibition was repealed,” Steve answered as they moved through a swingout.

“Somehow Bucky got his hands on a whole damn bottle of tequila-”
“Stole it from Halverson, old coot fell asleep on his balcony with half his hooch on display.”

“We both got thoroughly sloshed. I was done, what, four shots in?”

“Oh, please. You were ninety pounds soaking wet after a big breakfast. Three.”

Steve swatted him on the shoulder as they trotted together. “You must’ve had something like seven or eight by the time you called it quits.”

“God, I barely remember that.”

“Well, that’s probably why,” Mickey taunted with a grin. “Wait, you were, what, sixteen? Damn, dude.” James rolled his eyes as he and Steve spun around again.

“Oh, shut up, you. Anyway, Steve is so zozzled at this point that he can barely stand, and he-”

“Yeah, like you were any better. Started slipping into Gaelic, you were so far gone.” Through the mixture of Sarah Rogers’s crooned lullabies and the men at the docks, James and Steve had quickly gained passable fluency in the rough, crass dialect of Gaelic thrown around in the lower class.

“Focái leat.”

“Well, yeah, that’s kind of what happened.”

A pair of drumsticks flew past them as Clint drawled, “You’re killin’ me, Cap.”

“Steve ‘stumbles’ and ends up faceplanting into my chest, slurs something about how I got the prettiest eyes this side of Manhattan, and plops those limp wet fish he calls lips on my face.”

“Well, I didn’t hear you complaining.”

“Oh my god, Capsicle, you did what.”

“Aaaaand that’s the story of how we woke up naked in bed together in my parents’ house with spunk on the sheets, and how we found out Steve’s a switch hitter and I’m definitely not.” The song finished, and he and Steve smirked at each other before bursting out laughing at the stunned looks on everyone’s faces.

“Wait, I thought you said-”

James cut Mickey off with a wink and a grin. “First time with a girl.”

“You know,” Tony mused, “I’m pretty sure I’m the only one in this room Barnes hasn’t slept with, shot at, or both.”

“And it’s going to stay that way, Stark,” James laughed. He was about to walk over to the empty spot next to Mickey when Pepper reached into the bowl on the table and picked out two more names.

“Natasha and… James. Again. Tony, are you sure this isn’t rigged?”

Tony’s look of nonchalant innocence gave everything away. “Can we get back to the part where Cap and Hiyo Silver had sex?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Tony,” James complained.
Steve winked at him and smacked him on the ass on his way back to the couch. “No rest for the wicked.”

“Are we going to hear a steamy Russian love story now?” Bruce seemed to be enjoying this way more than James had anticipated, and was slowly working his way through a cup of tea. Maybe that was why; it smelled like one of the calming blends.

Natasha muttered something in Russian vulgar enough to make James blush slightly, and he glanced at Bruce. “I’ll spare your ears. Basically, no.”

Little did the team know that James and Natasha had been working on a routine for a while. “<You ready>?” James asked, and Natasha hopped up into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist.

Someone whistled, and he had to suppress a chuckle at the surprised amusement plastered over Mickey’s face. “Hit it, JARVIS.”

Up-tempo percussion filled the room, and James carefully supported Natasha’s weight as she leaned back and kicked her legs over. Swinging her hips from side to side, Natasha raised up her arms and stepped back, spinning around as James guided her through the steps. A hand on her waist helped her rotate around as she kicked her legs up in the air through a full circle.

He couldn’t help but beam at her; her footwork was perfect as always. Natasha moved effortlessly with him, turning just right, trusting him enough for the tricky lifts they’d practiced to no end. They split apart for a few moments and he caught Steve’s eye as he twisted his hips, swinging his arms, mirroring Natasha’s movements.

Steve’s eyes were bright, crinkled at the corners, with a nostalgic smile. They’d spent so many nights with Steve alone at the bar and Bucky whirling around with a fancy dame that this, Tony’s game, ended up helping the Tower feel like home in a way nothing else had yet.

Moving back behind Natasha, James caught her as she leaned back into him, swinging her through another lift and taking her weight when she dropped into the splits. “Should she even be able to do that in jeans?” he heard Sam ask.

Another set of spins, and Natasha flashed James a dazzling smile. They twisted around each other, moving flawlessly through the various steps, and ended with Natasha perched on James’s shoulders as they both finished with their arms flung out to the left.

The exertion left James slightly short of breath, and he gently lowered Natasha down before she popped up on her toes and kissed him on the cheek. “<Well done.>”

“<I had a good partner.>”

“Does anyone care that they’re whispering sweet nothings in Assassinese?” A smattering of laughs greeted Hill’s complaint as James finally landed in the spot on the couch he’d been aiming for.

“Down, boy,” Mickey warned him with a grin. “You’re spoken for, remember?”

“Now, where would I be without my reputation?” Draping an arm around Mickey’s shoulders, he pulled her in for a quick kiss and then took a long drink from the beer that she handed him. “Please, no more dancing tonight. My legs feel like they’re made of lead.”

Tony wagged his eyebrows at James. “You’re in luck, Terminator. Next up, Clint, and… Bruce.”

“Oh, no no no. No. I don’t dance. And don’t get any ideas, neither does the Other Guy.”
Fizz burned James’s nose as he snorted, and he promptly started to choke on the maelstrom in his sinuses. “Sorry,” he gasped out. “Just… Big Green in a tutu.” There was a moment’s pause, and then the rest of the team got a nasty case of the giggles while Bruce tried to glare at James, unsuccessfully attempting to fend off a smirk.

Pepper saved the day by drawing another name. She frowned, glanced at James, then Tony, and rolled her eyes. “Okay, Tony, you get the honors. Get up there.”

The rest of the evening passed by quickly, and James was nursing his fourth beer as Sam bounced around the makeshift stage to Gangnam Style, Clint and Thor right next to him.

As Clint flopped back down onto the couch, he lazily waved an arm in James’s direction. “So tell me, Barnes, where’d you learn how to salsa?”

“YouTube.” James tipped the bottle up, catching the last few drops. “Wanted to see what dancing was like nowadays, so I probably watched a couple hundred hours of videos over the course of a few months. Man, I love the internet. Would’ve made things so much easier back in our day, Steve.”

Mickey swatted his arm playfully. “Oh, stop it with the old man jokes. You’re making me feel weird.”

“Well, he’s got a point. Yelp would’ve been awesome for finding the speakeasies, and Facebook would’a helped a lot keepin’ Bucky from getting stuck with some ice queen.”

“Remember Caitlyn? God, that girl was colder than Germany in January.” James shuddered. “She didn’t look much better than some of the girls in the pubs there, either. Don’t know what I saw in her.”

“She knew how to dance,” Steve pointed out.

“That she did. She also knew how to step on a guy’s toes just right if you got too fresh. I swear, she made an art of it.”

The conversation petered out after that, until Mickey tried, and failed, to stifle a yawn. “Sorry, I’m wiped. Been up since six.”

A chorus of oh-god-whys serenaded her as she stood, grabbed her cane from the table, and cracked her neck. “It’s past eleven, you weirdos. I’ve actually got a job to report to tomorrow, so…”

She glanced at James and he shooed her away. “I’ll be right up. Go on, it’s fine.” As she ambled away, he leaned out and started to clear the dishes from the huge coffee table. “It is actually getting pretty late, and I had an early morning myself.”

“You’re doing much better now, though.” A hand touched his arm, and he turned to see Natasha give him that gentle smile with her eyes. “Good dancing, tonight.”

“You too, Lisichka.”

People in various stages of tipsiness lurched to their feet and gradually the common room cleared as dishes were ferried into the sink, rinsed, and left for the morning. Normally James would have insisted on washing them, but his eyelids were beginning to droop and he didn’t trust himself to stay awake much later.

“I’ll get them, don’t worry about it.” Steve rolled open the dishwasher and started slotting dishes into
place. “One of these would have been so nice to have back in Brooklyn.”

“No argument there. G’night, Steve.”

“Hey.” Steve caught his arm and gave him a serious look. “Good job, today. I’m proud of you.”

James’s smile was equal parts self-conscious and pleased. “Thanks.”

He chatted with Clint and Sam as they rode up to their respective floors, wishing them both a good night. Once he was alone in the elevator, he leaned against the wall and looked up at the hidden camera.

“Thanks, buddy. I owe you a big one.”

“You’re most welcome, sir. It’s a reward enough to see Agent Romanoff smiling again. She’s had a difficult time of it, lately.”

“So she tells me. Still, thanks. Good work on the music. Everyone had a lot of fun tonight.”

“It was my pleasure, sir.”

The doors slid open and James stepped into the small foyer, now completed with more tasteful chairs and a petite coffee table, and less one plant. Two of Steve’s paintings hung on the walls, one on each side of the apartment door.

James had asked Steve to help him with artwork for the apartment; while he’d anticipated a well-researched and thoughtful collection, he hadn’t expected Steve to actually paint him a full series of originals. A total of twelve oil paintings of various sizes now warmed the wood-paneled walls even further, all of them breathtaking views of their favorite places in New York growing up.

He paused in front of the large staggered-size triptych spanning the wall behind the couch, drinking in the ethereally delicate depiction of the Brooklyn Bridge shrouded in fog. Now that Steve had the time, tools, money, and paints to truly explore his passion, his skills had skyrocketed above anything James could have hoped for.

The sound of running water drew him to the bathroom – he paused in the bedroom to glance at the huge frameless canvas hanging over the bed that depicted Brighton Beach in the early morning – and Mickey leaned over the sink to spit out her toothpaste, pajama shorts riding up slightly in the back.

“You doing better?” she asked.

“Yeah, definitely. Apparently I do know how to play piano. Sat down and muscle memory took over. It helped a lot.”

She walked over to him and wrapped her arms around him, hugging him tightly. “Good to hear.” A quick, minty peck on the lips, and she slid past him, hips still rolling with her off-balance gait, and climbed into bed. “Are you coming to bed right away?”

“Yeah…” Scrubbing at his eyes, James rolled his shoulders back and twisted a bit to get those satisfying crackles in his shoulder blades. “I can barely keep my eyes open.”

She hummed at him and snuggled into the thick, soft flannel sheets. He moved through his evening routine quickly, popping open the right cap on his pill box and tossing the small handful of medications back with a palmful of water. A fresh tube of the Arm & Hammer toothpaste he’d grown fond of was already waiting for him in the medicine cabinet.
Living in the Tower definitely had its perks.

He’d taken to leaving small tips around in discrete places: tucked between the towels with a short note complimenting the staff’s taste; underneath the empty carton of sassafras root beer in the fridge; any place where it was clear that whoever had been assigned to his quarters was doing their job and doing it well. Tony had insisted that tips weren’t necessary, but… James’s mother had drilled it into his skull from day one that a gentleman always tipped for service.

Pepper had helped him learn how to braid his hair after Mickey was released to outpatient care, and while his fingers were still slightly clumsy and he’d never wear his own braids in public, it definitely helped keep things tamed at night. Mickey had certainly appreciated the change, telling him dryly that there was a reason she’d never grown her hair long to begin with.

As soon as he lay down and relaxed into the amazingly comfortable mattress, Mickey squirmed over to him and cuddled up against his side.

She pressed her lips to his cheek as he reached out and pulled the cord for the bedside lamp. “You did well today, love. You’ve come a really long way. I think you should tell Dr. Ellmore about today when you call her next time.”

James considered it for a moment, then nodded against the top of Mickey’s head. “Yeah, I think I will. Today went pretty well, all things considered.” One more kiss on her forehead and a hand on her shoulder, and James whispered, “Good night, Myshka.”

“G’night.”

Chapter End Notes

So, generally men don’t compete in uneven bars (or balance beam). Like, ever. This is why. But it can be done, and involves an incredible amount of strength and dexterity to the degree that I don’t think the Winter Soldier’s trainers would pass up that opportunity. Maybe if they had a custom rig spaced proportionately to keep him from popping a nad?

This is the dance routine I imagine James and Natasha doing.

While wasting time on Pinterest a while ago I stumbled on a screncapped version of this post that immediately made me say “YES THIS IS PERFECT” because it totally makes sense. Because no one in their right mind would not be terrified of Zola after an experience like that, and Zola most definitely knew what he was looking at when he saw a dead man walking.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

This chapter isn't quite as heavy as the previous two, which is good because I had a few Bad Nights myself recently and don't think I could've gotten this up today if it had more triggery stuff in it. In case you hadn't guessed, this is a bit of a therapy project for me. It's helping, in the 'cut an X and suck the poison out' method.

**Trigger warnings:**
- Unexpected body hair regrowth (I guess? I mean, it's only unexpected because our favorite amnesiac ex-assassin has Swiss cheese for a brain)
- Firearms instruction
- Hypervigilance results in misinterpreting a situation (no real danger)
- Discussion of effects of prior sexual trauma on James’s ability to get down to business

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Barnes - not Bucky, yet, he couldn’t call himself that even though he wanted to - stared at himself in the mirror, a mixture of shock, revulsion, and intent curiosity written across his face.

It was the most expressive he’d seen himself since Steve had woken him up in April.

The first day at the Tower had been strange, completely unlike anything he’d expected. While a few members of the team had given him unsure, calculating looks and a few others had avoided him completely, no one had tried to force him to do anything. He’d been given more choices than he ever remembered having.

But this, this was something for which he’d have to ask for help.

“Steve?” he called, his voice still shaking off the last traces of the rough, gravelly tones of atrophied vocal chords.

Within seconds, the tall blond soldier was at the door to the bathroom, carefully disguised panic in his eyes. “What? Is everything okay? Are you okay?”

Barnes found himself smiling. “No, it’s fine, I’m just…” Unable to find the words, he pointed at the mirror. “Fuzzy.”

His chest and armpits were covered in a strange brown fuzz that he’d never remembered having before.

Steve stared at him, eyes wide, for several seconds before he burst out laughing.

Barnes really did start to panic then - had he said something wrong? There were so many times lately when he said the wrong thing, misunderstood, didn’t respond at all… was this one of those times?

Eventually, after a snort and a sigh, Steve straightened up. “Oh, God, Buck… That’s okay. That’s normal. It’s just like your face, you’ll have hair that keeps growing there. You can either let it grow or, I dunno, shave, maybe wax? They must’ve waxed you…” And with that, Steve doubled over
again, tears leaking out of his eyes as he nearly pissed himself.

A weird itch between his legs made Barnes stretch out the waistband of his pajama pants. The same brown fuzz covered his crotch, and was beginning to make things decidedly uncomfortable. A memory tickled at the back of his head, of a girl with strange tastes and a boy, him, much younger, too eager to please, and the itchy, maddening aftermath; he pinched the bridge of his nose as the familiar mild headache settled in behind his eyes.

“Well, son of a whore,” he muttered. “That ain’t gonna be fun while it grows in.”

Steve fell to his side, curled up in the fetal position, face red and teeth bared in uncontrollable laughter. “They gave you a Brazilian,” he choked out. “Oh my god.”

Embarrassed and peeved, Barnes stalked out of the bathroom and into his bedroom, closing the door so that he could see what in the hell he was going to be dealing with for the next few weeks.

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A stubborn headwind had caused the Quinjet to touch down ten minutes late; James rode the loaner bike straight out of the loading bay and onto the tarmac, ignoring the frantic men running around as he twisted open the throttle and roared toward the road. As much as he knew he was a Harley guy, the Honda liter bike still plastered the same boyish grin across his face.

The wind whistled around his helmet and he reached up to snap the visor down so that it sealed properly.

Leaning into the curve with the ease of practice, James kicked down a few gears and swept onto the interstate, sliding neatly between the cars. He pressed his chest to the bike, curling around it, and sped off towards HQ.

Thanks to some blazingly stupid riding for which he would have killed Steve or Mickey if he’d seen them doing the same, he arrived only five minutes late. Holding his helmet in one hand by the chin bar, he slung his riding jacket over his shoulder as he strode down the hall to the training facility.

Agents milled around him, some casually leaning on the wall and chatting, some rushing to their next meeting with their noses buried in paperwork.

One benefit of his size, appearance, and reputation: no one got in his way. He chose to ignore the furtive glances, and met the eyes of those that openly leered or glared at him, challenging them silently. Steve wasn’t the only one that didn’t like bullies. Even if the Winter Soldier had earned these agents’ fear, James Buchanan Barnes had not.

The retina scanner clicked and beeped at him, and the door slid into the wall with a soft hiss. As soon as the seal was broken, the sharp report of handguns told him he was in the right place.

Hill had told him a locker was already set up for him, and the J BARNES stenciled on it helped him find it easily. She’d even had a shelf put in for his brain bucket and hooks for his leathers. He tugged the armored pants and boots off and quickly slipped into the uniform folded neatly below the helmet shelf. Blousing his pants automatically, James tugged at the fabric until it sat just right and reached in for the heavy ballistic vest. He pulled his guns out of the case in his backpack and buckled on the straps around his waist and thighs.

Full geared up, he stuffed his earplugs in and hung his earmuffs around his neck. He knew from experience that he had to secure his hair back before sliding the faintly yellow-tinted goggles on; the temple pieces loved to grab stray hairs and never let go.
The trainees were already shooting, the standard Glock 19s held out towards targets. His assistant, a young, willowy man named Franklin, waved at him before slapping a button to signal the end of the firing session.

Targets automatically rode forward on their tracks to each of the seven trainees, and they took them down, studying them, as James walked up to Franklin.

“Touched down a little late, sorry. What’ve we got so far?”

“They’re pretty fresh, sir,” Franklin told him, voice low so it wouldn’t carry. “Not too many bad habits yet, but we’ve got a long way to go.”

“First-years?”

“Yes.”

By this time, the trainees had all gathered around them, staring open-mouthed at James’s arm as it reflected the lights in the ceiling.

James crossed his arms, looking at each of the kids in front of him. Even though two of them looked to be in their late thirties, he still couldn’t help but consider them kids. Eyes slid away from his, postures shifting uncomfortably, and feet shuffled on the floor.

“Okay, this is how it’s gonna be,” he sighed. “Let’s get the questions out of the way, since they’ll only distract you when I’m trying to teach you how to do the not-dying thing. You first.” The small brown-haired girl jumped as he pointed at her. “Oh, for fuck’s sake, I don’t bite. Don’t raise your hand, this isn’t grade school.”

She swallowed, and James took that time to read the name tape on her chest. R Martin. “Sir-”

“James. Barnes if you have to be formal. I’m not an officer, don’t ‘sir’ me like one.”

“…Barnes. Um. You’re our instructor?”

“No, I’m waiting for Mikhail Kalashnikov to claw his way out of the grave. I’m just standing in.”

Franklin facepalmed, and a few of the trainees giggled nervously.

Leaning against the wall behind him, James brushed a stray clump of hair out of his eyes. “Look, my job is to make sure that, at the end of your training, you’ll be the hardest motherfuckers to kill since the Howling Commandos. Somehow you unlucky asswipes got selected for spec ops, so you’re going to get the full treatment. That means firearms, armed and unarmed combat, infiltration, linguistics, and a few others.”

He fixed each of them with a long stare once more. “Hill told me you’re what’s left of a starting class of three hundred. Let me make this abundantly clear: you’ve made it this far, and there will be no more dropouts. You graduate, you get medically retired, or you die.”

One of the boys, Evans, noticeably paled.

“My job is to make sure that only the first one happens and none of you fall into the second or third category. If you fail, I fail. Simple as that. Any questions?”

After a long pause, Evans raised his hand. James had to resist the urge to roll his eyes, but nodded at him. “How did you know we’re going into special ops? No one told us that.”
James bared his teeth in a wolfish grin. “Simple. I’m here.”

While he’d initially had reservations, James quickly saw the potential that had flagged each trainee for advanced training. Evans was twitchy and nervous, but his reflexes were almost superhumanly fast. Martin was methodical, tactical in her approach, putting nearly every round through the head or center mass. Tiny and barely able to hold her gun, Gonzalez still had a lithe grace about her that told James to build her skills into the same sort of acrobatic, rapid-fire movements that Natasha used. Her main weakness would be her stubborn insistence that she knew what she was doing.

Jackson was tall, gangly, a stork of a man; he was significantly less wary of his gun than any of his classmates but his stance was all sorts of wrong. He responded well to instruction though, tightening his footprint and bringing in his elbows; James nodded in satisfaction when Jackson’s aim improved drastically.

Peters, stocky and powerfully built, needed help with how his massive hands wrapped themselves around the Glock. Thick fingers with joints slightly out of square warned James of multiple injuries in previous training, likely due to bad form. His strength would give him an advantage, though, if he could build up his endurance to match.

He wasn’t sure how Carlton was going to do, though. The girl was of average height, average weight, looked to be fit and strong, but her hands shook around her gun and she seemed genuinely afraid of it. She’d need lots of encouragement and gentle coaching. The last trainee, Hendricks, was in the same boat; he leaned away from his pistol as if it was going to bite him. A quick tap on the shoulders, realignment of the kid’s spine, and James saw a marked improvement. He glanced over several minutes later and shook his head when he saw Hendricks revert back to his old habits.

He called a lunch break and dismissed the trainees, waiting for the door to hiss shut before dropping his face into his hands and letting out an exasperated groan.

“Barnes?” Franklin was checking that each trainee had dismantled and laid out the pistol correctly at their station.

“I got sent to war with eighteen-year-old city slicker draftees that were better than this.”

“With all due respect - goddammit Martin, that’s not how you do that - they haven’t had that many sessions at the range yet.”

“I can see that.” James stalked over to the mini-fridge that he’d been told would be stocked with food for the instructors, aggressively washing his hands to dispel some of his annoyed energy. “Please tell me they’re less hopeless when they’re sparring.” The kids weren’t really that bad, he just had to grump about something and this was the perfect target.

“Ehhhhhh…”

“God give me patience,” he muttered at the ceiling, tossing Franklin a wrapped sandwich once the other man was done cleaning his own hands. “Either they’re going to be the death of me, or the other way around.”

“They’ve got potential.”

“Yeah, and we’ve got our work cut out for us. Give me the rundown of what they’ve had for unarmed combat so far.” He savored the sandwich as Franklin filled him in, balling up the empty wax wrapper and tossing it into the trash bin by the door when he finished. “Ears and eyes,” he called, giving Franklin enough time to get ear protection and goggles back on before he stepped into
an empty lane and drew his SIG.

A quick once-over confirmed it was ready to go, and he tapped the control panel on the divider to his left to pull up one of the simulator programs.

The range flickered slightly, and a glowing orange figure popped up out of the ground and began to run towards him. James dropped it quickly with a single shot to the head, and took down the other four that appeared in quick succession.

Subconsciously counting the rounds, he ejected the magazine and slapped in a new one without taking his eyes off the range.

He switched to a one-handed grip and drew his COP 357, dual wielding until he emptied the second magazine for the SIG. Setting that down on the shelf in front of him, he adjusted his hands around the 357 and only lowered it when the program finished.

He hadn’t noticed the trainees return from their break and line up behind him, taking a moment to review the program report before dismissing it. He’d taken one shot for each target except for a two-shot kill towards the middle of the simulation.

Popping the cans off his ears, James turned around to a circle of wide eyes as the trainees followed suit.

“Now that is how you’re supposed to be shooting,” Franklin announced with a grin. “Tell me what you noticed about his posture, hands, stance, anything.”

James stepped back from the station and holstered his guns, reaching over to reassemble and then raise Martin’s Glock. He fell easily into a picture-perfect basic firing stance, and held still while Franklin used him to grill the trainees on their technique.

The rest of the day passed by in a blur as he walked back and forth behind his students, pushing an elbow down here, correcting a grip there, helping three of the trainees patch up their hands when they were inevitably bitten by the slide snapping back. By the time he dismissed them at 16:30, their groupings were tighter and better centered, and Hendricks had finally started setting his shoulders properly.

He rolled his jaw around to work out the soreness from having ear protection on for so long. Stowing the goggles and earmuffs in his locker, James draped his leathers over his arm and stuffed his boots in his backpack before checking his phone for the room number of the quarters he’d been assigned for the week.

Franklin offered to save him a seat in the mess hall, but James had to politely decline; he had other plans. To his relief, the bag he’d packed and entrusted to the flight crew was neatly laid in front of the small wardrobe in his room. The bed was a simple twin-size next to a small desk, and the wardrobe nearly hid the door to the cramped bathroom with a toilet and a stall shower. Hill had offered him a room at a nearby hotel, but he’d insisted on being quartered at HQ - just in case.

“Reserve a car at the motorpool,” he ordered the facility-wide AI as he pulled out his clothes and hung them up. “Something classy, and please don’t patronize me with a slushbox.”

A confirmation bleeped back at him, and he unzipped the large bag that held one of the suits Tony had practically thrown at him. He still preferred the rough, sturdy feel of tac gear or the jeans that Mickey had helped him pick out, but he had to admit that Tony’s tailor had done a remarkable job. He knew he cut an impressive figure wearing anything that Marguerite had sewn up for him, and it
helped that he genuinely enjoyed her quiet, pleasant company during fittings.

A quick shower - hair tied back - and a buzz with his shaver and he quickly wrapped himself in the steel-gray suit. Marguerite had specifically designed it for concealed carry, and he slotted his SIG into its shoulder holster buttoning up his coat. He checked his hair one last time in the bathroom mirror, and began the short walk down to the motorpool.

A silver Mercedes was waiting for him, and one of the attendants handed him the odd, small block that he’d been told replaced a standard key. The engine thrummed quietly as he thumbed the ENGINE ON button, and he slotted the shifter into first before trading clutch for throttle and pulling slowly out of the garage.

He rolled up to the library - his library, he still felt - right around 18:00. The car beeped quietly at him when he tapped the lock button on the key fob in his pocket.

The eyes on him as he strolled through the café lobby made the back of his neck prickle and he had to stop himself from reflexively tucking his metal hand into a pocket. He was a free man now, and refused to hide any more.

A student, one of Dot’s, gave him a double thumbs-up and winked at him, grinning. James had spent the past month annotating various books for the students, at first presenting himself as an anonymous primary source and eventually deciding he was comfortable sitting down with some of the more discreet students over a video chat. He’d gotten to know the budding historians quite well, and they’d eagerly jumped in when he’d asked for their help.

Right on time, one of the graduate students caught Dot’s attention as James stopped just shy of the edge of the stack he was in. The girl led Dot away, asking for help finding a specific title, and James dashed over to her desk once she was out of sight.

He settled into Dot’s office chair, kicking his feet up and crossing his legs once he found a clear spot on the large desk. Lacing his hands behind his head, he let himself relax into the chair and spent a minute watching the students work quietly while he waited for Dot to return.

Her short, steady footsteps approached from where she’d been led, and stopped dead when she saw James at her desk.

“Oh my heavens.” Stepping forward, she reached out for him and he stood, wrapping her in his arms.

“Good to see you, Dottie.”

“It’s been weeks, James,” she playfully scolded him. “What on earth have you been up to? Oh, right, jumping in front of a bomb, going on trial, and running off to New York with a pretty young dame. I’m insulted, young man; you’ve been sending incompetent knuckle-draggers to get your books. Where are your manners?”

Chuckling, James sat down on the edge of Dot’s desk and crossed his arms. “I’ll have a word with Pepper about that one.”

Dot checked her watch and nudged past James to close down the programs on her computer before gathering up her things. “I’m assuming there’s a reason you showed up here in your glad rags?”

“Surprise dinner not-a-date? I missed your birthday and I feel awful.”

Her lips pulled into a delicate smile. “Of course. I’d love to. Where are we heading?”
“You’ll know when we get there.” James offered his arm and led her out to the car, opening the door for her.

“Fancy car,” she observed. “Finally replaced that deathtrap on wheels?”

He waited until he was behind the wheel to answer her. “It’s a loaner from SHIELD. I’ve got a sport bike I’m using while I’m here, but I figured you’d be more comfortable in this.”

“How long are you here for?”

“Weekdays for the foreseeable future, weekends up north with Mickey. I’ve got a class of trainees that Hill wants me to whip into shape.”

“I feel sorry for them already.”

James flicked the blinker back into place as he rolled his eyes. “Your vote of confidence is overwhelming, doll.”

“Well, the poor children are probably terrified silly of you. That arm of yours would scare anyone squaring off against you.”

“We’re going to spend the day tomorrow rotating around for some one-on-one combat training.” Slipping over to the left lane, James dropped the car into sixth gear and leveled off the gas to cruise. “I want to spend some time observing their technique so that I don’t hurt them when the time comes.”

“That’s wise. I noticed you aren’t wearing your gloves today, by the way.”

He chewed on his bottom lip for a second before answering. “Trying to get more comfortable being out in public. It’s different at the Tower or HQ, where everyone’s already used to it. I really don’t like getting stared at but Mickey keeps telling me it’ll only get better if I don’t hide it.”

“She’s a smart young lady.” James could practically feel Dot’s gaze on him as he drove. “Any plans with her? Going steady?”

“Yeah. Um, yes, we’re steady. She’s good. I’m not sure where it’ll go.” Swallowing, James met Dot’s eyes for a brief second before turning them back to the road. “I’m not really comfortable making plans like that right now. Anything more than we already are, and she’s got an even bigger target on her back. I can’t do that to her.”

“Have you talked with her about it?”

“No! God no. How would I even… No, not yet.” His cheeks flushed and he ignored Dot’s quiet chuckle.

“If I’ve ever seen a man in love, then you are positively besotted.”

Sighing, James ran a hand over his head to sweep his hair back from his face. “It’s only been a few months since I met her. I don’t want things to move too quickly.”

“She took a bullet for you, James. If that doesn’t make things clear, then you’re still every bit as dense as you were at the carnival.”

“You really wanted that stuffed bear,” he whined defensively.

“Three dollars, James. Three dollars. Hopefully the Army improved your aim, because until then
I’d never seen a man spend a full day’s wages on a carnival game.”

He barely heard her, though, his attention shifting to the flash of lights in the rearview mirror as a car swerved to avoid something. Glancing over his shoulder, he slotted the Mercedes into the narrow gap to his right and worked his way through the lanes as quickly as he could.

“James?”

“Something’s on the highway. Gotta focus.”

The engine growled as he kicked it down a few gears, scanning the road -

There.

A huge black SUV rumbled up behind him, high beams glaring through his mirrors.

“Fuckin’ hell,” he hissed, and tightened his grip on the wheel. “Dot, grab a hold’a somethin’.”

Punching the throttle, he wove through traffic and tried to put as much distance between the two cars as he could. “JARVIS.” The AI never left him far behind, easily patching into nearly every system.

“Yes, sir?”

“I’ve got a tail I need to shake.”

“Sending a route momentarily.”

The windshield flickered and a glowing path illuminated the road ahead of him.

“I can have Mr. Stark authorize deployment of the Iron Legion.”

“Won’t be necessary.” Gritting his teeth, James yanked the handbrake up for a fraction of a second as he slid the car through a corner. “Doin’ okay, doll?”

There was a long pause before she answered him, knuckles white on the door handle. “This dinner had better be worth it.”

Finally putting enough distance behind him, James swept into an alley and cut the lights, jumping out of the car and drawing his gun in a smooth motion. He crouched, kicked the car door shut, and waited, counting off the seconds he’d benchmarked.

A quarter-second after his estimate, the SUV roared straight past the alley.

He waited another full minute before opening the door and sitting back down. Leaning forward, he dropped his forehead onto the steering wheel and took several deep breaths to calm his heartbeat.

“They’re gone?”

“Yeah.” Three more breaths. “I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

She laughed nervously, reaching out with her papery hands to give his a squeeze. “Well, that’s definitely more of a workout than my heart’s gotten in many a year.”

“I’m not sure it’s safe to go to the restaurant at this point.”

“Well, yes, certainly, for them.”
“Dot?” He looked at her, confused. Her eyes practically glowed as she set her jaw firmly.

“You may be a walking target, James, but you have to show the world you aren’t afraid.”

“But you’ll be in danger!”

Her smile was fierce. “Just like I am when I step into a cab to go to work. Just like I am when I take my evening walks. Just like I am when I ride the bus to church. I can’t control the world.”

“Sir, your reservation is due in roughly five minutes.”

“Thank you, JARVIS.”

“Look at me.” Dot gripped his chin in a surprisingly strong hand and stared intently into his eyes. “Yes, I’m scared. That was terrifying. But I’ve lived a good, long life, and I’ve found that when you’re scared, you square your shoulders, stare down your fear, and do it anyway.”

“I’ve only got the one gun.”

“You’ll only need one.”

“Sir…”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Pursing his lips, he let out his breath in a concentrated stream, let go of the wheel, and stepped out of the car.

He’d pulled in far too close to the right hand wall, so he had to help Dot awkwardly climb her way out through the driver’s door, and steadied her while she rearranged herself.

“I’ll let SHIELD know they need to come pick it up and send a different car for the ride back,” he told her as he offered his arm. “I’d rather not get caught out with a rookie mistake.”

James couldn’t help but flick his eyes everywhere, hyper-aware of their surroundings. Every scuff of a shoe was an attacker waiting to spring, and every hand in a pocket held a gun.

“James. Relax.”

He forced some of the tension out of his shoulders as they stepped through the door to the steakhouse. They were ushered straight to a small table towards the back with a clear view of the entire restaurant.

As they were sitting down, JARVIS buzzed his phone.

_The car pursuing you is registered to a local family. As far as I can tell, their teenage son took it for a joyride and thought you were trying to race him. I’m monitoring the local cameras and have traced it back to a residence. I’ll alert you if any more information arises._

James exhaled, the sigh of relief carrying the remaining tension out of him.

“Good news?”

“Yeah. Teen out for a joyride, thought we were racing. I’m just glad it wasn’t anything worse. Really did a number on my anxiety, though.” Dot nodded understandingly.
Even so, it took him halfway through the main course to stop scanning the room every three seconds, and dessert was on the table before he fully relaxed.

A black sedan pulled up to the restaurant just as James and Dot stepped over the threshold, and he waited until JARVIS verified the driver’s identity before opening the door for Dot. The ride to her modest condo was short and uneventful, but he still stayed on his toes as he walked her to the door.

“Thank you for indulging me,” James said as he gave the small woman a gentle hug.

“Thank you. That was quite an eventful night.” With a smile, Dot cupped his cheek in her hand. “Take care, James, and stop by again soon?”

“Of course.”

He waited until her door was closed and the lights turned on before walking back to the car.

“Back to HQ, sir?” the driver asked him.

“Yeah. Take the backroads, I got tailed by someone on the way here.” James wasn’t completely ready to dismiss the SUV as a fluke.

The driver pulled smoothly away, and James stared aimlessly out the window the whole way back to HQ. Before leaving the garage, he stopped by the attendant desk and verified that the Mercedes had made it back properly.

Most of the units on his floor were occupied by the other instructors; early morning duties meant early into bed, and the barracks were quiet when he finally stepped through into his quarters.

The small console in the wall next to the door blinked at him, and he tapped it to wake the screen. Franklin had sent him a message with the next day’s training schedule; today had served as an evaluation and introduction for sidearms and tomorrow would be the same for unarmed combat.

*Be prepared for Gonzalez’s thick skull, Franklin warned him. She’s pretty cocky. Peters relies on his strength more than he should, and doesn’t pay attention to his technique. I’ve set up a round robin system where I’ll float around and you’ll have one-on-one time with each trainee.*

James dictated a quick acknowledgment and told the AI to send it off as he unbuttoned his shirt. Hanging every piece of his suit carefully, he zipped the bag back up around it and hung it flat against the back of the wardrobe on one of the small hooks.

Several more training uniforms were folded and stacked neatly in the upper of the two drawers at the bottom of the wardrobe, and the lower drawer held a spare set of earmuffs and range goggles, a box of earplugs, a few cups, and wraps for his hands. He pawed through it quickly, checking over the quality and sizing, and shut the drawer, satisfied. Hill hadn’t been joking when she’d told him everything necessary would be issued to him.

It felt strange, winding down from the day and getting ready for bed without Mickey there. He sat upright on the narrow mattress, arms wrapped around his knees, staring at the wall for several minutes before scrubbing his fingers over his hairline and asking the AI to bring up a video call.

Mickey answered right away, holding up a finger as she spat the toothpaste foam out of frame. “How was training?” she asked, smiling brightly at him.

“I’ve seen worse. I mean, I’ve seen a hell of a lot better, but I’ve seen worse, too.” James gave her a tired smile and reached out to touch the wall where the picture hovered in front of him. “Miss you
already.”

“I’m looking forward to when you’re back, that’s for sure. Had to have JARVIS crank the heat up for me.” She reached forward and picked up the tablet, giving him a wonderful view of the underside of her chin as she headed for the bedroom. The frame dipped from side to side, still rolling just a little bit more when she shifted her weight to the left.

“How’d PT go today?”

“Pretty good. Jake started me on the treadmill, just some walking for now. Things are healing up pretty well, looks like there won’t be any permanent muscle damage.”

The image blinked black for a second, and then resolved. She must have transferred the call to the screen embedded in the bedroom wall because he was able to see nearly the whole bed.

“That’s good. He said you shouldn’t need the cane past Christmas, right?”

“Yeah, thereabouts. Sooner, if I’m lucky.”

Something he’d overheard on his way through the research wing sparked his memory. “Doesn’t one of the whitecoats have a regeneration thingy? Some sort of table you lay down on, makes things heal.”

“Dr. Cho, yeah, she’s out in Seoul right now though. Tony’s been trying to get her to set up a lab here for a while.” Mickey held up a hand and gave him a warning look. “I know what you’re going to say. I’m not going to call her all the way here for something that isn’t life-threatening. I can do this the old-fashioned way just fine.”

James sighed and dropped his head onto his arms. They’d had this conversation… argument… multiple times since Mickey had woken up in the hospital. He still couldn’t get past the guilt that plagued him. “I know. Just feels shitty, seeing you walk like that. I feel responsible.”

“And it’s my choice, sweetheart.” She tempered the words with a soft smile that dissolved into a yawn. “God, sorry. I had a long day staring at reports and trying to make sense of some new data that just came in.”

His head snapped up. “New data?”

“Yeah, some weird energy usage out in the middle of the desert in South Dakota. K39-triple-Z on the power grid. None of the maps show anything there, but there’s been some weird spikes and surges over the past year that we’re trying to figure out. One of the flyovers spotted something that looks like a giant warehouse sticking out of one of the mountains.”

“A… warehouse.” Something tickled at the back of his mind, a memory trying to surface. “Gimme a sec.” Pressing his hands to his eyes, James leaned against the wall. “The SSR used to ferry stuff off to a warehouse. There’s been a group of people doing this since god knows when, from what Peggy said. They’d crate up dangerous stuff and ship it off to get stuck on a shelf somewhere, keep people safe until we understood what it did.”

Mickey was quickly tapping out notes on her tablet. “And this was in South Dakota?”

“I have no idea. Mostly I just worked on boxing everything up and then handing it all over to people a lot smarter than me. We got a lot of weird shit whenever we hit a HYDRA base. Stark couldn’t use or tame all of it so a lot got sent stateside. We’d spray paint identification codes on the crates and they’d get stamped with some sort of… pyramid? I think it was a pyramid.”
“Awesome. Well, we’re setting up a team to take a look this Friday if you want in. I know I’d like to have you there.”

After thinking about it for a few seconds, James shrugged and said, “Sure, why not? Sign me up. Could use a vacation.”

“I’ll let Hill know.” Mickey set her tablet down on the nightstand and stretched her arms above her head. “Time for bed.”

“Good night. I’ll be home soon.” Different words almost tumbled out, but… he wasn’t sure it was right to say them yet.

“Good night. Sleep well.”

That small smile with her eyes only made James miss her more.

***

Gonzalez glared at James as she lurched her way up off the mat, shifting the mouth guard around her teeth and pawing at her jaw with a bulky, gloved hand.

“You’re half my size and twice as fast,” he growled, looming over her. “No more fuckin’ excuses.”

Drawing her lip back in a snarl, she dropped into a basic stance, fists held up in front of her. James bounced lightly on his feet, raised his own hands up, and lunged forward.

The schedule had him rotating between the trainees for a one-hour individual session with each while the others either sparred or worked on basic forms with Franklin. So far, he’d spent the first half of his time with Gonzalez knocking her flat on her ass. She wasn’t taking instruction well, relying too much on her experience brawling with the boys in the slums she’d grown up in.

“Don’t just dodge, counter it!” Pivoting, he swung a fist towards her, and felt a small rush of satisfaction when her hands latched onto his wrist and yanked, sending him stumbling past her. He tripped over her outstretched foot and fell, rolling and pushing himself back up. “Better. You’ll need to use whatever mass your opponent has against them. Don’t try to take me down, make me do it to myself.”

He rolled his shoulders back and cracked a joint in his spine that was starting to stiffen. They spent the rest of the session working on how to transfer energy and momentum around her, and by the time Franklin called out rotation, James felt cautiously optimistic.

“Gonzales,” he called as she toweled off her face, walking stiffly over to the next station. She turned, fixing him with a put-upon, flat look. “Next time, I’m not going to go easy on you. You have a lot to learn, and you aren’t going to get there with a chip on your shoulder.”

The girl turned without responding, and James shook his head as he watched her sit down for some stretches.

Peters was next, and the brick house of a man gave James a wary look as he set his things down off to the side.

“Relax, kid. I’m not gonna hurt you.”

“All due respect, I’m not convinced.” The stocky man’s eyes slid to Gonzalez, and James sighed.
“She isn’t ready to learn, yet.”

“Maria breezed through all the classes,” Peters told him. “This is the first hands-on she’s had where she couldn’t ace it without studying.”

“Noted. Okay, Peters, get your hands wrapped up. Show me what you’ve got.”

Countless times within the first ten minutes, James managed to send Peters sprawling, wrap him in a hold, or pin him down. After the latest bout, where Peters log-rolled for several feet before pushing himself to his hands and knees, James reached down a hand and tugged the trainee to his feet.

“No more haymakers, okay? All that does is throw off your balance. You need to have better control.” James demonstrated a few punches slowly, exaggerating certain key points. “You’ve got a lot of muscle behind your swings, but that doesn’t do you any good unless you can actually hit something. Keep everything centered, and if you’re determined to punch with a closed fist, lead with these knuckles here or you’ll end up with a boxer’s fracture.”

James raised his hands up, fingers loose and relaxed, and tapped the side of one hand below his pinkie with his other hand. “Try to use this as your striking surface. You’re less likely to hurt yourself and it’s a quicker motion.” He demonstrated a few basic strikes, pulling the blows just before they contacted Peters. “Also leaves my hands open in case I need to grab something.”

They squared off again, Peters pulling his hands further in than he had been, and James motioned for him to start.

While Peters managed to throw a significantly better punch than before, James easily ducked it and shoved his shoulder firmly into the trainee’s sternum. The breath left his lungs with a loud oof and Peters stumbled backward.

“Next step, don’t tell me how you’re gonna hit me; I saw that one coming a mile away.”

Peters continued to improve over the course of the hour as James barked orders at him.

“Move your feet, dammit!”

“Give me that opening again and I’ll break your elbow for real this time.”

“Lead with the inside, not the outside!”

“What did I say about haymakers?!”

When rotation was called, Peters was drenched in sweat and breathing heavily, but grinning from ear to ear. He’d finally managed to land a blow, and James rubbed his jaw. “Good one. You’re getting better. Go stretch out and do a cool-down.”

The last hour of the eight-hour session was taken up with a demonstration; Franklin protested heavily but James eventually convinced him to give the trainees a better look at what they’d been working on.

“Look any more worried, pal, and my gran’s gonna come back from the grave to bake you cookies and kvetch about the weather with you,” James teased him quietly so that the trainees wouldn’t hear.

“Dude, you ripped the door clean off Fury’s truck during the uprising. How am I supposed to feel good about swinging fists at you?”
James smirked and huffed out a laugh, clapping Franklin on the shoulder. “Knock me down and I’ll buy you a beer at Bluejacket after we’re done tonight.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then you’re buyin’.”

Franklin grinned at him as they faced each other on the mat. “I think you got yourself a deal, Barnes.”

While James was fast, scrappy, strong, and tall, Franklin had the advantage of being a much smaller target that moved surprisingly quickly. James must’ve stood six inches taller than him, but the lithe smaller man made up for his lack of reach by dancing around more than half of James’s blows.

Eventually James slipped up, fooled by a well-executed feint, and ended up slamming down to the mat with the wind knocked clean out of him. He sucked in air as best he could, rolled to his side and took Franklin’s proffered hand.

“Looks like I owe you a beer,” he panted, leaning over on his knees. Raising his eyes to the trainees sitting at the edge of the mat, he had to laugh at the shocked faces staring back at him. “Anyone see what I did wrong?”

Stunned silence answered him.

“Okay, Franklin, let’s do that again, slower.” This time, he caught the subtle tell in the set of Franklin’s shoulders, but forced himself to react the same way he had before, and Franklin reached out to grab James’s arm to keep him from falling as his assistant swept his legs out from under him. Standing back up, James pointed to Martín. “What did he do?”

She hesitated for a moment. “Looks like he stepped under and through, and got a leg behind your knee. Then he just pushed and you went down.”

“Good.” Clumsy with the heavy wraps between his fingers, James pulled his hair loose and shook it out. “We’re done for the day. Go home, take a good, long, hot shower, make sure to stretch before you hit the sack. We’re back at the range at 0800 tomorrow morning. Good work today.”

Franklin agreed to meet him in an hour at the north gate, offering to get a car and driver reserved for them. While SHIELD tended to frown on using the motorpool for personal use, James assured the younger man that they could pass it off as a work meeting that just happened to involve good beer. He didn’t mention that he’d requisitioned a car last night for the sole purpose of taking an old friend to dinner.

The brewpub was surprisingly busy for a Tuesday night, but the hostess seated them almost immediately after giving James a wide-eyed look.

“Perks of being famous, huh?” Franklin teased, hopping up onto the barstools at their small table.

“Honestly? It’s not all it’s cracked up to be. I can’t buy groceries in New York without some little midget of a kid running into my knees. You have no idea how scary that can be.”

“Pretty sure getting accosted by toddlers is better than being hunted by HYDRA.”

“Fine, I’ll give you that one.” They ordered a flight when the waitress came by, as well as her recommendation of appetizers. “So, how’d you get into this mess?”
“Served in the Army over in Afghanistan for a few years, came back, end of contract, got approached by a recruiter to be an instructor. Couldn’t really say no after Loki tried to blow up New York, so here I am. How about you? There’s a little in the history books, but not a whole lot.”

“Drafted.” James picked up one of the tasters almost as soon as the waitress set the flight down on their table. He lifted it and peered through the dark stout before taking a sip. “Oh, that’s good. Yeah, they pulled my number in ’41. I tried to keep telling them that I had this friend of mine with a terminal case of stupid that I had to take care of, but I couldn’t get out of it no matter what I tried. Cotton balls, drugs, sleep deprivation, nothing worked. They were getting pretty desperate, I almost thought they were actually gonna take Steve at some point.”

Franklin bared his teeth as he laughed, grabbing one of the IPAs. “Well, I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone describe Captain Rogers as having a ‘terminal case of stupid’ before.”

“You should’a seen him,” James chuckled. “Barely came up to my chin, and that’s before we both got juiced. Little tiny Irish punk would pick a fight with anything that moved, if you’d let him. He’d insist on walking a dame home, even in the pouring rain, even if it gave him pneumonia again. Everyone thinks he was just this little ball o’ sunshine, but he’s always been a bundle’a piss an’ vinegar. Someone once called him a golden retriever, but really he’s a pissy alley cat who’ll bite you as soon as look at you.”

“You taught him how to fight, didn’t you?”

“Hell no. All I did was teach him how to do it properly. Scrappy sonuvabitch split my lip a couple of times; he’d swing ‘em up at anything that pissed him off. I couldn’t stop him come hell or high water, so the only thing I could do was wade in and make sure he never got backed into a corner. You do that to him, he’ll become your worst fuckin’ nightmare and burn everything to the ground.”

Franklin frowned appreciatively. “Good thing he’s on our side.”

“Don’t say that until he’s had his coffee. Man’s an ornery walrus without it.”

A plate of appetizers slid into view, distracting both of them. By the time their dinner had arrived, James and Franklin were cheering loudly at a surprise touchdown shown to them by the numerous TVs.

Later, stuffed full and supporting a mildly drunk Franklin, James waved down their car as it pulled up to the brewpub. His phone buzzed as he helped Franklin slide into the backseat, and he smiled automatically when a picture of Mickey, grinning and wearing gold-painted Mickey Mouse ears, greeted him. He tapped the wiggling green button to answer her call as he checked to make sure Franklin had buckled in correctly.

“Hey, Myshka.”

“Hey! Round two of training go any better than yesterday?”

“Yeah, they’re starting to show promise. Gonzalez is giving me a headache, but I’ll manage.”

“Which one’s she?”

“Thinks she knows it all. Girl’s got one hell of a chip on her shoulder.”

“If anyone can train them, it’s you.”

“Yeah. Hill’s gonna owe me for this one, though.”
“Oh, speaking of which. I did some more digging on that old SSR warehouse. Turns out there actually was a facility in South Dakota that got deactivated in ’59. I went and checked all the records I could find, though, and it looks like the deactivation was a cover for something; the facility’s still operational. Hill bumped my clearance up a level so I could access the SSR archives.”

Papers shuffled in the background, and James heard a thump that he assumed to be a box of files. “Apparently these guys have been flying under the radar for a long time now, snapping up dangerous shit and filing it away for safekeeping.”

“Sounds like they’re doing the right thing, then.” A glance to his left confirmed that Franklin had fallen asleep. “How’d this end up on your radar anyway?”

“Well, JARVIS has scanners set up for a specific range of energy patterns. That’s how we’ve tracked most of the HYDRA bases down. This place popped up, but it doesn’t meet any of our other profiling criteria.”

“Did Fury have anything to say about it?”

“No, but I don’t think I’d know if he was lying.”

“Yeah, probably not. Hold on a minute.” Tilting the phone away from his mouth, James nudged Franklin. “C’mon, man, wake up. We’re home.”

Franklin sat up, blinked, rubbed his eyes, and ran his tongue over his teeth. “Ew. Beer breath.”

James made sure Franklin got to his quarters in one piece, and opened up a video call to Mickey once he was in his own. “So who’s on the team flying out on Friday?”

“So far just you, me, and Clint. He can fly us, but Steve’s taking the jet so we’ll need you to bring us another one.”

“I’ll requisition one tonight. JARVIS can tap into the nav systems if he needs to, or if I’m too jittery.” Technically Dr. Ellmore had never cleared him to operate aircraft of any type, but that never stopped him. He hung his jacket from a hook by the door, and tugged his shirt over his head. “Steve’s not coming? He’d be all over this stuff.”

Mickey shrugged, shuffling through the stack of papers she had in front of her on the desk in the study. “He’s deploying to Latvia. We found a confirmed base there and he’s taking a tac team to flush them out.” Glancing up at him, she frowned. “What happened to your shoulder?”

Twisting his neck, James ran his fingers over the rippled seam of scar tissue where his skin had been grafted over the synthetic muscles. Normally a dull pinkish-red, the ring of skin around the metal shoulder was mottled with purple bruising. “Oh. Huh.” He probed the bruises with a finger. “If it isn’t healed up tomorrow morning then I’ll get it checked out.”

“James.” He didn’t have to turn to see the exasperated look Mickey shot him.

“What? It’s normal. I’ve got hooks and bolts in my spine.”

“No, that isn’t normal or I would’ve seen it after we spar. You’re having it looked at when you get back to the tower.”

“Yes, mom.”

She sighed, threading her hands through her hair. The short tufts stuck out between her fingers like fur, the ends dyed orange from Mickey’s latest color change. “You’re sure it’s nothing to be
worried about? Looks like it hurts.”

James folded his jeans, smoothing them out with his hand before draping them over the desk chair. “I think we’ve established my pain scale’s pretty fucked up; I can’t even feel it. And really, it’s probably just overuse from working with the trainees. If beating myself up for ten hours on gymnastics equipment doesn’t mess things up, it’s fine.”

“Just keep an eye on it, okay? Let me know if it gets worse.”

“Of course.” He rolled the dial on the thermostat a few clicks to the left and then stretched out on top of the blankets on his bed. “I really miss our mattress. It’s like sleeping on a granite slab here.”

Mickey smirked at him as she closed another folder and set it on the stack to her right. “Well, I’m enjoying being able to stretch out all the way across the bed.” She leaned her head on her hand and took off her glasses, rubbing her forehead. “It isn’t the same without you here. I’m not sure what it is, but everyone’s different. More subdued.”

“Huh.” Crossing his arms behind his head, James paid attention to the pull of muscle and skin in his left shoulder to make sure nothing felt wrong. “Didn’t think I made that much of a difference.”

“You’re part of the family, James. Pepper’s complaining about her hair buddy being gone.”

He chuckled. “I’ll be back this weekend, and then she can do whatever she likes. Even those stupid little flower clips.”

“Shut up, you like them,” Mickey retorted, pointing her glasses at him. “You get that dopey grin and you blush like a damn schoolgirl.”

Holding up his hands in surrender, James couldn’t help but laugh. “Alright, you got me. Fine.”

He’d never admit it to anyone else, but he definitely loved when Natasha and Pepper asked to play with his hair. It had taken months, but he’d worked hard at learning to enjoy their affectionate companionship. Besides, the two of them had patiently taught him how to take care of his hair using all the strange, modern products available now.

“I hate to cut you off, but I need to review these files before I go to bed and it’s getting late for you. We’ll talk tomorrow?”

“Of course. Good night.”

“Sleep well.” The video blinked out, and he pushed himself up, padding silently into the bathroom. He rolled the tie out of his hair and onto his wrist, using his fingers to shake out the kink in it from keeping it balled up on the back of his head all day. It hung down to his shoulders now, the ends still relatively tidy from when he’d let Pepper clean it up last week.

It took him a few tries, but he managed to secure his hair back into a slightly-off-center French braid, only getting it caught once in the plates on his fingers. He looped the tie around the base of the braid and turned around to take a picture of it in the mirror, sending it to Natasha for critique.

Before he turned in for the night, he laid his range gear out on the desk and inspected his guns, making sure each magazine was fully loaded and ready to go. The bright red ballistic vest was heavy in his hands as he checked each of the SAPI plates; even though he’d done this last night, he knew he would toss and turn for hours unless he checked and re-checked everything.

Doctor Ellmore had said that obsessive-compulsive tendencies were normal and to be expected. At least they manifested in ways that were useful, he told himself. It never hurt to recheck equipment to
which he entrusted his safety. Even though a gunshot wound couldn’t kill him, it wouldn’t tickle either.

His guns were still clean and oiled from when he’d broken them down and given them a once-over after he woke with a start in the middle of the night the previous night. The motions were familiar, soothing, and as soon as he’d finished, he’d been able to sleep through the rest of the night without issue.

Satisfied, James stood, stretched, and slid himself into bed. He rolled onto his right side, facing the door, his SIG on the nightstand within easy reach. The risk was minimal, if it existed at all, but old habits die hard.

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The next two days flew by quickly; Franklin wordlessly handed him a coffee with a playful glare from baggy eyes on Wednesday morning as they arrived to set up before the trainees. Scores gradually improved, technique showed considerable progress, and even Gonzalez picked up a few things by the end of the second sparring session.

James left the gym on Thursday night sore and sweaty, kneading his metal knuckles gently into his aching right shoulder. Maybe taking on all of the trainees at the same time hadn’t been the best of ideas, after all. Franklin had merely laughed, mimed eating popcorn, and barked out corrections to the kids as they tried - and succeeded - to take James down.

He’d landed on the mat heavily, rolling just slightly wrong, and something in his shoulder had twanged. Now, he worked the muscle around, rubbing circulation back into it so that it’d be mostly healed by the morning.

Peters waved over his shoulder as he turned toward the trainee quarters, and James raised his hand in return before heading to his own. The shower was blessedly hot and relaxing after a day of getting hit by overgrown mosquitos, and he couldn’t help but smile as he remembered the drastic improvements he’d seen in only a few days.

“Incoming call from Agent Michaela Draymond,” the AI announced.

“Put her through.” Reaching for the shampoo, James pumped some into his hand and started smearing it over his hair.

“I can call back if now isn’t a good time,” Mickey drawled, her face appearing at eye-level on the wall to his right.

“What, not enjoying the show?” He struck a pose and wagged his eyebrows at her. While he’d considered asking her to join him a few times, he’d never been able to actually follow through. He told himself it was because he didn’t need the temptation and embarrassment. Mickey was amazingly, absurdly attractive to him and things would just get uncomfortable for both of them very quickly.

“We both know what you do in the shower, love.” Even though her tone was accusatory, Mickey grinned at him. She was seated in the study again, the stack of files on her right much larger than it had been last night. “Oh, stop blushing. It’s perfectly okay.”

“Yeah, I just… you know I… I don’t want to…”

“And you just get more adorable the more awkward you get. I never said never, James, just that it’s different for me.”
He paused, hands still covered in suds, bit his lip, and stared pointedly at the tile in front of him.
“I’m… I’m not sure I can.” This was one of the only things they hadn’t talked about yet. “I didn’t have any luck, um, before.”

Mickey tilted her head, eyebrows furrowed. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No really.” Sighing, he turned to put his head under the steady stream of water and closed his eyes as he rinsed out his hair. “But we should.”

“Okay.”

“I tried to have a few one night stands after I got out on my own again, got functional enough to think I was good for it. You know, like the old Bucky.” He spat out the shampoo suds that dribbled into his mouth. “God, that shit tastes nasty. Anyway, it went fine for the most part, but, well, I got flashbacks when things got…”

“When things got steamy?”

“Yeah. Kind of kills the mood pretty quickly. Sam says it’s normal for… um, rape victims-”

“You’re not a victim, sweetheart. You’re a survivor. There’s a difference.” Her voice was gentle and kind, and oh, he wished so hard he could reach through the miles and hold her tight.

“Sam says it’s normal for survivors to have some hang-ups at first. Also says it’s normal for some of us to, um, never get past it.”

Mickey pursed her lips. “Well, you only tried with girls you didn’t know and trust.”

Suddenly, James was decidedly thankful that his video feed only captured him from the ribs up. Mickey must have seen his split-second glance downward, though, because she gave him an awkward smile and blushed.

“Sorry.”

He buried his burning face in his hands and sighed. “Sometimes I swear you do this to me on purpose. You’re one hell of a tease, babydoll.”

“Well, I’ll be even more of one tomorrow; Hill’s ordering fancy clothes for this one. What time are you planning on touching down in New York?”

“And there goes any hope of sleeping tonight,” James muttered. “Probably around nine-thirty. Make sure to dress warmly, South Dakota’s cold as balls this time of year.”

“Can’t be that much colder than it is here, but I’ll pass that on to Clint.” Mickey winked at him. “I’ll let you get finished up. See you tomorrow morning.”

“Looking forward to it.” He reached out to touch the projection of her face before the call ended, then shut off the water and towed himself off. Tugging on a tank top and thick heather gray sweatpants, James rubbed as much of the water out of his hair as he could.

The mess hall was on the floor below his quarters, and he was too focused on trying to make sense of the strange anomalies they’d be investigating tomorrow to care about the half-hidden stares. He thumbed through the files Mickey had emailed him on his phone while he ate, switching to the maps app to pan around the specified coordinates. So far, nothing seemed to indicate that this was anything remotely resembling a HYDRA base, but he’d still requisitioned a fully armed Quinjet just
in case. Mickey would probably give him grief for it, but it never hurt to be prepared.

A quick message to Hill confirmed that she had indeed asked Mickey to be dressed up, but since James was mostly there as a protection detail, combat gear was more than acceptable unless Mickey decided otherwise.

When he got back to his quarters, he dug through the clothes he’d packed and pulled out the best-looking tac gear he had; heavy duty black combat pants, a black long-sleeve turtleneck shirt, the thin but surprisingly effective ballistics vest Tony had designed for him, and a durable, sturdy thermal jacket. ‘Protection detail’ meant open carry was permissible, so he laid out the thigh holsters and double-checked the clip mechanisms that held everything in place.

Three guns, six knives including the two that would sit over the small of his back, and a few other fun toys hidden in the pockets in his pants completed his loadout. Still, he felt strangely naked without something larger, preferably a rifle, as a backup. Hopefully things wouldn’t escalate that far.

Pushing his combat gear to the side, James opened his laptop and set it on the desk. Mickey had sent him new information as she’d uncovered it, and he settled himself into the wooden chair as comfortably as he could while he reviewed decades of seemingly innocuous files.

Chapter End Notes

Gearing up for our first fandom crossover! I won’t be adding it to the tags, though, because it’s more of a set of cameos than anything else. Don’t want to mislead people and whatnot.

Bluejacket Brewery is a real place in DC, and from what I’ve heard, it’s pretty good. Never been there myself so you can thank Google for that, haha.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

There’s another character named Steve in this chapter and the next. Steve Rogers doesn’t show up though so it shouldn’t be too confusing.

Trigger warnings:
- Natasha’s Age of Ultron flashback (like, nonconsensual everything)
- Graphic description of Bucky’s fall from the train (injury, hallucinations, frostbite, capture by HYDRA)
- James has a pretty nasty nightmare, see above
- Internalized self-blame for James’s actions as the Winter Soldier
- Non-graphic discussion of torture and abuse
- James mentions some of the assassinations he carried out

Thanks to 303SnowWolf for helping with the plane stuff!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Soldier watched carefully from the shadows as the younger girls stepped delicately up the wide stairs in tandem. He turned, boots making almost no noise on the marble floor as he slowly made his way to the door to the dance studio.

In perfect sync, a group of young women twirled graciously on their toes. Maestro watched them dispassionately, his long steel-gray hair limp around his shoulders. “<Again,>” he rasped. Six more girls, very young and uniformed in black jumpers over crisp white blouses, knelt and watched the ballerinas with wide eyes.

There had been twenty-eight ballerinas. Now, there were only six. Each girl wore her hair in a tight, smooth bun. Watching them as they danced, the Soldier let his eyes track the faded ghost of a broken ankle, a finger just crooked enough that the hand was shaped wrong. He kept coming back to the blazing, fire-red hair of the girl closest to him. Natalia. His little Nataschenka. The fire-haired little fox. Lisichka. She dared not meet his eyes.

Two weeks later, he leaned against the wall at the back of the shooting range, evaluating technique and form as she placed every round precisely and neatly through the center mass of the paper target. At Madame’s nod, the Soldier strode past Natalia, moved the target away, and dragged a hooded man into its place. He kicked the man’s knees out from under him and retreated.

Natalia raised her gun and took aim.

The next night, the Soldier sprang forward as Natalia spun around the shoulders of Comrade Fyodor, sending him flying into the upright piano against the wall. The Soldier hooked his right arm around her neck, his left whirring expectantly as he tightened the headlock. She writhed in his grip, struggling to free herself, before slapping his forearm.

He stepped back, frustration and fury burning in his eyes as he looked at Madame. Natalia had managed to kill every single one of her classmates. He may be larger and stronger, but she should have been able to best him easily.
"<Sloppy. Pretending to fail.>” The words lanced across the room and Natalia recoiled slightly as she leaned over onto her knees, panting.

Meeting Madame’s eyes, the Soldier shook his head. "<She isn’t ready.>” Madame approached the girl and leaned down, her face a paper-thin veil of sympathy.

"<The ceremony is necessary, for you to take your place in the world.>”

The Soldier turned, feeling sick. He wasn’t sure where the nauseating tickle in his memory came from, but the Red Room had learned through experience that the Soldier must not be present when the girls were… finished.

He must never be allowed in the operating theater or in the conditioning room. He must never hear them scream.

Madame dismissed him with a flippant wave of her hand. His part in the girl’s training was over. He turned on his heel and stalked toward his quarters.

"<I have no place in the world.>” he heard Natalia murmur.

"<Exactly.>”

Even though the Soldier moved with inhuman speed, he couldn’t outrun the piercing scream as they cut open his Lisichka. He slumped to the floor of his cell, arms pressed over his ears, teeth gritted as her harsh wails echoed in his head.

A heartrending “Kolyaaaaaa!” tore an answering whimper out of him as he curled up in a ball, oblivious to the heavy footfalls of the guards converging on his cell.

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"SHIELD ground, Quinjet 7834Q on the south ramp, taxi VFR to Avengers Tower with Kilo.” James adjusted the headset slightly, then quickly quadruple-checked the flaps.

After a moment, a voice crackled through his headphones. "Quinjet 7834Q, taxi Charlie Delta to Runway 20, hold short 20, squawk 0343 for Avengers Tower.”

"7834Q, Charlie Delta to 20, 0343,” he replied as he guided the jet forward. Vertical take-off was easier and faster, but the crew chief had made it aggressively clear that even these paragons of engineering were happier with a full runway. He taxied slowly, bring the nose about as he positioned the Quinjet at the head of the runway. "SHIELD Tower, Quinjet 7834Q, short of 20.”

"7834Q, cleared for takeoff, Runway 20, left turn on course approved.”

“Rolling 20, 34Q.” The spine-tingling thrill of opening up the throttle and feeling the beast roar to life never got old. Responsive and snappy, the jet smoothly left the tarmac and the ground dropped out from under him.

As he banked left, the control tower hailed him again. “34Q, New York Approach 125.7. Good day.”

While he could easily drop the jet into autopilot for the short flight to New York, he kept it in full manual and let the static in his mind gradually fade away as he nosed through the clouds to cruising altitude. A quick glance every so often at the radar assured him he wasn’t crossing any flight paths, and the subtle vibrations travelling through the body of the jet were soothing.
The air over New York was clear and cloudless, a welcome change after the overcast weather he’d been suffering through for a week. Eventually, the nav system pinged him to let him know that he was five miles away from the Tower, and he did a cursory recheck of the landing gear and VTOL system. A minute later, a voice from the local air traffic control tower greeted him.

“Quinjet 34Q, two miles southeast of Avengers Tower. Radar services terminated, landing at Avengers Tower will be at your own risk. Change to advisory frequency approved, good day.”

He acknowledged and swung the jet around to bring it into the right approach vector. Once the helipad was in view, he flicked a series of switches over and engaged the landing guidance. Carefully, so carefully, he lowered the jet down and released a pent-up breath as the landing gear thumped down on the helipad.

His gear could stay on the jet for now, since they’d be taking off again within the hour. James set the headset down on the console in front of him and stood, ducking out of the cockpit and punching the button to open the rear hatch.

Mickey was already waiting for him at the edge of the helipad, grinning from ear to ear. She waved at him as he jumped the last few feet to the ground and he jogged forward to scoop her up in a hug, spinning around.

“Hey Micks,” he mumbled into her shoulder. “Missed you.” Leaning down, he pressed a kiss to her forehead, nose, and lips. She reached up to brush back a clump of hair that had been pulled free from his ponytail when he took off the headset.

“It’s good to have you back.” Her eyes twinkled at him. “We’re wheels-up as soon as Clint gets his coffee. How was the flight?”

He’d never get tired of breathing in the bright orange scent of her shampoo. “Fine. The air’s pretty smooth on the coast right now, but the radar says we’ll hit some snow on the way over to South Dakota, though.”

“Good thing I packed warm.” Reaching down, Mickey grabbed the handle of her small duffel and began walking toward the Quinjet. “I packed one of your sport coats for you, by the way.”

James glanced down at his thermal jacket. “This looks fine,” he muttered defensively.

“Fancy dress, Hill said, and I don’t know why she told you tactical gear counted. You’re going to wear your sport coat or I’ll make you take the guns off.” Opening her duffel, Mickey pulled out a button-down shirt, jeans, and a coat as well as a smaller bag, then shut it and slid it into one of the cargo compartments.

“Fine.” James was still grumbling to himself as he tucked the clothes under the net covering his own bag, then ran through the small arsenal the jet had been stocked with. As he finished his checks, Clint appeared and clattered up the ramp. A duffel identical to Mickey’s was in his right hand, travel mug in his left, and a bow case slung over his shoulder.

“Hey, man.” Clint’s eyes were purple and puffy; he usually wasn’t up before noon unless something was exploding.

“Early bird, worm. She’s all yours, fueled her up and ran all the pre-flights in DC.”

Clint grunted, put his duffel and bow case under a cargo net, and slumped into the pilot’s chair. His deft hands reflexively went through a quick set of checks, verifying that nothing had gone wrong on the short trip north.
Mickey tugged James over to one of the alcoves off to the side where the fold-out bunks were still stowed against the wall, snuggling up against him as he automatically lifted an arm and pulled her in close.

“We’re two hours out, so get comfy,” Clint called from the cockpit. “The weather at our destination is 32 degrees with some broken clouds, but we’ll try to have them fixed before we arrive. Please note that the in-flight amenities do not include condoms, and holy hell, Barnes, you’re adorable when you blush.”

James raised his middle finger at the nearest camera and Clint’s shameless cackle answered him.

Scooting around so he could pull Mickey against his chest, James leaned back into the corner of the alcove and looped his arms in front of her shoulders. He didn’t even try to hide the possessive pride he felt, having her close again.

Mickey bumped her head against his cheek softly, lifting up her tablet. “I haven’t been able to dig up any personnel files,” she told him, sounding slightly frustrated. “They’ve got it locked down tight, whatever it is. I found some whispers of people going missing, witness protection style, but that’s all I’ve got.”

“Do we have to talk shop right now?” James murmured into her ear, reaching out to tap the lock button on the tablet. “I’ve been gone for a goddamn week, just wanna enjoy holding my girl again.”

Mickey twisted around to give him a bemused smile. “Do you want to be properly briefed for this mission or not?”

“Does the briefing involve cuddles? Because if that’s the case, then hell yes.”

Chuckling, Mickey unlocked the tablet again and pulled up her notes. “Maybe after, if you pay attention and we get through it quickly enough.” She started reading off the bullet points, expanding on them and giving him all of the details they’d been able to glean. As he pursed his lips, watching Mickey flip through blurry security footage of five people in purple gloves, he couldn’t help but be impressed with their dedication to security.

The briefing shifted toward the purpose of the warehouse; so far, all Mickey had been able to glean was that it was some sort of secure lockdown for items and people too dangerous to be out in the world, just like the Fridge was for SHIELD. A prison for the occult and strange. James couldn’t help but feel a little sick at that; many would argue that he belonged in such a place, permanently.

Mickey switched to a list of people that had gone mysteriously missing – dangerous people who had vanished without any trace except for the ghost-like footprints of these strange agents. The list spanned back centuries. Pointing to a few names, James helped Mickey cross them off; he even remembered how he’d disposed of each of the bodies.

Clint gave them a five-minute warning before they touched down, spurring the two of them into action. Mickey immediately stripped down to her underwear and pulled out a crisp black pantsuit from the small bag – “A gift from Pepper,” Mickey said with a slight blush when she caught James’s reaction.

“She’s got good taste. Or a good tailor. Or, um, both. You look great.”

“Down, boy.” Mickey pointed meaningfully at him as he stood watching her, the lightweight ballistic vest swinging slightly in his hands from the turbulence that Clint valiantly battled. Rolling his eyes, James shrugged on the vest over his thin undershirt, buttoned up the dress shirt over that,
and finally slid his arms into the sleeves of the sport coat.

He’d harbored a long dislike for suits since childhood, and hadn’t understood until Tony had paid for his first fitting and three-piece that he’d simply never worn a well-made one, much less one designed for a soldier. The shoulders were roomy and allowed full range of motion while still looking sharp enough that he could slice bread with them. Shoulder holsters would disappear completely under it, and he reluctantly switched the thigh holsters and belt for his concealed carry gear when Mickey gave him a stern look.

“You’re wearing jeans, Barnes,” Clint called back. “Everyone knows that SIGs and light-wash doesn’t go together.”

“Oh, piss off, Katniss.” James tugged at the base of his coat, shifting it around on his shoulders until it felt right. “At least I don’t have to look like a mobster.”

“You’re both assholes,” Mickey growled as she wiggled her feet into impossibly tall stilettos. “Keep bitchin’ about your clothes and I’ll make you wear these damn things next time.” After several seconds of quiet cursing, Mickey finally teetered to her feet and took some experimental steps around the cabin. The dark red toes of her shoes poked out from under the hem of her pants as she walked, and James watched her gait with concern.

“Should you be wearing those? I mean, you’re supposed to be using your-”

“I’m fine.” She picked up her cane and popped in the tiny catch near the bottom, twisting and extending it a few inches. “Part of the whole girl thing. I’m just glad I transitioned early and my feet didn’t get any bigger. I don’t have to go to specialty stores for my girl shoes.”

James opened his mouth a few times, before finally saying, “Well, I suppose that is one plus.”

A toothy grin flashed his way. “And you’re still just as fun to fluster.”

The jet settled onto the ground with a light thump, and James silently thanked himself for ceding the cockpit to Clint. The smaller man was a much better Quinjet pilot.

Ducking out of the cockpit, Clint quickly swapped the loose workout gear he’d been wearing – likely his pajamas – for a pair of black slacks and a matching jacket. Sunglasses popped out of a pocket and onto his face, and he eyed his bow case as he reluctantly tucked a gun into the holster under his belt.

“Let’s roll,” the archer said, and slapped the button to lower the loading ramp.

There was a thin dusting of snow on the ground, and James instinctively held out a hand to Mickey to steady her as she stepped off the edge of the ramp. “Careful, ground’s a bit slippery.”

Turning, he stopped dead in his tracks as he caught sight of what they’d flown out for.

The satellite images and radar had been inconclusive at best – something big was out here, but none of them had any idea what. Towering above them was a giant, peaked-roof metal warehouse larger than anything he’d ever seen before, probably large enough to house the Hindenburg at least fifty times over if the size of the retractable hangar doors were anything to go by. Streaks of rust and the stains from rainstorms painted down from the roof over the dull gray paneling, and massive rust-red girders crisscrossed their way up the support beams lining the outer wall.

Swallowing, he stepped forward when Mickey tugged at his hand. Clint fell into step on her other side, and the three of them slowly walked forward toward the tiny door barely visible at the other end
of the massive wall.

No sooner had they made their way within a hundred feet than the door opened and a head poked out, bedecked in wavy red hair and eye-catching makeup. The head disappeared back inside, hollered, “Artie! We got company!” and stepped out, followed by the body of a young woman.

She stood a few inches shorter than Mickey, slender and fine-boned, wearing a heavy bomber jacket over skinny jeans tucked into slouchy boots. Her hair fluttered around her face in the slight breeze and she grimaced against the cold.

“The FISH only gave us about three minutes’ warning before you touched down,” she said.

“The fish?” James repeated under his breath.

“Claudia Donovan.” The girl stuck out her hand towards Mickey. “Welcome to Warehouse 13.”

“Agent Michaela Draymond. We’re with SHIELD. This is Clint Barton and—”

“Claudia? Who is it?” A short, slightly overweight man in shapeless brown clothes stepped through the door, followed by a second man, thin and blond, his eyes immediately clocking every concealed weapon.

James’s stomach lurched as he locked eyes with the first man. “Weisfelt.”

The round face went pale under his glasses and curly, graying hair. “Both of you, back inside,” the short man ordered. “Now.”

James stepped forward, raising his hands in what he hoped was a non-threatening gesture. “Arthur—”

“Oh, no thank you.” Dark eyes glared directly at James as the man drew… something… from the pocket of his coat. “You turn around right now and you get the hell away from my Warehouse.”

“Artie—” Claudia reached out and placed a hand on Artie’s arm, looking James over with a mixture of concern and amazement.

James stared, perplexed, at the strange contraption Artie leveled at his chest. “The fuck is that? Is that a squirt gun?”

Artie clumsily shoved Claudia behind him. “Oh, this’ll squirt you with over fifty thousand volts of electricity so I recommend you turn around and get back in your little bird and fly home. Right. Now.”

Taking another half-step forward to get between Weisfelt and Mickey, James made the best placating gesture he could. “Look, pal—”

The finger curled around the strange gun’s trigger tightened and a blinding flash of blue lightning sped towards James, engulfing him completely before his eyes rolled back, his knees buckled, and his vision whited out.

***

“You have no idea what he’s capable of. He’s dangerous!” A thick, upset voice bubbled its way through the sludge in James’s brain.

“So am I, asshat, and I’m in heels.” Mickey was still with him. James inwardly sighed in relief. “I don’t know and don’t care what history you and James have with each other, but we’re here because
I need to make sure you aren’t a risk. If I can find traces and footprints, so can HYDRA, the Hand, or AIM, or any one of the other organizations hellbent on making our lives miserable.”

“She’s not lying,” another male voice added quietly.

“Not now, Steve.”

James groaned involuntarily as he tried to force his eyes open. His eyelids were gritty, heavy, and sticky, but eventually they shuddered apart and he blinked blearily, waiting for the world to come back into focus.

“Hey, man.” Clint’s blurry head filled his field of vision. “They zapped you good. How’re you feeling?”

“Where’m I?” He tried to push himself upright but firm hands pressed him back down onto… a couch?

“South Dakota. Do you remember the flight over here?”

James lifted his hands and promptly poked himself in the eye as he tried to rub his face. “Ow. Motherfucker. Um. Yeah. Flew up to the Tower, picked you two up, and then we landed in the asscrack of the Midwest.”

“Hey, look at me.” Clint held up a finger and moved it back and forth, checking James’s eye movement. “Yeah. We landed in the Badlands. Remember what we saw?”

This time, Clint didn’t push him back down as he rolled to his side and slowly, achingly, levered himself up into a slumped sitting position. His hair was loose around his face and he buried his hands in it, holding up his head which suddenly weighed a metric ton. “Some sort’a weird-ass warehouse thing. Couple’a kids. Weisfelt.”

“His name’s Nielsen now. Artie Nielsen.” A mug of something herbal slid into view under his nose. “Drink this. It’ll help.” James let the thin, slender hands holding the mug position his own around it and breathed in the steam. It tingled in his nose, the sharp scent of cloves helping to clear the fog in his head. “Artie turned himself in when he learned what the Russians were doing with the artifacts he found. The Warehouse took him in after that and gave him a new name and a new life.”

After a few sips of the strange-tasting tea, James lifted his head. A willowy, brown-haired woman with full lips and a tentative smile looked down at him.

“I’m Myka,” she said. “Welcome to the B&B.”

The room he was in was comfortable, with a classic feel to it. Several large couches and armchairs were placed strategically around it, angled toward the happily flickering fireplace. Clint stood up from the squat he’d been in and stepped back, falling into one of the armchairs with a sigh.

Myka waved her hand vaguely at the door into the hallway. “I’m sorry about that, by the way. Agent Draymond’s talking with Artie right now. You’ve been out for a lot longer than normal.”

Two voices, one male and one female, hollered over each other down the hall. James couldn’t hide the amused smile that made the corners of his mouth twitch up. “Has anyone been monitoring me?”

“Mickey’s had a feed running nonstop since Nielsen hit you,” Clint answered. “We’ve been streaming it to JARVIS, courtesy of Claudia letting us use her uplink. So far, you’re fine.”
Nodding, James drank some more of the tea. Each sip cleared up a few more of the dusty cobwebs that floated behind his eyes.

Myka sat down so she could face both of them and chewed her lip thoughtfully before turning to James. “Pete and I were already on our way in from Minneapolis when Artie called us. He seemed pretty upset. What exactly happened between you and him?”

James knuckled his forehead. “I used to meet him at drop points. Most of the time I was just a protection detail, a bodyguard. Sometimes it was just me. He’d hand over some sort of case or bag, and that was that. I always had explicit orders to never open them up.”

“So… why is he so afraid of you?”

Clint snorted eloquently, drawing an unamused look from Myka.

“Please, Agent Barton, enlighten me.”

“You’ve seen the news, right?” Clint’s tone implied that the question was rhetorical - who hadn’t?

“Patches. We’ve been pretty busy until recently fending off the world’s craziest alchemist so I didn’t really watch any of the DC coverage in real time. There was a third-page article about some trial that stuck around for a few days but I didn’t have time to read it, and Pete only gets sports channels on his TV.”

“I’m a World War Two veteran and formerly brainwashed Soviet black ops agent with a titanium alloy arm and a list of confirmed kills that would make most historians nauseous,” James supplied bluntly. “Almost every unsolved assassination or political murder since the 50s, and some of the solved ones? That’s me.”

“Oh, okay.”

Her nonchalant acceptance made James do a double-take. “What? Okay? That’s it?”

“Trust me,” she said with a wry smile. “We’ve dealt with a lot stranger.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.” Clint leaned his chin on his hand, giving Myka a bored look. “Once you’ve seen aliens and then had ‘em play basketball with your brain, then we’ll talk.”

The shouting in the next room rose in volume and James set down the mug carefully on the coffee table in front of him, pressing his fingers to his temples in an effort to ward off the splitting headache that was starting to develop.

A hand waved in front of his face and he jolted back in surprise, causing Mickey to jump a bit herself. “Wha…?

Mickey sat down next to him, pulling out her phone and quickly glancing over the charts displayed on it. “You lost time.”

“Fuck. How long?”

“About twenty minutes. Clint called me in when you didn’t answer a question.”

James screwed his eyes shut and then opened them again, glancing quickly around the room. He and Mickey were alone, and judging by the complete lack of other voices, everyone else had left the building completely.
A stray clump of hair had fallen out of where she’d combed it back with product. Reaching up, James brushed it back into place, his tired hand barely cooperating. “Feel like I’m gonna fall over,” he mumbled.

“Let’s get you upstairs, then. Mrs. F and Abby are insisting on putting us up here while we work to find out what’s going on – with the Warehouse and with you.” Mickey tugged him to his feet, ducking under his arm and ignoring his half-hearted protests. She led him up the stairs and down the hall to one of the rooms where their gear already sat at the foot of the bed. “Get changed and lay down for a bit, okay?”

“I’m fine,” he complained. “I’m not a fuckin’ kid.”

The look she gave him was all it took before he disarmed and disrobed, stepping into the shorts and t-shirt held out to him.

“You don’t have to sleep, you can play games on your phone or whatever, but you’re going to rest until we’re out of the risk zone.”

As soon as he sat down on the bed, a nap started to sound like a damn good idea, and he leaned back, landing flat on his back with a quiet thump. He rolled over, clumsily shoving his feet under the quilt, and struggled to keep his eyes open as Mickey tugged the quilt up over his shoulders.

“I’ll wake you up when I get back,” she told him as his eyelids drooped.

***

If Bucky had any air left in his lungs before, the bone-shattering impact against the side of the mountain knocked out what was left. He felt himself spin, cartwheeling through the air like a rag doll as he bounced and tumbled his way to the forest floor.

His arm caught in a tree on the way down. He was falling too fast. His shoulder strained, cracked, and yielded.

There wasn’t any air left in his lungs to scream as the bones neatly separated at the socket.

He landed on his left on the snowy ground, coughing up dry, oily bile as soon as his lungs could fill themselves again. His vision faded in and out, head lolling as he tried to shake off the ringing in his ears and the world-spinning wooziness.

Five cycles of freezing cold and watery light, five days as he lay there, ice slowly forming in his veins, the tissue around the remnants of his shoulder already beginning to turn black. Vomit caked the front and side of his once-handsome blue coat, and his right hand felt numb and cold as he tried desperately to move.

Heavy blocks of ice and snow pinned his legs to the ground.

All he could feel was cold, and the taste of sick in his mouth.

His hair froze to the ground when the sun melted the snow after the first night.

His eyes froze open on the fourth day.

His lips blistered and cracked, his face bruised and swelled up with frostbite.

He hallucinated vividly as he lay dying.
The fire at the grocer in Brooklyn, warmth barely penetrating into his hands as he blandly considered shoving them directly onto the embers. The owner’s harsh voice ordering him back to work.

The warmth of a cigarette in his hands as he sat, laughing politely at a joke about the blood-suckin’ gypsies stealin’ all the work ‘round these parts, a joke that hit far too close to home. The early winter night hid his burning face as he called goodnight to the men at the docks and trudged his way home past the cemetery that held his Irish Catholic father and soft-spoken, fearful Romanian mother.

Steve’s sunshine smile as he grinned at Bucky, cards whipping through his hands as he prepared to fleece Dum Dum out of another ration of chocolate.

The pained, quiet acceptance in Steve’s eyes when Bucky had pushed him away, peeled himself off of stained, sticky bedsheets and wiped himself down, shame written in the set of his shoulders.

Becca’s wet, smiling laughter when she tore apart the greasy brown paper to find perfect, pristine hair ribbons, and the warmth in Bucky’s heart knowing that his painful saving had been worth it just to make their first Christmas alone special, just to see her smile again.

The halo of green light that ringed Steve’s face – too big, too big – as gargantuan hands dragged him from his portal to hell and a deep voice promised to keep him safe. The strange new man who had replaced his best friend but had somehow kept all the best parts, wrapping them up in a massive body with a heart strong enough to turn the world.

The bright red blood rolling down the lip of the biggest bully he’d ever seen, twice his size and towering over him as he shielded Steve with his body. The solid crunch of a cheekbone under his fist as he pulled back his arm and let loose, fists flying with the authority of three boxing titles.

He was so far gone in his memory that he didn’t notice the snow and ice heave off of him, the hands rip him from where he’d frozen to the mountain, or the stretcher that carried him to a truck.

Delirious, he rolled his head to the side, relief flooding through him when he recognized Allied Russian soldiers. The relief shattered into panic when one by one, the Russians disintegrated. Heavy boots and black uniforms tramped up.

Bucky was so close to death’s door that he couldn’t even cry out when he saw a red skull spitting tentacles at him from the chest of the black-clad soldier closest to him. A hand blocked his view and thudded down on his temple, and the world went black.

He opened his eyes again to see shining, round spectacles reflecting the sickly light around him, stuck to a small, flat face that spoke to him soothingly with the clipped tones of Swiss German.

Zola.

He screamed.

It came out as a hoarse, whistling whine, and his limbs were too weak to thrash against the straps that held him down.

His next wave of consciousness came with a nauseating, matching wave of terror as a large lens filled his sight, flashed brightly at him, and vanished. Hands pulled him upright off the table – gurney – whatever it was – and released him. He stumbled forward, trying to catch his fall, but slammed to the ground on his left side when there wasn’t an arm there to help him. Voices laughed and faces sneered at him as an agonized whine escaped his lips.
He’d been there for three months when they finally decided to test the chair on him. He’d seen the aftermath in the other prisoners already. Zola assured him that his serum was strong enough, delighted with the opportunity to play with his personal lab rat.

The guards propelled his limp body into the chair, the unnecessary restraints slamming shut around his arm and legs. Invisible hands latched on to his shoulders, somehow shaking him bodily in the chair as the strange headpiece whirred into place. His eyes darted around as he shook uncontrollably, the headpiece slamming into place and white, arcing lights filling his vision.

His voice tore out of his throat for the first time in months. He’d promised himself he would never scream, never talk, never give them the satisfaction-

A hoarse, strangled yell ripped him out of the nightmare, and he lashed out reflexively at the hands that held him down, the ghosts of the scientists dancing in front of his eyes. His hand – the metal hand – connected with something soft and he heard a surprised grunt as a person shifted to the side.

James curled his arms protectively around his head and drew up his knees, drawing his tongue back as far as he could to avoid biting it off. His breaths were short, rapid, and noisy as he panted through his nose, making himself recite his base truths through sheer force of will.


“You okay, man?” The voice was male, unfamiliar.

Rolling over onto his back, James turned towards the voice. A young man stared at him, alarmed. Fit and strong, he wore a simple t-shirt and jeans and his dark hair was close-cropped, framing a youthful face that had seen far too much.

James reached up and shoved his hair out of his face; the other man’s eyes followed the metal arm carefully. “Sorry. Nightmare.” Understanding and empathy softened the man’s face.

“Hey, it’s okay. I get them too. Military does that to you.”

Studying the other man, James picked up on the subtle cues he’d missed at first. “Marines.”

“Yeah.” The man sat down as James pushed himself into a sitting position, wrapping his arms around his knees over the quilt. “I’m Pete. Mykes said they’d taken you upstairs when you had a weird reaction to the Tesla gun. Sorry about that, by the way, Artie’s kind of hair-trigger after all the stuff that went down last year.”

“I noticed,” James grumbled, threading his fingers into his hair and scratching at his scalp. “Can’t say I blame him, though. I’ve got a nasty reputation. HYDRA messed me up pretty bad.”

Pete looked down at his hands. “Yeah, they told me. Mickey says you’re getting better, though.”

“Trying.” James dropped his head onto his arms. “Some days aren’t so good.”

“It takes time. Trust me. You’ll get there.”

“Thanks, man.”
Clearing his throat awkwardly, Pete shifted on the bed, turning to face James and pulling a knee up. “I know you don’t really know me, but it helps when I talk about my nightmares. Myka has me tell her what happened every time I wake us up. Makes sleeping easier after that.”

“You don’t want to hear about this, kid.” James pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, trying to drown out the jeering, dancing afterimages of Zola’s gleaming glasses.

There was a long pause before Pete said, “I nearly killed my best friend when I drove us into a tree. Had a few drinks, thought I was fine. I walked away, he’s in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Six months ago we had this weirdo from the 1500s try to take over the Warehouse. He wrote us all out of history and we had to go back and change it. I promised myself when I took off my uniform for the last time that I was done killing people, but I’ve got blood on my hands just like every single person here. We all killed doing what we thought was right.”

“What about killing doing what you know is wrong?” James fixed Pete with tired, puffy eyes. “My finger pulled the trigger and I couldn’t stop it, so many times.”

When Pete’s face tightened into an unsettlingly wise expression, James saw a person far older and in more pain than the young, healthy body in front of him implied. “We’ve dealt with mind control here, too. Artie killed Leena, the woman who used to own this place. He got whammied by an artifact, nearly killed all of us. There isn’t a day that goes by where that doesn’t haunt him.”

James looked down at his hands, one flesh and pink, the other unyielding metal. He wiggled the fingers of his metal hand slowly. “My nightmare. It’s when they… when they made me. When they cut me into so many tiny pieces that I couldn’t put myself back together again. They tortured me for years and years before they ever grafted this- this thing onto my body. Zola just wanted to see how well the serum had worked. He spent nearly four years trying to kill me before he admitted it wasn’t possible.”

Pete’s eyes tightened, but he didn’t look away.

“Artie. I um, I met him after I got transferred to the Soviets. To the KGB. They had this division, Department X, and then a unit called the Red Room where they trained assassins.”

“The Black Widow.”

“Yeah. I trained her.” He wiped a hand under his nose. “A decent amount of my missions were escort, extraction, retrieval, stuff like that. Not as many assassinations as you’d think, but still more of them than I’ll ever remember. Artie’s were fairly standard. Escort prisoner, receive ransom, deliver prisoner. Sometimes I had orders to execute the prisoner after the fact. That’s probably why he hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you, man. He’s just kind of… like that.”

“Wouldn’t blame him if he did.”

“You know, they made comic books about you. About the Howling Commandos and Captain America.”

“Oh God. Why couldn’t they have just left it as the Invaders? Stupid-ass name.” James couldn’t help but laugh bitterly. “Yeah, Steve showed me those. They made me, what, like, sixteen?”

“And they stuck you in a bright blue and red outfit, complete with tights and pirate boots,” Pete smirked.
“Please tell me you don’t have one of those fuckin’ Bucky Bears.”

Throwing his head back, Pete laughed. “No, but my sister does. She loved reading the comic books. Couldn’t watch the TV shows. You know.” He pointed to his ear meaningfully. “It was so awesome to see the look on her face when she saw Hawkeye’s hearing aids on TV.”

James was so used to them that he never even noticed anymore. Flicking the lights as he entered a room, signing one-handed over his shoulder when he couldn’t turn to let Clint read his lips; all of that was second nature by now.

He didn’t realize Pete was still talking. “The thing that people forget about from the comics… everyone knew who you were and what you did. You were the guy that did the stuff that Cap couldn’t be seen doing.”

“Wet work.” The words ripped out of James as he closed his eyes, remembering the orders he’d been given so many times, out of earshot of Steve and the rest of the Invaders.

“Thing is, Barnes,” Pete said gently. “You were the Winter Soldier before HYDRA messed with you, because you signed up to do the things no one else would so that you could protect the people you love. Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis*. When they had the war crimes trials for the men that fought in Vietnam, they called themselves winter soldiers, too. Kind of a creepy coincidence if you think about it, but…”

Pete took a deep breath before continuing. “They mention in the history books in school that you were the sharpshooter, Morita was the radio guy, you know. Gave all your roles on the team with a short bio before they started to lick Cap’s boots. What they taught us in boot camp was that Captain America was the soldier you wanted in command, but Bucky Barnes? He’s the soldier you wanted to be. Because he got shit done when no one else could, and he never left a man behind.”

“Zola took all of that from me, though. I never got to choose. For sixty years I wasn’t anything but a gun.”

“So maybe it’s time you take it back.” Standing, Pete held out a hand and tugged him to his feet after he scooted to the edge of the bed. “Maybe it’s time to start protecting people again. You can start by protecting me as I raid the kitchen. Come on.”

***

James shot a long-suffering look at Clint, receiving a small nod in return. He politely excused himself, giving the Warehouse agents a tight smile. Mickey could handle this one on her own; she had no use for him here.

He buzzed the heavy steel door open, leaving behind the nostalgic, warm, dusty office and blinking against the sterile white lights of the passage to the surface. His footsteps echoed softly in – what had they called it? The Umbilicus? – and he carefully avoided bumping into the rather menacing explosive columns on either side. The door at the other end opened at his touch, and he stepped out into the cold evening.

His breath fogged the air in front of him as he leaned back and let his shoulders thump against the heavy steel wall of the Warehouse. Artifacts danced in front of his eyes, their small computer readouts straining credulity. A pair of shoes that made you dance until you died? Impossible. Shaking his head, James shoved his hand in one pocket, then another, until he realized that he no longer carried cigarettes.
Old habits and all that.

The sound of a lighter clicking to his right made him turn, and he jumped clear into the next zip code when a sturdy, dark-skinned woman with a knobby beehive updo and colorful horn-rimmed glasses held out a lit cigarette.

He took it automatically, his other hand pressing against his racing heart. “Didn’t see you there.”

The woman gave him a small smile and turned outward, fixing her eyes on the Quinjet. Something was familiar about her, maybe it was the shape of her face, or how her eyes –


“Trust me, it’s been one.” Her voice was every bit as sharp as he remembered. “It’s been a long time, Sergeant.”

James blinked, and the woman in front of him was decked out in Army khaki, holding a Tommy Gun as the boys from the SSR packed up crates to ship stateside. He blinked again, and she regarded him with a raised eyebrow and pursed lips. She looked like she hadn’t aged a day, save for a single salt-and-pepper braid winding its way across her head.

Speechless, James lifted the cigarette to his lips and took a long drag, holding it delicately between two fingers as he exhaled. The nicotine didn’t have any effect on him anymore, but the motion of it was still soothing.

“I hear you had quite the morning,” she prompted.

“Tell your man to lay off the stun guns. I’m fuckin’ epileptic now.” James jingled the medical bracelet on his left wrist meaningfully.

“Arthur can be…” She paused, smiling at her shoes. “Excitable. We’ve had an eventful few years here.”

“So I’ve heard. HYDRA’s been leaving you alone, though, right?”

“They’ve never gotten past the front door, if that’s what you’re asking.”

A curl of smoke wound its way into the air as James paused, cigarette halfway to his mouth. “So they’ve tried.”

Frederic raised her head proudly. “Them and many others. We’ve weathered every storm.”

“But how are you…” Frowning, James waved his free hand at her.

“Being the Caretaker of the Warehouse comes with certain… responsibilities. It also comes with certain benefits that one might also consider costs.”

Understanding dawned. “You don’t age. Some sort’a magic in that thing keeps you young?”

“Indeed.” She reached up to play with the delicate pearls around her neck. “I understand that you’ve found yourself in a similar situation.”

James coughed slightly as he sucked in the next drag of smoke. “Yeah,” he choked out. “Stopped aging at the normal rate, probably after Steve pulled me out of the labor camp.”

“I would imagine it’s an effect of the serum you were injected with.”
“What else could it be?” Flicking the ash off the tip of the cigarette, James squinted out at the dusky horizon. “Did you know? Back in the war, I mean.” Her piercing eyes had followed him everywhere whenever their teams met up to transfer the crates.

“I have an intuition about such things, but my responsibilities only extend to artifacts, not the people that carry them.”

“…the people that…” He jumped for a second time when he turned back to look at her and all he saw was empty air. “Jeeezus Mary and Joseph.”

Cigarette half-forgotten as he leaned over with his hands on his knees, James blinked hard a few times and blew his cheeks out as he exhaled.

The door to the Warehouse clicked open and groaned as it swung outward, a pair of feet scuffling their way towards James.

“Um…” Artie’s voice was hesitant. “Are… are you okay?”

Straightening, James sniffed and wiped a hand under his nose. “Yeah. Just… Does Frederic always… I don’t even know what to call it.”

“Yeah. She does that.” Artie stuffed his hands in his pockets and stared pointedly at the ground. His next words were clipped, the inflection odd, and James realized quickly that they’d been drilled into him by someone else. “I’m sorry for hitting you with the Tesla. The Warehouse is my… everything… and I can be aggressive when I think it’s in danger.”

Despite the grudging tone, Artie’s apology seemed heartfelt. After a moment, James reached forward a hand – his right one – and did his best to smile when Artie shook it. “I probably deserved it. I’m no saint either. And Pete told me you’ve all had a rough time of it lately.”

“We have, yeah,” Artie admitted with a mirthless laugh. “Seems like every time I turn around there’s someone new trying to take over or destroy my Warehouse.” Turning back to the door, Artie beckoned James toward him. “Come on. There’s something I want to show you.”

Pete, Myka, Mickey, and Clint were chattering away animatedly as Claudia sifted through information on her computer. Rather than stop to join in the conversation, though, Artie led James through the door at the back of the office, to the end of the metal balcony, and down a set of stairs.

James’s jaw dropped as he took in the sheer size of the Warehouse. “How does this all fit?”

“Something about interdimensional manipulation and a bunch of other pseudoscience that no one really understands. We don’t ask too many questions.”

“Oh. So like the TARDIS.”

Stopping, Artie gave him an amused look. “Yeah, kind of. Didn’t figure you’d watched Doctor Who.”

“Well, I spent a long time in a hospital getting my brain and body fixed back up after Rogers and I blew up DC. Didn’t have anything better to do so I mostly ended up watching Netflix and browsing the Internet. Learned a lot of stuff really quick.”

The amused look turned thoughtful. “There’s someone you remind me a lot of. I’ll let you know next time she’s in town. I think you two would get along.” Artie turned away again and led the two of them on a winding path through countless shelves.
“Ah! Here we are.” Artie swung his arms wide and spun in a slow circle. “Consider this my olive branch. We don’t normally bring outsiders in here - don’t touch anything, I mean it - but Mrs. Frederic vouched for you.”

“Did she now?” James muttered as he began looking over the smattering of artifacts in front of him. A Harley WLA growled at him quietly, the strange little readout warning him not to open the throttle or the bike would never stop. Above it, sitting on the rib-height shelf, was a collection of stielhandgranates that would explode twice when thrown. Guns of all shapes and sizes rested on a specially designed rack, many of them individually tagged and some of them trapped in odd restraints.

He recognized a few HYDRA weapons, some of which he’d actually captured himself. The Tesseract hadn’t been the only occult myth that HYDRA had dug up, and Artie quietly informed him that the Nazi deep science division had discovered one of the previous warehouses, raiding it for any tool that would give them the upper hand in the war against the Allies.

“Seems like they got more than they bargained for,” James muttered as he eyed an ancient Greek mask that allowed the wearer to breathe underwater, at the cost of ever breathing above the surface again.

“They definitely did. The first section they laid hands on was where the old Warehouse kept all of the really dangerous stuff.”

Jutting his jaw out, James chewed on his lip. “Did you ever get back the stuff that you, um, gave to the Soviets?”

“Not all of it,” he admitted, glancing down. “We recovered most of them when we ended up in Russia tracking down Ivan Petrov-”

“Alexei’s son?” Aleksandr Petrov had been Artie’s main liaison with the Soviets, and had frequently been shadowed by the Soldier – partly for protection, and partly as insurance.

“Yeahp.” Artie shifted uncomfortably under James’s scrutinizing gaze. “Vanya kind of blames me for getting his dad locked up for his whole life.”

James frowned, glancing down at his hands as two uncomfortably familiar faces hovered in his mind. “If… if it makes you feel any better, HYDRA had me off both of them a few years ago. Two headshots while they were out in the yard for recreation, distance of two thousand yards.” He glanced up at Artie’s bloodless face and grimaced apologetically. “I had orders to make sure they didn’t die in pain, at least.”

“That’s… um…” Artie cleared his throat loudly and pulled his glasses off to clean them. James could practically smell his discomfort. “Good. Yes. Um. I’d never call Alexei a friend, God I hated him, but… um. Thank you. I guess.”

Closing his eyes, James sighed quietly. He turned and walked slowly along the shelf, taking in all the pieces of history – his history – with a buoyant, slightly dizzy feeling. When he reached the end of the shelf, his eyes landed on a small black box, velvet lined, with the lid propped up.

Stepping forward, he took a closer look at the small, silver object laying on the velvet, and had to reach out and grab the upright of the shelf to steady himself.

They were dog tags.
His dog tags.

_Bucky Barnes’s Dog Tags_, the readout told him. _Properties: Bestows the wearer with the ability to make any shot with any projectile weapon without missing. Warning: Chance to incur reckless behavior. Danger: Minimal._

“We tracked those down in the late 1950s at a bar in Oslo,” Artie offered. “They were in the possession of a professional hitman who’d been acting erratically enough to register on our system.”

“May I…?”

The shorter man made a gesture that said, _of course_, and James reached out nervously. His fingers slipped against the thin metal chain at first, then he hooked a finger under it and lifted up the tags.

JAMES B BARNES
32557038 T42 43 O
STEVEN G ROGERS
1478 E 28TH STREET
BROOKLYN NY C

The original chain had broken sometime while he’d been in the trenches, the flat metal links and sister hooks swapped for tiny beads that grabbed the hairs on the back of his neck and left sore pockmarks pressed into his skin.

He shivered involuntarily as the chain shifted and the tags skittered their way down. The chain felt electrified in his hand as he stared at the small metal tags, the last remnant of who he’d been so many years ago.

“Now, I don’t normally do this,” Artie began, reluctantly. “But Mrs. Frederic and the Regents have talked and if you want, we can release your dog tags to you.”

James gave Artie a suspicious, sidelong glance. “How long have you known we were coming?”

“Things move fast when they have to.” His reply was accompanied with a noncommittal shrug. “Suffice to say, we don’t need SHIELD’s protection, but the Regents are interested in partnering up for some of the bigger jobs. You have resources we can use, and we’ve got agents who specialize in weird.”

The warm glow of the overhead lights glinted off of the stamped lettering on his tags. James stared at them, unsure for several seconds, before tracing his thumb over the line with Steve’s name.

“Claudia told me every one of these things has a downside and sometimes it gets nasty. I… I’ve had enough of my brain scrambled already that I think I’d rather have a replica.”

Artie’s face lit up. “I have just the thing. Come with me.”

Dog tags dangling from his hand, James trudged after Artie, impressed at the way that the plump, clumsy man seemed to know his way around the Warehouse blind. Artie murmured to himself as they wound through the stacks, pointing at each turn, until he made a grand gesture and stepped to the side to show James a large, ornate, and _very_ old iron cauldron on stubby feet.

“The Chinese Doubling Pot. Drop your tags in there.”

“Um… what?” James stared at the dull gray pot, sizing it up.

“Trust me. Here.” Artie reached out and grabbed the tags, tossing them into the cauldron. A
strange puff of purple smoke curled up out of it, and Artie waited for the smoke to dissipate before
reaching in and pulling out two sets of dog tags.

He grunted softly, reaching into his pocket and brandishing the shiny silver bags he pulled out.
“Here. Take one. Drop your set of tags in and cover your eyes.”

Baffled, James did as he was told, holding one set of tags over the open plastic bag. Turning away,
he closed his eyes and dropped the tags in. The bag vibrated and a strange, searing hot but pleasant
sensation brushed against his hand, and he turned back to peer inside the bag. “What just
happened?”

Artie poured his set of tags into his hand and held them out to James. “Here. The bags are made up
of a special polymer that neutralizes artifacts. It’ll send out purple sparks when you drop stuff into it
if it’s an artifact.”

“So we dropped both sets in to tell which one’s going back on the shelf.”

“Exactly.”

Closing his eyes and raising his eyebrows, James sighed and shook his head slowly. “And I thought
my life was weird.”

Artie grinned wolfishly. “Oh, you haven’t even seen the beginning of weird.” He led the two of
them back through the endless maze, nestled the original tags back in their velvet box, and then
navigated back to the office.

James was still staring at the tags in his hand when he followed Artie through the door, the chain
cold and familiar around his neck. He caught Mickey’s eye and shrugged when she gave him a
quizzical look. Pulling out the collar of his shirt, he dropped the tags down against his chest.

He hadn’t realized how much he missed the comforting, grounding pressure on his sternum.

Sitting next to Mickey, he set his right ankle on his left knee, holding it in place with his metal hand
and not-very-subtly draping the other arm around Mickey’s shoulders. Clint’s eye-roll received a
smirk, and Artie loudly shushed the excited squealing coming from Claudia.

James let his attention wander during the rest of the meeting, pulling out his tags and absently
fiddling with them as his eyes scanned the large room. Eventually, he noticed that the young, blond
agent sitting quietly behind Pete and Myka was watching him. Their eyes met, and the agent’s eyes
narrowed thoughtfully before he gave James a cautious smile.

He barely noticed when the meeting ended, and Mickey had to poke him repeatedly in the shoulder
to draw his attention away from the bookshelf he’d been peering at. “They’re inviting us to dinner in
town. Come on.”

As everyone filed through the narrow door, the blond agent caught up to James. “Steve Jinks,” he
said, offering a hand.

“James Barnes. Jim if you want.”

“Not Bucky?”

James frowned a bit. “I’m not sure I’ve gotten there yet.”

Jinks smiled at him knowingly before stepping through the door.
I’d already inserted the Winter Soldier into Natasha’s AoU flashback by the point I found this, but it’s basically a perfect Photoshop of what I had in mind.

Warehouse 13 cameo! There’s only five seasons and it’s complete, so if you’ve never watched it, go do that. It’s a little campy at times, but it’s very good. It’s set in the same universe as Eureka and there are a few crossovers between the series. But yeah, I couldn’t resist a crossover given how similar the MCU’s 084s and other artifacts are to Warehouse 13’s artifacts.

Also, cookies for the first person to guess who the woman James reminds Artie of is ;)

Lastly, the amount of research I did for the five lines of text on Bucky’s dog tags is just plain silly. But the format and information is as correct as I could manage. His tags would have looked something like this:

And around 1944, the Army started issuing the standard ball chains like we see on today’s tags:
Lastly, WW2 dog tags were stamped rather than embossed, meaning the letters recede into the tag versus popping out. The Army also changed the formatting of the information some time around early ’44 if I remember correctly. If you have any questions as to what means what on his tags, let me know! The address is made up because I live on the opposite end of the United States from NYC and yeah.
“Hey, Mick- what the hell?” James pulled away from her as she repeatedly tried to stick something to his arm.

She frowned, tapping a small round plastic thing against the metal plates. “Damn.”

“What are – is that a fridge magnet? Gimme that.” An elaborate game of keepaway ended with both of them on the floor in the living room, laughing, the magnet all but forgotten until James triumphantly raised his fist in the air, the plastic edges of the disc digging into his fingers. “Hah!”

“Asshole,” Mickey panted. “Seriously, though, why doesn’t it stick?”

“Titanium alloy. There isn’t any steel; it’s too heavy.” James pushed himself to his feet, reaching down a hand and helping Mickey up. “Good thing, too, or I’d have a hell of a time if anyone decided to hit me with an electromagnet.”

He slapped the magnet on the fridge, staring in disbelief as it slid smoothly down and clattered to the floor.

“Titanium alloy, meet aluminum.” Mickey smirked and smacked him on the ass as she pushed past to grab a drink out of the fridge.

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He couldn’t help but sit stiffly, and his smile felt forced as he attempted to look engaged in the conversation at the table. Food had been passed around and doled out onto plates, then quickly inhaled as SHIELD and Warehouse agents tried to outdo each other with tales of the strange.

Everyone except for James.

He picked at his food – for some reason his normally voracious appetite had abandoned him. While
he managed to choke down enough to put an end to Mickey’s concerned prodding, there was still at least half of the meal staring accusingly at him from his plate.

The mixture of voices at their table and throughout the restaurant, the clink of flatware on dishes, and the innumerable smells had been crashing together in his head since the moment they stepped through the door. Claudia’s enthusiastic laughter had begun to send twinges through his temples, despite the fact that he enjoyed her geeky humor. He tried his best to turn his ears off, clearing out all the extra stimulus in an attempt to meditate, but kept getting shaken out of it by some new sound that his subconscious hadn’t yet dismissed as not-dangerous.

Just when he’d finally started to relax, a much-hated name jolted him back into full awareness.

“Who said that?” he growled, quietly enough not to disturb the other tables. The conversation around him trailed off, and Claudia covered her hand with her mouth, eyes wide and cheeks flushed.

“Ohhhhh man I was not supposed to… I am so sorry.”

James narrowed his eyes. “Lebedev was never mentioned in the trial. He isn’t in my file. According to the Russian government, he doesn’t exist. So how in the hell do you know who he is?”

Claudia’s eyes darted around and a tense silence settled over the table. Eventually, Artie leaned forward on his elbows. “Lebedev’s Toolbox. It showed up on our system last week. When we realized what we were dealing with, we reached out to SHIELD. You’re the team they sent.”

He turned to Mickey. She stared at her empty plate, tight-lipped and pale.

“When were you going to tell me?”

She didn’t respond other than a small shake of her head.

Before he could stop himself, his hand balled into a fist and slammed against the table. Several of the agents jumped, and people around them were starting to look over, curious.

Clint turned his head toward James. “Hey, man…” He reached out, moving to wrap a hand around James’s wrist only to get it swatted away.

James forced himself to keep his voice low and controlled as he glared at Artie. “You warned Claudia and Jinks that they have no idea what I’m capable of. Those… tools. Whatever you want to call them. That’s what made me into what I am. If they’re out there and someone’s using them, you can sure as fuckin’ hell bet that there’s a trail of bodies. And if Lebedev’s still alive…” He stood, palms flat on the table, chair sliding backward. “Let’s just say you’re best off leaving well enough alone and not getting anyone else hurt. They don’t know what I’m capable of? You don’t know what he was capable of.”

Mickey caught his arm as he turned to leave. “James-”

“Need some air.” He shrugged off her hand and stalked out of the restaurant, pointedly ignoring the other patrons that stared after him. As soon as he stepped outside, he realized he’d left his coat on the chair. Stuffing his hands in his armpits, he trudged through the snow for several blocks before finally sitting down on the first spot he found clear of snow: the short wall bordering the planter under the barber shop’s overhang.

The tiny snowflakes drifted down, floating this way and that on random puffs of air. Streetlights glowed with halos, their thick yellow light casting strange shadows on the ground as flurries blew
He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and rested his forehead against the back of his right hand. Closing his eyes, he sighed heavily and tried to calm the blistering frustration threatening to make him do something stupid. He couldn’t believe that Mickey and Clint had lied to him, especially about something like this.

Some things were better left buried. Why couldn’t people leave well enough alone?

On an impulse, he stood and scooped up some snow, packed it into a hard ball, and hurled it at the nearest concrete wall as hard as he could. It exploded, sending white powder flying outward. The debris hadn’t settled by the time another snowball pounded into the wall.

He’d lost count of how many he’d thrown when a startled yelp made him freeze in the middle of his windup. Jinks poked his head around the corner, eyeing James suspiciously.

“Are you gonna try and kill me with a snowball or can I come out?”

“Free country.” James turned slightly and lobbed the ball at another building. Paff.

The snow squeaked underfoot as Jinks walked over toward him. “You wanna tell me what that was about?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t lie to me. I can tell.”

“Go take a powder.” James bent down to scoop up another handful of snow. Paff.

“God, what decade are you from?”


“Okay, can’t argue with that.” Jinks stuffed his hands in his pockets after folding up his collar around his neck. “But seriously, what was that about?”

Paff. “You ain’t gonna leave this, are you?”

“Nope.”

James dusted the snow off his hands. “Fine. Lebedev was the Soviet Union’s finest when it came to extracting information. He had a special gift to make you feel stupid amounts of pain without coming even close to killing you. The guy was also a sadist and actually, literally got off on watching his victims thrash around.”

“Sounds like a swell guy.”

“…don’t. Just don’t.” It always bothered James when people tried to use old slang around him. For some reason, it never sounded right. “They brought in Lebedev when they transferred me to Russia. He had these… things. Tools. Whatever. He loved them like a mother loves a child. Would wipe ‘em down, clean ‘em in front of you, and lay them out in a neat little row as he told you what each one of them was for.”

“He tortured you.” The words didn’t seem to bother Jinks, but James had a hard time reading him.
So far, all he’d figured out was that Jinks was gay.

“Yeah,” James confirmed, his voice threatening to crack. “But he never used the tools. They were pristine, all shiny silver steel. They never actually touched a human body. Everything he did, he did with his own two hands.”

“So… what’s so special about the Toolbox then?”

Plopping back down heavily on the wall he’d been sitting on previously, James peered up at Jinks. “If I’m understanding how all this artifact shit works, I’d hazard a guess that being exposed to that much terror and panic would do something to those things.”

“So that’s what Artie meant,” Jinks mumbled, then spoke up. “He said that simply seeing any of the tools would be enough to cause paralytic fear in someone until the person using them released their victim. Used properly, they can extract any information, no matter what.”

“Sounds about right. Lebedev never went after intel, not directly. He never asked you questions. He simply made you beg and beg and beg, telling him everything, all your deepest, darkest secrets in the vague hopes that that’s what he was looking for.” The night felt significantly colder than when he’d left the restaurant, and he rubbed his hands up and down his arms. “Trust me, you’re going to want to leave this one alone. Lebedev’s probably dead, hopefully dead, but whoever’s got them is either just as bad as he is, or worse.”

“I know.” Jinks squatted down in front of him. “That’s why we called in SHIELD. Artie may not have known it, but Mrs. F specifically requested you by name.”

That got his attention. “What?”

“Mickey’s been spending the whole damn day talking Artie down from sending the whole team – all of us and you – to retrieve the Toolbox. She was going to tell you about it tonight after we came to an agreement, privately, so she could help you process everything. This isn’t something we can handle on our own. We’re good at what we do, but… we retrieve artifacts. We’re not killers.”

Anger faded away in an instant and was replaced with guilt.

Jinks raised an eyebrow at him. “Artie’s agreed to let one person from each team handle this. We send one of ours, you send one of yours. Two people’s less likely to get noticed.”

“That’s not how infiltrating a base works, especially not the one they’re most likely to be in. There’s no such thing as not getting noticed. And you don’t know what you’re playing with here.”

Sighing, Jinks let his head loll forward. “There’s this guy you might’ve heard of. Name’s Hitler. He’s a bit of a jerk.”

“Understatement of the century there, kid,” James drawled, leaning back and crossing his arms.

“We’ve got his microphone sitting on a shelf in the Warehouse. It can make almost anyone do almost anything, and the person who uses it starts getting this overwhelming desire for power that consumes them alive.”

James snorted. “Sounds about right.”

“There’s this other guy, Maelzel.”

“What, the metronome guy?”
Nodding, Jinks shifted to sit next to James. “That’s him. This metronome of his, it can bring people back to life. This guy, Walter Sykes, he tried to destroy the Warehouse a while back and had a bodyguard named Marcus that just plain couldn’t die. We shot him, he fell something like fifty feet, you get the idea. Always walked right back in without a scratch.” Jinks cleared his throat before continuing.

“Mrs. F sent me in as an undercover agent. I used to do that sort of thing for the ATF. Well, I got made, they killed me. Claudia used the metronome to bring me back after she stopped it from ticking and killed Marcus. Downside? Every time I got hurt, she felt the pain. We ended up getting me off of it, but she nearly died a few times because of me.

“So, you wanna talk messed up shit that kills people? We’re the ones that risk our lives every single day to make sure that doesn’t happen. Kind of like SHIELD, just with weird knick-knacks that turn into fireworks when we bag ’em.”

Mulling this over, James watched the snowflakes slide off his metal hand. “Who’re they sending?”

There was a pause before Jinks replied. “Us.”

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James tried his best to hug Mickey, but twitched away when she reached up to give him a kiss.

“Jim…”

“I’m sorry, Mickey. Just… I gotta take some time to work this through, okay? We’re gonna talk about it when I get back.”

“…okay.” She stepped back, leaning with both hands on the cane that she held in front of her. “I was going to tell you.”

James let out an exasperated sigh. “Yeah, I get that. But why didn’t you just talk to me, tell me what was going on in the first place?” Pressing his hands against his face, he growled softly in frustration. “You know what? No. I can’t talk about this right now. We’re gonna sit down and work this out when I’m back. I can’t get distracted.”

She nodded, her eyes following him as he walked back to the Quinjet’s loading ramp with stiff, wooden-feeling legs. As his foot hit the ramp, she called after him.

“James.”

He paused, turning his head to halfway look back over his shoulder.

“Come home safe.”

His eyes were tired and sandy and he felt haggard, overused, and under-rested, but he tried his hardest to smile. “Always.”

Jinks – he couldn’t call him Steve, otherwise he’d have two snarky dick-loving blue-eyed blond Steves sassing him at every opportunity – was waiting for him in the copilot’s chair.

“Trouble in paradise?”

“Not in the mood, Hocus Pocus.” He dropped into his seat, slid the headset on, brought the jet to life, and signaled the local air traffic tower before cycling up the engines and lifting them smoothly
off of the helipad.

“Are you cleared to fly? At all?” Jinks asked him through the comms. “You know, with your seizures and all that?”

“That’s why we’ve got autopilot. Now shut up and let me get us over the ocean.” James reached forward and flicked a few more switches, the jet thrumming and singing under his hands as it whispered what it needed to him.

Once they were in open airspace, James engaged the autopilot and lurched out of the chair, his hands itching maddeningly until he popped open one of the arsenal hatches and began checking over the guns.

Footsteps from the cockpit told James that Jinks had followed him, and within seconds the smaller man sat down across from him, picked up a carbine, and methodically broke it down, inspecting every piece before reassembling it with smooth, practiced motions.

“ATF, right?” James asked.

“Yeah. My big sister always wanted to be a cop, so…” Shrugging, Jinks set the carbine back into its slot.

James’s hands froze in the middle of slotting a yellow chamber flag into a rifle, and he looked up at the other man. “I’m sorry.”

“Happened years ago. Stray bullet. Probably gang activity or something.” Jinks smoothly pulled the slide on a Glock 19 back, peering into the chamber. “So, I went to college, joined the ATF, and ended up as a Warehouse agent. What about you?”

Flicking over the takedown lever on his SIG, James quickly stripped it down. “Spent most of my childhood preventing Rogers from getting himself beat to a pulp in some back alley, got drafted, and then it was more of the same, except this time I had a rifle.”

“Sniper?”

“Designated marksman, back then. ‘Sniper’ wasn’t used until a bit later, and the training they gave us was kind of shit anyway. 400 yards for a body, 200 yards for a head, and even that was a stretch with the shitty old Springfield kits they issued us.” After unclipping his TEC-38 from his thigh, James handed it over when he saw the excitement on Jinks’s face.

“Wow, you don’t see these anymore.”

“Karpov, my main handler in Russia… he had pretty good taste. Kept my gear up to date. He was a bit of a gun nut so I got to play with some rare stuff. Every once in a while he’d violate protocol, pour some drinks, and ask me questions about the guns from the war. The electroconvulsive treatment made me forget a lot of stuff, but… the feel of a gun, that’s something that stays with you, stays in your hands.”

Jinks handed the TEC-38 back with an almost reverent care. “Yeah, I took a look at your file before we flew out. You’ve got a pretty impressive rifle in one of the pictures. What was that, a Barrett?”

“Yeah, the M82. That one was nice, felt really good in the hands. Rounds flew straight and true, just as long as you let her barrel cool down long enough between shots. A bit bulky, but perfect if I didn’t have to worry about being seen. If there’s anything I miss, though, it’s that Colt 1911 they issued me in the war. Surprisingly handy and dead reliable, that thing. Got me out of more scrapes
They chatted about various firearms well past the point when they’d finished checking over every gun in the Quinjet. A quiet ping from the cockpit interrupted James in mid-sentence a while later, and he stood, jogging over to the console.

“Approximately thirty minutes from destination,” the computer told him.

“Transfer to manual control.” He dropped into the pilot’s seat and clipped on the various straps of the harness, motioning for Jinks to do the same. “Air’s a bit choppy here.”

They dropped through the clouds, and James smirked a bit at the sharp intake of breath next to him. The view was stunning; huge cliffs, a midnight-blue ocean, the evening sun throwing gleaming streams of gold across the monochrome landscape. Beautiful, but deadly.

“Where are we?” Jinks breathed.

“Northern coast of Siberia, fifty-seven miles north-northeast of Norilsk. HYDRA and the KGB loved digging into mountains and cliffs to hide their bases.”

Static crackled over the radio, then resolved into fuzzy, rippling Russian tones. “<Unidentified aircraft, state your destination and directive.>”

“Let’s try this the easy way first,” James told Jinks before transmitting his reply. “<SHIELD Quinjet 7438Q, commandeered and bringing in for processing. Requesting permission to land on Landing Pad 3.>”

“<Identify yourself.>”

James shot a nervous glance at Jinks before responding. “<Nikolai Ivanovich Bruskin and copilot Stepan Zhidkov. Mercenaries currently lacking a high bidder.>”

They waited, hovering in front of the hidden base, for several nerve-wracking seconds, until the base responded. “<Landing access denied. You have five minutes to clear out of our airspace before we deploy countermeasures.>”

“What did they say?”

“We’re doing this the hard way.” James punched the button to engage stealth mode and launched a drone to fool their radar into thinking the jet had flown off. “We’ll give them a bit to calm down and then make our way inside.” He landed the jet gently on the top side of the cliff, tugging a thick thermal jacket on and handing another to Jinks as he left the cockpit.

“And how do you expect to do that?” Jinks demanded as he shrugged on a large backpack. “We don’t have a map or a plan of attack.”

“Don’t need one. I’ve been in this base before.” He fought hard to suppress the mixture of nervous excitement and sickening dread he felt about returning to the compound he’d spent so many years in. Grabbing the first rifle that his hand fell on, James pulled out the chamber flag and snapped in a magazine before dropping several spares into his pockets. “Your system says the Toolbox is here. I’ll get you to it, you neutralize it and bag it up or whatever it is that you do, and I’ll get you out.”

“You say that like I’m useless in a firefight.”

James narrowed his eyes at Jinks as the smaller man crossed his arms. “If I have my way, it won’t...
come to a firefight. I want to get in, get the Toolbox, and get out without triggering any alarms that might alert the other bases.”

“I can help.”

“You’ve got undercover training, you’re good with a gun, but you’re not black ops.” He pulled two grappling rigs out of their storage compartment and tossed one to Jinks. “Trust me on this.”

Jinks grumbled under his breath but took the rig and followed James as they jumped down to the frozen ground.

Thankfully, there wasn’t much wind as they crept along the edge of the cliff. James stopped, laid himself flat against the ground, and shimmied forward so that he could look down the drop. He swallowed his nausea – he’d never liked heights, not even as a kid – and scanned the cliff face for the hidden opening.

Moving twenty feet further down the cliff, he pulled out the grappling hook and raised it up, stabbing it into the ground as hard as he could. When he tested it, it held, so he reached out his hand for Jinks’s hook and anchored it next to his.

They unwound the cables and James quickly snapped them both into the harnesses, swatting away Jinks’s hands as the smaller man attempted to figure out how it went together. “I’m not going to tell Artie that I let you fall off a cliff because of a bad harness.”

“I’m ATF, not SWAT.”

“Exactly. Come on. Keep your legs to the cliff face, and if you spin, spread yourself out as far as you can. Feed the cable under you like this – yeah, that’s it.” Tapping the comm in his ear, James said, “Check 9.”

“9 secure.” Jink’s voice echoed through the comm.

James stuffed a thick earplug into his other ear and worked the elastic band for his clear-lensed tactical goggles over his hair. “Alright, get your eyes and ears on.”

Slowly, so carefully, they walked down the cliff until they were just above the mouth of the landing bay. James held up a hand, gripped the cable above him with the other, and then switched the carabiner from his chest to his back. He turned over slowly, leaning forward until he was clinging upside-down to the rocks, and crawled his way headfirst onto the rough landing bay roof.

It was painstaking, slow progress as he lowered himself onto the girders holding the lights, rotating sideways to swing his legs down and stretching as far as he could before dropping the extra foot. He absorbed the shock in his knees, barely making a sound as he crouched, perfectly balanced on the large steel lattice.

He reached back and disconnected the cable, snapping the carabiner around a thin support brace, and unhooked another cable from where it hung looped from his belt. Gently setting the micro-anchor against the steel between his feet, he waited for it to finish whirring as it burrowed in, blinking green when it could take his weight. Reaching around his back again, he clipped the carabiner on the other end of the cable onto his harness and pressed a button on the anchor to winch up the slack.

While it slowly wound the cable around itself, James paired the anchor with a remote on his wrist and took the remaining time to steady his breathing. Half-finger gloves covered his hands, armor plates crisscrossing over the backs. The body armor he wore under his thermal gear was significantly lighter and less bulky than what he’d been given by HYDRA, and he squirmed his
shoulders as he tested his range of motion one last time. Settling the rifle back in place across his shoulders, James tucked a thumb under the strap to reassure himself that it was secure.

He used his phone to activate a signal-jamming device on the Quinjet, blocking the feeds from their security cameras until he lifted the jammer.

Another green blink of the light on the anchor caught his attention, and he leaned out, gripping the girder with his hands until he hung from it. He slowly transferred his weight to the cable, then tilted forward, sweeping the landing bay with his eyes. Two soldiers patrolled it, and he waited a full cycle of their rounds before he lowered himself down behind one of the helicopters. He reached up and tapped his comm twice – I’m in.

Three taps thudded into his ears, acknowledging. Waiting until the soldiers came around again, he gave them a few seconds to pass him and then silently rose from his hiding place behind two fuel drums. His boots made no noise as he ghosted across the floor, reaching out to wrap one of the soldiers in his arms and snap his neck before the other soldier even realized what was happening.

The second soldier went limp from a firm uppercut, and James hastily grabbed the front of his uniform before lowering him down gently. He used his hand to cover the soldier’s mouth and pinched his nose shut until his pulse faltered and stopped, weak hands loosening and sliding to the floor.

A quick search of their pockets gave him two access badges, a key card, and a pack of gum. He tossed the gum aside before walking over to the edge of the bay and waving up at Jinks.

Jinks’s face was pasty white when his feet finally touched solid ground again, and James quickly reached out and pulled him away from the edge, moving his harness clip from his chest to one of the tie-downs on the ground.

“Hey.” James patted Jinks on the shoulder. “You still with me?”

Shaking himself like a dog, Jinks blinked a few times. “Y-yeah. Sorry. Don’t like heights.”

“Preachin’ to the choir. Come on.” James jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “This way.” He led them to one of the doors, taking a quick breath before he swiped the card and buzzed it open. The hallway beyond was empty, and they paced down it cautiously as they approached a 90-degree corner. Pulling a suppressor from his pocket, James carefully threaded it onto the barrel of his SIG and handed it to Jinks.

-dragged down a dirty gray hall, concrete walls covered with early winter rime, bare feet dragging on the slick floor, arms supporting him, nausea, aches-

“Don’t you need one?” Jinks hissed, dragging him back into the present.

James held up a hand, made sure Jinks actually stopped, and drew the stabbing dagger he had tucked behind the SIG’s holster. Twirling it in his hand, he flattened himself against the corner, closing his eyes as he waited for the quiet footsteps to get closer.

When he had that strange feeling, the one that told him the timing was right, he spun out into the hallway and hooked an arm around the guard’s throat, driving the dagger deep into the man’s chest with the force of his whole arm behind it. The guard shuddered and died, and James carefully laid him down to minimize the noise before slipping the dagger out and wiping it on the guard’s uniform.

- voices shouting, blood on his hands, a dead guard, guns trained on his head, laughing, they can’t kill me even if they tried-
The trail of bodies steadily grew as James made each kill as silently and quickly as he could. Once, he miscounted and ended up with three guards instead of two, and Jinks quickly dispatched the unexpected guard, the suppressor changing the gun’s report to a loud, hollow thwack.

“I had ’em on the ropes,” James grumbled.

“Sure you did. Let’s keep moving.”

Finally, they stood outside of a rolling steel door that James knew all too well. He chewed his cheek as he fought the sickening twist in his stomach, turning to look at Jinks. Ready? he signed, and Jinks nodded, gun raised and steady.

- hearing his own voice shudder, begging, pleading, don’t take me in there, I can’t, please, I’ll do anything, don’t put me in there, shoved and carried toward it -

Leaning back, James wound up and kicked the door in, sending the massive steel panel flying into the large room beyond it. Yelps of surprise and a few screams greeted him as he drew the COP 357 and grabbed Jink’s Glock from his hip, firing as soon as he spotted his targets. He forced himself not to look at the dull yellow tanks when he saw the half-visible silhouettes of bodies ghosting their way into reality from the depths of his mind.

- screaming, screaming, white hot pain, can’t see, a voice echoing in my head, words, he’s using the words -

Eight shots later, a single man cowered in the middle of the room, crouching next to a mass of cables and machinery surrounding the chair with the electrode plates.

James snarled at him, holstered the 357, and yanked the man up by his white lab coat collar. “<Who are you working for?>”

The scientist sputtered and stammered until James pressed the Glock under his jaw. “<Who are you working for?>” he repeated, the words rumbling in his chest. Pulling his lips back in a snarl, James narrowed his eyes and growled at the pathetic man in his hands.

Eventually, the whitecoat managed to stutter out, “Lukin.”

He let the scientist fall, and shot him through the head.

- escape, he fought back, dead technicians, the man with the book is scared, running, lost, don’t know where I am, his feet knew, round the corner, spray of bullets tearing up his stomach -

Jinks was still standing at the door, gun raised and ashen-faced. “Was that really necessary?”

“That chair?” He pointed to the mess of machinery in the center of the room, shaking the dregs of flashbacks from his head. “I have fond memories of it. Except that they aren’t that fond.”

“…ah. Well, let’s grab the artifact before the whole base-”


“You had to say it.” James switched the Glock to his right hand and moved through the room, scanning the tables and shelves – there. A small, unassuming wooden box just about the right size for a pair of ladies’ ballet shoes. The only marking on it was a black branded hammer and sickle.

“Do your thing. I’ll cover you.”
alarms blaring, flashing lights, wrapped in so many chains, strapped down in the containment cell, rolling, onto a truck, onto a plane, not-Steve smiling at him, the smile is wrong -

Jinks handed him the SIG and pulled a pair of purple gloves out of a pocket. Swinging his backpack down, he unzipped the main compartment, pulled out a large silver canister, and carefully picked up the small wooden case. “Eyes.” He dropped the case into the canister, jerking his head away as it sparked and sizzled loudly. As soon as the canister lid sealed with a hiss, Jinks stuffed it back into his backpack and swung it back onto his shoulders, taking the SIG and Glock back from James.

James switched to his rifle, settling it into his shoulder, pacing forward and clearing the hallway before he motioned Jinks out. They backtracked, moving as quickly as they dared, the klaxons roaring in their ears.

two men, soldiers, fit, one taller, the short one has black hair, the tall one should smile more, professionals, the look at him like they know him, like he was a person once -

Before they reached the first turn of the hallway, James spun to face the dull thud of boots behind them. “Go! Go!”

He lobbed a grenade back the way they came and shrank back against the wall, scanning the smoke for anything moving. His finger pulsed on the trigger as soldiers staggered to their feet only to fall again, the rifle bucking slightly in his hands. As soon as he could, he turned and sprinted after Jinks.

They ran into three more teams before they made it to the landing bay, and James slapped a new magazine into his rifle while they darted across the open ground. He spun, dropped to a knee behind some crates, and opened fire when a group of soldiers burst out of one of the doors.

Ducking back and popping up like a gopher, James whittled them down until all that was left was a heap of bodies. A strangled groan made him whip around and he saw Jinks on one knee, leaning heavily against a fuel drum, hands pressed to the growing red splotch on his thigh.

James ran, dove, and slid over to the other man, ducked under his arm, and half-carried him over to where the cable still sat clipped to the floor.

He used a spare carabiner to attach their harnesses together, draped Jink’s arms over his shoulders and told him to shoot anything that moved as he pulled them up the cable hand over hand. Spinning around as best he could, he planted his boots on the cliff face and lurched upward, the freezing cable biting into his fingers as he raced up the cliff.

They rolled over the edge of the cliff and James immediately hoisted the smaller man up onto his shoulders, breaking into a run toward the cloaked Quinjet. He counted paces under his breath, and finally his feet hit the hidden ramp.

Jinks bit back a grunt of pain as James dropped him to the floor before running to the cockpit and firing up the engines. The acceleration forced him back into the seat as he pressed the throttle open, wanting to put as much distance between them and the base as he could. He ripped the goggles off his head and tossed them to the side with his earplug.

Two jittery minutes later, he punched on the autopilot and raced back into the cargo hold.

Jinks had dragged himself to the medical kit, cut open his pants, and was pressing a thick wad of gauze to the bullet wound with shaking hands.

“Here.” Kneeling down, James took the bandage, split it in two, pressed the other half against the exit wound, and secured them in place with more gauze. “You’re lucky it’s a through-and-through.”
“Yeah. Hah. Lucky.” Jinks tilted his head back and hissed a breath out between gritted teeth. “We’ll go with that.”

“I can land us at a base in England—”

“No. I’m fine.”

“Jinks. You took a bullet through your thigh.” James stuck the cap of a syringe between his teeth and pulled. “Missed the artery by an inch. Hold still, this is gonna hurt.”

“OW! Motherfucker! What was that for?”

“Local anesthetic. On your side. Leg up.”

He took Jinks’s pack and shoved it under the man’s knee, supporting his leg. Rummaging through the medical kit, he pulled out a bag of blood substitute, straightened the rubber tubing, uncapped the needle, and squeezed Jinks’s arm to find the vein in his elbow before slotting the small needle into it. He shoved the dark red bag under his shirt and pressed it to his chest, trying his best to warm it up.

Jinks’s eyelids fluttered, his lips pale. “Hey. Stay with me, man.”

“’m just gonna go take a nap.”

“C’mon, you gotta stay awake. Tell me about your sister.”

His bloodless lips stretched into a tired smile. “Olivia. She was awesome. Spent so much time getting me out of trouble.”

James barely paid attention to the quiet murmurs, only prompting Jinks when he stopped talking for more than a few seconds. He pressed his hand to the blond’s neck, monitoring the speed and strength of his pulse as he tried to keep him awake.

The AI alerted him to their arrival in London, informing him that an ambulance was already waiting on the tarmac. Jinks must have noticed the gentle thump as the jet touched down, rolling down the runway on full automatic. He dug a white, unsteady hand into his pocket and handed James a strange device.

“...button... bottom right.”

The paramedics rushed up the ramp to Jinks, lifting him onto a stretcher and rolling him down to the ambulance as James swung the pack over his shoulder and wiped his hands on his pants. He followed the gurney and stepped into the ambulance, sinking into a tiny seat as one of the paramedics handed him some sort of wet wipe.

Clipped, rapid words danced around him as he slowly worked the wipe over his left hand, using his thumbnail to press the thin cloth into the grooves between the plates. He glanced up to see two of the paramedics staring at his hand.

“I’m not the one that shot him, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“N- not at all, sir.”

“Good.”

None of them spoke to him after that, and he waited until he was sitting in the recovery room next to Jinks to pull out the little boxy device. Hesitantly, he opened it, pressed the little gray button, and
waited awkwardly for a few seconds before Artie’s face appeared on the small screen.

“What? Where’s Steve?”

“GSW to the thigh. Mission went south. I got him out of there, he’s in one piece, we’re in the Royal London Hospital.”

“Did you get the Toolbox?”

“Yeah. It’s in the can, I’ve got it on me.”

“Good. Did you see anything else?”

James chewed his lip, unsure of how much to say, before making a decision that he wasn’t sure was the right one. “It’s one of the facilities they took me to. The, um, conditioning room was operational. I think they’re trying to make more people like me.”

“Oh, God.”

“Not so sure He exists anymore.”

Artie gave him an exasperated look, and rubbed his face with his hands. “How’s Steve?”

“Through-and-through, tore through a muscle but that’s it. They patched him up, he’ll be fine. Do you want me to stay with him?”

“I’ll send Pete out. Bring the artifact back and then you should probably talk to SHIELD about this.” The image whited out, then shrank to a pinpoint in the center of the screen before fading.

Folding the device shut, James tucked it into Jinks’s backpack and tried to get comfortable in his chair while he waited for the Warehouse agent to wake up.

***

Exhausted and still wearing the clothes smeared with Jinks’s blood, James lurched out of the pilot’s seat when the AI finished touching down at Avengers Tower. He’d only stopped for a brief minute to hand over the Toolbox, leaving as soon as Artie promised him that it would never hurt anyone else.

Between the nightmares, anxiety, and mission, he hadn’t slept in – what – two days?

His hair was greasy, loose ponytail tangled, dirt and debris sticking to his scalp, and he still had blood under his fingernails. Red lines in his face still marked where the goggles had pressed into his cheeks and nose. Sluggishly, he clomped down the ramp with his bag slung over his shoulder, and shivered against the bitterly cold air as he sped up to get inside.

Hill was waiting for him just inside the door to the helipad, but she took one look at him and said, “You know what? Debriefing can wait until tomorrow. Go get cleaned up and get some rest.”

“Yes, ma’am.” James tried not to touch anything as he stepped into the elevator; he knew he looked exactly as disgusting as he felt.

JARVIS let him off on his floor and even opened the door to the apartment. Mickey glanced up from the couch and her eyes widened at the sight of him.

“James? What the hell happened?”
“Jinks got hit. He’s fine now, but we had to get out of the base in a hurry when the alarms went off.” The heavy tactical bag thumped to the floor next to his gear locker; he’d deal with it in the morning. He walked through their room into the bathroom, Mickey right behind him – tile would be easiest to clean if his clothes gunked up the floor. With a groan, he raised his arms and shrugged off his heavy jacket, then the ballistic vest. “Got the Toolbox.”

“…good. Um. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just feel really gross.” His boots came off next, and he turned his jacket inside out with the grimy side facing up before setting his boots on it.

“Is that blood?”

He smiled at her, hoping it looked reassuring. “Not mine.” Wincing slightly as he grabbed the hem of his shirt and dragged over his head, he looked in the mirror to see a huge, purpling bruise splayed across his ribs. His right shoulder also wasn’t working quite right, and he couldn’t raise his arm up past shoulder-height. Right – he’d ended up grappling with one guard, taking a steel-toed boot to the side and getting his shoulder torqued around in just the wrong way. Funny how those things got lost in the moment.

Gentle fingers prodded the bruise, pausing as he hissed. “You’ve got a broken rib, maybe two,” Mickey told him.

“I’ll be fine in a few days, though it’d be nice if you could wrap it up after I get out of the shower.”

She sighed and leaned against the counter next to him as he unbuckled his tac belt, dropping it on the jacket next to his boots.

“Okay, tell me what happened.”

James’s hands paused halfway through undoing the button on his pants. He met Mickey’s eyes, then looked back down. “The Warehouse tracker sent us to a compound in Siberia, and a specific room inside of that. I recognized the door. They had one of the chairs in there, the one they used on me when the KGB had me. Lukin’s trying to either kill me or get me back, and he’s probably trying to make... make more of me. The alarms went off while we were in there. The Toolbox was there, we got it, Jinks got hit in the hangar, I got us onto the jet and dropped him at a hospital in London.”

“Jim, are you okay?”

“...no. No, not really.” His hands were already shaking, so he reached forward and splayed them flat on either side of the sink in front of him. “I haven’t slept since the nap I took at the B&B, I nearly got an agent killed, I’m barely holding off a panic attack, and I’ve got blood and shit and everything nasty where the sun don’t shine. I killed people again today. Honestly, what I want right now is a really long shower and a real bed followed by a good long talk with Doc tomorrow.”

“...are you still mad at me?”

Her question caught him by surprise and he turned to face her. “No? No. I wasn’t mad earlier. Well, maybe a little, but Jinks and I talked about it a bit in the hospital. Just... I know why you lied to me, it just hurts that you felt like you had to lie in the first place.”

“Orders,” she admitted quietly. “Hill gave me orders.”

Reaching forward, he cupped her jaw in his hand. “Hey. Hill’s orders don’t come past that door,
okay? We made a promise to each other. No secrets. I have to be able to trust you completely, and I gotta make it so you can do the same. You trust me not to hurt you, I trust you not to keep things from me.”

Nodding, Mickey stepped forward to hug him. “No secrets. I’m sorry.”

“Geez, kid, wait until I get through the shower. I’m two bars of soap away from being clean enough to call myself human again.” Despite his protests, he wrapped his arms around her small, strong shoulders, and closed his eyes as he tucked his nose above her ear. “Missed you.”

“Missed you too.” Mickey pushed him away and pointed to his pants. “Gonna shower in those?”

“Right.”

He finished piling his clothes on the floor and stepped into the shower, cranking the water as hot as it would go. Sighing, he leaned against the wall under the showerhead as the scalding liquid poured across his back and rolled his head from side to side to stretch out his neck.

The shower door clicked open a second time, and James jumped as hands slid around his waist from behind.

“Hi,” he squeaked, and Mickey chuckled into his shoulder. She poked her head under his arm and gave him a sly smile.

“Figured you might need some help.”

“I… um. Uh.” He turned around, and blushed profusely as he noticed that she was quite naked. As close as their relationship was, he’d never seen her completely exposed like this, and she gave him a shy, nervous smile, trying not to hide behind her arms.

“You are such a dork.”

Pot, kettle, he wanted to say. It took considerable effort on his part to keep his eyes from wandering, but his body reacted nonetheless. “I… thought you – that we-”

“Dork.” Mickey reached behind him and pumped shampoo into her hand before reaching up and starting to scrub her nails through his hair. “I may not have much of a sex drive, but that doesn’t mean I’m blind. Besides, there’s ways to be intimate with someone without boning them.”

“Tell that to junior, here,” he grumbled, melting against the shower wall as his scalp tingled pleasantly.

“It’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Says you. When was the last time you had to deal with blueballs?”

Laughing, Mickey flicked him on the nose. “James Buchanan Barnes, infamous ladies’ man, bitching about getting a boner with his girlfriend in the shower.”

James blinked at her, his eyelashes sticking together slightly. “Um.”

Her face fell. “…sorry. Was that not okay?”

“I, um, no, that was perfectly okay.” He reached out and pulled her in by her shoulders, pressing his lips to hers.
“You taste like soap,” she complained, pushing his head to the side so that the shower could rinse the shampoo out of his hair.

“You’re the one that put it there.”

“Didn’t see you bitching. Swear to God, you’re like a cat sometimes.”

He grinned and purred low in his chest, wrapping his arms tightly around her as he leaned down and nibbled on her ear. She yelped, slapping his arm, and he laughed as he pressed his cheek against her head.

“God, I missed you,” James murmured quietly.

“Yeah, I can tell.” When he sighed, rolling his eyes, she wrapped her arms around his neck and squeezed gently. “It’s okay. I don’t mind.”

“You don’t mind, as in you don’t mind, or you don’t mind, as in…”

Mickey cut him off by bouncing up on her toes and kissing him. “We’ll talk after you don’t reek anymore.”

“Thanks,” he said flatly, reaching for the soap.

“Turn around, I’ll get your back.” She took the bar of soap from him and lathered up her hands, quickly spreading the suds over his shoulders and back before kneading her knuckles into the muscles.

James groaned as she pressed her hands into his right shoulder, letting her lift his arm up and work it around to manipulate the joint as she loosened it up.

“So. Girlfriend.” He bit his lip to hide a smile.

“Um… yeah. Nat sat me down and gave me an absolutely terrifying shovel talk. I figured if she’s threatening me, it’s probably time to admit it’s official.”

James blinked a few times, then burst out laughing, leaning against the wall for support as he clutched his stomach. “Oh, my God…” One look at Mickey’s face sent him spinning back into peals of laughter as she glowered at him, raising the bar of soap like a weapon.

Her lips twitched up as he snorted involuntarily, and eventually she broke into giggles herself. “Yeah, okay. It’s a little silly.”

“You are adorable.” He pushed himself upright and turned back around, Mickey’s hands resuming their work on his aching back. “But sure, okay. If Tashka says it’s official, then it’s official.”

“To answer your question, by the way, I was sixteen. Hadn’t tumbled that I was trans yet, still thought I had to be a hetero boy, there was a really cute girl who didn’t care about any of the stuff I was going through, figured what the hell, why not. I just… couldn’t keep it up. Felt really, really wrong. It messed me up pretty bad for a while until Jack sat me down and managed to convince me I wasn’t broken, that gender and sexuality and stuff like that aren’t the same thing. That it was okay to feel like a girl but not want to have sex with either girls or guys.”

“So…”

“Yeah, I’ve gotten laid, both before and after I had surgery. It wasn’t bad, and a few times I actually
enjoyed it, I just never really had the urge to do it again after each time.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Mickey’s hands turned him back around so he was facing her, and she handed him the soap. “You get to do the rest, I don’t know where you’re okay with being touched on your chest and below the waist yet.”

“Thanks.” Mickey’s immediate acceptance of no-zones had been a relief beyond words, and she’d always asked before touching him in any way at first. That was the main reason that the skin shocks had started to fade on his good days, to the point where they were gone completely after a few months.

James caught himself staring a few times as Mickey crossed her arms and leaned back into the corner of the shower; his face flushed again and he busied himself with using the small metal nail file to dig the grime out from under his nails.

“It’s okay if you look at me, Jim. Wouldn’t be in here with you if it wasn’t.”

“Well… I just remember reading that a lot of people like you don’t like being… ogled.” He’d spent a lot of time on Google trying to learn more about what being transgender and/or asexual was like. One thing that had puzzled him to no end was that most of the forums and websites had really driven home the point that it wasn’t the same for any two people, until Sam had pointed out that neither was being cisgender and straight.

“A lot of us, yeah. But for the ones like me, being kind of… grayish on the whole thing, it’s mostly when it’s people I don’t know or trust. Partners, that’s another story. It’s…” She paused, her arms unconsciously crossing over her chest as her shoulders turned inward. “For me, it isn’t so much about, you know, the bodies or the sex or shit like that, it’s more about the closeness, intimacy, you know. I mean, I like how you look, I’m even a tiny bit attracted to you and it’s kinda freaking me out because that basically never happens, but… for me to want to be naked, it’s, it’s a trust thing.” She took a deep breath and glanced up, giving him a wan smile.

“It took me a while to accept that I’m trans, and before surgery I’d do things like stuff a sports bra and tuck up real tight. Getting all the work done was the best thing I ever did for my body image, and I wouldn’t trade any of it for the world, even having to dilate and stab myself with hormone shots and still see a urologist and get my face lasered and deal with the stigma… but, it’s like…” Sniffling, she shoved her fingers in her hair, the tufts sticking out between them in wet spikes. “Even though I live in my body so much better the way it is now, it’s still really scary for me to, you know, be naked with someone, ‘s why it hasn’t happened til now, and the fact that you haven’t pushed is… it’s amazing. So… this is me trusting you with… with everything I have.”

Stunned, James tentatively reached out his right hand, glancing up to meet her eyes, and didn’t move further until she nodded. Mickey’s skin was soft and smooth under his fingers, and he stroked his hand down her side, letting it rest on her left hip. Pressing his fingertips gently over the puckered scar on the soft muscle just inside the bony crest of her pelvis, James tried to pretend it wasn’t there to remind him of how scared he’d been. The faint pockmarks from the IED wound around her right side, spreading up her ribs and covering part of her shoulder, neck, and chest before it reached her face.

His eyes drifted back up, then down lower. If he hadn’t known she was transgender, he would’ve been hard-pressed to pick up on it. “I can barely see the surgical scars.”

“I’m one of the lucky ones.” Mickey looked at her feet, her cheeks turning pink. “Not everyone
gets the quality of doctors I had, or the equipment and aftercare.”

A thought began to blossom in James’s head, and he smiled slowly. “And now I know what I’m going to do with the assloads of money I’m sitting on.”

Mickey’s eyes glistened as she looked up at him. “Seriously?”

“Yes. I mean it. There’s gotta be a lot of folks just like you out there, they just can’t afford or access what they need. That’s got to change; they all deserve to be as beautiful and amazing as you are.” He caught her eye, stroking a finger over her cheek.

Now that he saw her, all of her, it was easy to identify the barely-there signs, her hips and waist a little narrower and squarer than most women, the faint trail of hair from her belly button downward, the way her small breasts were just a little wider apart than usual, the muscle definition in her shoulders and back that most women could only dream of. Her feet were definitely on the larger side but still within what would be considered normal for a woman of her height.

Pulling her towards him, James tucked her head under his chin and ran his hands down her back, resting them just above her tailbone. Her breath hitched slightly, and he leaned back, catching her chin with a finger.

“Hey.”

Mickey gave him a watery smile. “Sorry. It’s just, I keep thinking I’m gonna wake up and this is all gonna be a dream.”

“No, no, don’t say that.” The warm water from the shower ran down his arms in tiny rivulets as he wrapped them protectively around Mickey. “Why on earth would you think that?”

“Because somehow I ended up in a relationship with Bucky fuckin’ Barnes and now you’re saying I’m… Jesus, James, I just…” Her voice was muffled and thick.

“Hey, hey. Come on. It’s okay. Here.” He spun them around so that Mickey was under the steady stream of water. “Don’t want you getting cold.” Reaching up, he stroked his hands through her hair, rinsing out the styling gel that she was so fond of.

Mickey pressed her forehead into his neck, her arms tight around his chest. “I really am sorry for lying to you about the Warehouse stuff.”

“I know, babydoll. I forgive you. Just please don’t do it again.”

“I won’t. No more secrets.”

Steady, soothing warmth spread up from the base of James’s spine as he leaned down and pressed his lips to hers, pulling her tightly against him.

***

James grunted a greeting at Tony and Bruce as he carried a mug of coffee into the common area, snagging the newspaper off of the wet bar and plopping down heavily on the couch. Mickey had an early report time downstairs so he’d taken the opportunity to sleep in a bit before he flew back to DC later that afternoon.

“Oh, Winter’s coming.” Tony called, waving at him. *Game of Thrones* was the show of the month in the Tower, and that joke apparently never got old.
Propping his ankle up on his knee, James leaned back into the couch and took a long sip of his coffee. He made eye contact with Tony, and blithely replied, “Winter already came this morning, pal.”

Tony’s stunned face was priceless and it was all James could do to keep a straight face as he pretended to read the paper. After several long seconds, Tony sighed, rolled his eyes, dug into his wallet, and passed Bruce a twenty dollar bill. The small scientist winked at James and lifted his own drink in salute.

Chapter End Notes

This isn’t the last of Warehouse 13 that we’ll see, but it’ll be a while before they come back.

Also, I couldn’t resist that joke at the end. Source:
Winter is coming!

Winter came this morning, buddy.
To provide a little more background for Mickey: when she went through the coming out and transitioning phase, part of it involved working through internalized transphobia and queerphobia. She’s technically biromantic gray/asexual, but leans toward male partners. The “I’m slightly attracted to you and that’s freaking me out” bit is from my own personal experience. It’s every bit as surprising (and scary at times) as it sounds.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Flashbaaaaaaaaacks. We have several flashbacks in this chapter. One of them involves Steve Being A Mature Grownup for a few minutes (gasp).

Trigger warnings:
- Non-graphic, mostly off-screen, unsuccessful sexual assault attempt
- James threatens the perpetrator of above attempt pretty explicitly
- Referenced abusive relationship
- Referenced gaslighting
- Light discussion about James’s sexual trauma
- Encounter with cop (routine traffic stop)
- Vicodin use (responsible and as prescribed)
- Steve gets druuuuuuunk
- Teasing use of gay slurs
- Period-accurate racial slurs (flashback to WW2)
- Discussion of past suicidal ideation
- James sort-of talks about his past during a VA group session
- Flashback-Mickey references dealing with a depressive episode

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Barnes stood awkwardly in the corner of the common room – the emptiness was oppressive. Steve was away on a mission and Barnes had just been cleared to leave their apartment, so he’d taken the opportunity to explore the Tower as much as the computer in the walls would let him.

He pulled one of the armchairs towards the window, setting it up so he could look out across Manhattan. This kept him occupied for several minutes as he studied the strange yet familiar skyline, three versions playing in front of his eyes. The New York of his youth was gone, yielding to the bustling, lively festival city he’d visited several times on assignment. And this new city, all gleaming metal and glass, drew up memories of the futuristic architecture that Howard Stark had loved to show off.

Tony Stark didn’t have all of the quirks and oddities his father did, but he was definitely a strange man. He never looked at Barnes directly and actively avoided being near him, often ignoring him completely in conversations. Barnes still had yet to figure out – or remember – why.

His attention started to drift again, and he stood to rummage through the magazines and newspapers littering the coffee table. Pushing a red plastic cup out of the way, he scanned the titles until he found one that interested him. The magazine was heavy, thick, and glossy, with a picture of a beautiful American car – Mustang, mid-60s, he guessed.

He tugged on the magazine and frowned, tugging again with more force but not enough to tear the fragile paper. For some reason, the magazine refused to slide out from under the strange, blocky thing sitting on top of it.

It looked to be some sort of hammer or mallet, the large head shining with a strange, ethereal light. The handle was smooth under his hands, aged and worn leather, as Barnes reached out and traced
his fingers over the perfectly even wrapping. A matching leather loop dangled from the end of the handle. Runes wound their way over the chamfered edges of the hammer, and Barnes had difficulty reading them as they seemed to slip out of focus as soon as his eyes pinned them down.

Shrugging, he nudged the hammer to the side, tilting it up off the table slightly, and pulled out his magazine before trudging back to the armchair where he could read and stare at the brilliant pictures with the late afternoon sunlight.

His back was turned toward the hall that held the main elevator so he didn’t see Thor frozen in mid-step, eyes wide and jaw agape, blinking slowly.

***

Rolling his shoulders back, James twisted his head from side to side and groaned softly when the vertebrae in his neck released with several satisfying pops. He set his helmet on top of the wardrobe and draped the heavy motorcycle jacket on the back of the chair at his desk before tugging off his sweaty t-shirt. Mickey was just finishing up in a meeting with SHIELD medical personnel so he most likely had time to take a shower before they headed to the mess hall for dinner.

As he was rummaging through his duffel for another shirt, voices drifted faintly down the hall and through his door. The serum had enhanced his hearing enough that he’d had to learn to actively tune out the majority of conversations around him in the mess hall and other public spaces. This one, however, grabbed his attention completely when he heard a yelp of pain.

Carlton’s voice was loud, tight, and upset, and while James couldn’t hear exactly what she was saying, the word, “No,” was plain enough. An unfamiliar male voice cut in over her, interrupting, and that was all it took for James to throw open the door to his quarters. His unit for this week was one of the first in the instructors’ hall, the first four being a set of larger units designed for couples and families. As a result, his quarters were the one closest to the junction with the trainee dorm. As he jogged into the dorm, his ears led him to the third door on the right.

It stood ajar, and James’s jaw tightened when he pushed it open to see Carlton grappling with a young man, her left hand curled inwards on itself and the wrist below it already bruising and swelling. Her shirt was ripped, pulled off one arm and sitting crooked around her neck, and her belt hung loose in front, unfastened. In the blink of an eye, James stepped in, wrapped his hand firmly in the man’s collar, and sent him flying from the room.

The man gasped as he crashed into the opposite wall, leaving a slight dent in the drywall. James reached down and heaved him up with an unyielding metal hand, pinning him against the wall, and leaned in close, his dog tags bouncing off of the smaller man’s chest. “If you so much as look at any of my students again, I. Will. Kill. You.”

Wide eyes stared back at him, and the man grimaced as he gasped desperately for air.

“James! Stand down!” Mickey’s voice ripped through the hall as she ran in, gun in hand.

James tugged the man forward, balled his fist in the collar of his uniform, and started dragging him towards Hill’s office. “Carlton’s been hurt. She needs medical attention - from someone who won’t look like a predator.”

Mickey’s face drained of blood at the implication in his words, and she immediately holstered her gun and rushed into Carlton’s room.

The SHIELD agents milling about the building practically dove out of his way as he stalked down
the halls, winding his way up two levels and to the other end of the building before he finally burst into Hill’s office and tossed the man on her desk.

Hill raised her eyebrows, blinked a few times, and looked up at James. “Good evening.”

“Little fucker had his fly open and one of my students pinned on her bed with a broken wrist.”

“I see.”

The younger agent moaned, tried to sit up, and ended up sliding off Hill’s desk to crumple into a heap on the floor.

“I’m going to trust you to take this to his SO and get this asswipe buried as deep as it goes. Because, and let me make this abundantly clear: this one’s alive. The next one won’t be.”

“Is that a threat, Barnes?”

“No, ma’am.” James leaned over onto her desk, fists balled against the surface. “That’s a promise.”

“You do realize that the young man you’ve brought me is well-respected as a model agent?”

Sneering, James straightened and turned to leave. “So was Rumlow.”

Ignoring the stares and whispers, James made his way back to Carlton’s quarters, stopping by his own on the way to grab the shirt he’d left on his desk. Carlton’s door was closed and locked, so he knocked softly.

“We’re down here,” Mickey called, sticking her head out of another unit several doors further down the hallway.

Carlton sat on Gonzalez’s bed, wrapped in several blankets, her wrist splinted and arm in a sling. Her eyes were puffy and a small heap of tissues sat next to her on the bed, balled up and wrinkled. Sitting protectively next to her, Gonzalez snapped her head up with a glare when she heard James approach, her eyes softening when she saw him.

“Jessica,” James started, keeping his voice soft as he leaned against the door frame. When Carlton looked up at him, he gave her a reassuring smile. “I’m more than happy to give you a few days off if you need it.”

She shook her head, drawing in a shaky breath. “I… no, no. I think I need to keep going.”

“If you’re sure.”

Giving him a hesitant nod, Carlton turned to look at Gonzalez. “I’m going to bunk with Maria for a few days though, if that’s okay.”

“Of course. Anything you need, let me or Mickey know. Please. We’re here to help.”

“Thank you, sir.”

James chuckled. “Anything but that. We’ve been over this.”

That got a hesitant smile out of her, and Carlton replied with a quiet, “Thank you, James.”

“There we go. Are you two okay here? We’re just down the hall in the instructors’ quarters if you need us, or you can page me. Any time of day or night, okay?”
“We’re good,” Gonzalez said with a nod. “Martin’s going to crash on the floor in here too, once she gets back from dinner. We’ll keep her safe.”

“Good night, then. I’ll see you all at the gym tomorrow.”

Once James and Mickey were back in their unit, he dropped onto the bed and sighed heavily. “For fuck’s sake, I hope I never have to deal with that again. I really can’t promise I won’t kill the next unlucky asshole who tries to fuck with my students.”

“She’s got a good team to look after her. I think she’ll be okay.”

James laughed mirthlessly. “Oh, she’ll never be okay. She’ll learn to live with it though, and she’ll heal eventually. But you’re right about the team, they’re good for each other. They’re already working together really well.”

“Yeah, you said as much about when they’re paired up for sparring,” Mickey commented as she unpacked her bag and shoved her clothes in the small dresser next to the bed.

“You still good to come to training tomorrow?”

“Of course.” Flopping down on the bed next to him, Mickey stretched her arms above her head, groaning. “I’m actually looking forward to it. And you really should get through the shower, you still stink like motorcycle.”

“Wow, feelin’ the love,” James drawled as he sat up and walked to the bathroom, stripping on the way. “Thought you liked it.”

“Not when it’s five hours overripe. Shower. Now.”

Grinning despite himself, James stepped into the shower and almost melted as the steaming, hot water poured down over him.

***

“Alright,” James called, clapping his hands together and projecting his voice through the gym as his trainees lined up at the edge of the large sparring mat. Carlton, Gonzalez, and Martin looked tired and worn out, but Carlton had a refreshingly fierce, determined look to her that widened James’s grin. Her wrist was wrapped in a firm, rigid brace, but he could work with that.

“You all met Agent Draymond last week at the range. She’s retired Navy, served as a doctor with a unit of Marines, she’s a double red-tabber in MCMAP, she’s also got kickboxing, Muay Thai, and krav maga under her belt, and she can kick your asses seventeen ways to Sunday without breakin’ a sweat, unarmed, with a bad hip. Listen to her, do everything she tells you to, and for fuck’s sake, don’t give her any sass because I won’t step in if she decides to knock you down a peg.

“Remember, no serious injuries. I don’t want to see any broken bones, concussions, dislocations, internal bleeding, or groin shots. Seriously,” he admonished when the trainees giggled. “Leave ’em alone. You have no idea how much paperwork I have to do if one of the boys has to go to medical for busted balls. Evans, Martin, with me. Peters, Hendricks, Franklin. Jackson, Gonzalez, bags. Work on your form, make sure you lead with the inside. Carlton, you’re with Agent Draymond. Grab your training weapons and let’s get started.”

After a lengthy, serious conversation with Mickey the night before, they’d agreed that the first rotation would be double length and Mickey would spend as much time as possible working with Carlton one-on-one. The events of the night before were also the main motivation to have Mickey
handle the individual sessions - he didn’t want Carlton to feel uncomfortable or unsafe at any point, and Mickey was much better qualified to handle anything that might come up.

Roughly two-thirds of the way through the first rotation, Mickey called James over and he told Evans and Martin to practice takedowns with each other as he walked away.

“You okay being thrown around for a bit?” Mickey asked him. “I want to show Carlton what it’s like using these throws against someone twice her size. I want you to try to pin her down, get her in a headlock, whatever.”

James shot Carlton a concerned look and glanced down at her wrist. “Are you sure this is okay? Absolutely sure.”

“Yeah. I asked Agent Draymond if we could do this.”

Scratching his neck, James exhaled and shrugged. “Okay. Show me what you got. Tell me right away if you need to stop.”

He lunged forward and immediately found himself spun around, landing heavily on the mat several feet away. The next half-hour progressed like this, until James managed to get Carlton in a hold that she couldn’t break free of. He let go immediately, helped her to her feet, and waited for her to tell him she was good to go.

“Let’s work on that one,” Mickey said, cracking her neck. “Barnes, like most men, is bigger and stronger than you, so your best bet is to not let that happen again. Watch carefully.”

James and Mickey went through the same set of motions, slowly and deliberately, as Mickey demonstrated how to avoid getting trapped again. Pausing at a crucial moment, James turned back to Carlton. “Watch how you position your feet. Draymond’s got a different stance here, so I’m not able to knock her off balance as easily. Let’s try it again, Carlton, slowly, and then we’ll get back to full speed.”

Several minutes later, Franklin called a short break before the next rotation, and Carlton sat down, stretching as Mickey handed them each a bottle of water. She’d adapted well to having her wrist immobilized, but there were several techniques James wanted to review with her as soon as the splint came off.

“God, I wish I’d known how to fight like this in college.” Carlton’s voice was muffled as she bent over to touch her toes, head between her knees.

Mickey and James traded a glance before James sat down cross-legged in front of her. “So… last night, that happened before?”

 “…yeah. Abusive ex.” Carlton pulled her legs into her chest and set her chin on her knees. “Used to get in my head and fuck things up until I didn’t know what was real and what wasn’t.”

“He gaslighted you?” Mickey growled, her voice rough and deep. Her stepfather had abused both her and her mother in a similar fashion, James remembered.

“Among other things.”

Turning to James, Mickey practically radiated fury as she balled up her fists. “Can I go kill the bastard? Please?”

Just as James was about to reply, Carlton cut in. “He’s dead already. Drunk driving accident senior
year.”

Mickey deflated. “…oh. Well, I… I probably shouldn’t feel good about that.”

Something about the way Carlton said it, flat and emotionless, caught James’s attention. “His drink got spiked?”

“Maybe.”

Intrigued, James mentally reviewed her personnel file until - right. “Chemistry major.”

“Yes.”

“Does the rest of the team know you’re good with toxins?”

“Nope. You gonna report this?” Her eyes flashed, challenging, and James smirked at her.

“You really think I’ve got room to judge you? I bit the dick clean off the first guy who got frisky when HYDRA had me. Took the rest of ‘em two years and a nasty cocktail of drugs in my food to work up the courage to try again.”

Carlton’s face was such a hilarious mixture of shock, revulsion, and awe that James couldn’t help but laugh, at least until Mickey swatted him on the shoulder. “Behave.”

“Sorry, sorry.” Shaking his head, James chuckled a few more times and sighed. “Just… you’re not alone, kid. I’ve been there, I know how it feels, and it gets better. Hill sent me a message this morning - Smithson’s going to rot in a SHIELD cell for the next five years, he’s been stripped of his rank and clearance, and they’re working on drafting up a new organization-wide policy to protect people like you and me. Should roll out within a month or two.”


“I’d say come to me if anyone ever tries anything like that ever again, but… I think you’re pretty well on your way to being able to take care of yourself.” James grinned proudly at her. “Just remember, guys are bigger and stronger, but we’re usually slower and less flexible. Use that against us and you’ll be fine.”

“Just like Gonzalez,” Mickey added. “She’s got a pretty good handle on it. You might ask if she’ll help you with that this weekend.”

“Good idea. Thanks.” Carlton stood, grabbed her things, and waved as she walked away to her next station.

“Okay, dish,” James ordered Mickey quietly as soon as Carlton was out of earshot.

Mickey pursed her lips thoughtfully as she pulled off her gloves and adjusted the wraps around her fingers. “She’s still skittish and flinches away a lot, just like you used to, and I don’t expect that to go away anytime soon. Give her a few more weeks, make sure the whole team is there for her, build her up but don’t baby her. She’s probably going to have nightmares and flashbacks, especially since it’s happened before, so I’d advise a permanent change to a double unit in the dorms and talk therapy if she’s up for it. See if one of the other girls is willing to bunk with her until she’s good. Have her spar against Peters and Evans so she gets used to taking down bigger people in an environment she has control over. She might have some aggression issues, especially as she gets her confidence back, so make sure to keep an eye on that.”
Giving Mickey’s arm a quick squeeze, James stood to head back to his own station. “Thanks, love. This means a lot to me.”

“Always.”

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“Are you sure this is a good idea?” James asked, wrinkling his nose at the dosage sheet in front of him. “I mean, I’m fine with how things are right now, I can handle the side effects.”

Leaning forward on her desk and steepling her fingers, Dr. Ellmore looked over her glasses at him. “The goal is for you to be functional without medication, James. That means gradually weaning you off of it when you reach certain checkpoints.”

“Yeah, but… I’ve got responsibilities now. I’m training a team. They need me to be reliable. Right now my bad days are, what, like, once every two weeks? I don’t want to go back to the way it was before.” Progress had been gradual and steady since he’d started treatment, but at first he hadn’t been able to go more than six hours without a flashback, waking nightmare, seizure, or any one of the other nasty symptoms of coming down off of the drug cocktail HYDRA had pumped into his veins for so many years.

“This is your decision in the end, but I’d like you to think it over, talk it through with Mickey before you make that choice.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s fair.” James set the sheet of paper down on his lap and combed his hands through his hair, careful to avoid the strands getting caught in the seams on his left hand. “I can’t say I’m thrilled about going through withdrawals again.”

Doc gave him an amused smirk. “Well, if I do my job correctly, any effects should be minimal. Mickey’s also pretty thorough in her reports, so I trust her to notice anything unusual.”

“Wahoo.”

“Trust me on this, we’ve got plenty of data of the long term effects of being on these medications in normal people, but your physiology is completely different. I’ve got no idea how or even if they’ll still affect you six months or a year further down the line.”

“Yeah, I know. I just really like being able to drive.”

Nodding sympathetically, Doc leaned back in her chair. “I know. Hopefully we’ll be able to keep everything under control and you won’t need to worry about that.”

“So, this is just the antidepressants and mood stabilizers, right? We aren’t touching the anxiety and seizure meds?”

“Correct. Your anticonvulsants are one thing I don’t want to mess with.”

“Well, that’s definitely appreciated,” James replied with a wry smile. The change in medications after his first seizure since Mickey moved in had worked well, and the only full or partial seizures they’d logged so far had all been triggered by something outside of his control. So far, so good.

“So, how is training going?”

“Pretty well. They’re all learning fast, and they’re working as a team better than I would’ve expected this early on. Carlton’s recovering from everything quickly, and the whole team’s working
hard to support her. We ended up having a kumbaya day where everyone dished on their shit, and that seemed to bring everyone a bit closer. I’m just happy they didn’t turn out to be the awkward squad that I thought they would at first.”

“What did you share with them?”

James pressed his lips together. “I didn’t, really. This is more about them than it is about me. I sat down with Carlton a few times over the past week, wanted to check in with her, see how she’s doing, we ended up talking about symptoms and coping mechanisms.” He smiled fondly, remembering her dry comment about how he’s one of only two people who can burn out his stress by running nearly a mile every minute.

“Sounds like they’re all doing fine, then.”

“For the most part. I’m going to take a break, spend some time up at the Tower for the holidays. Franklin said he’s got them covered until I come back in January.”

“Would you like to do our sessions by video while you’re up there, then?”

James nodded, leaning back and lacing his fingers behind his head. “Yeah, if we can. I think I need a vacation. Mickey, too. Hill’s been pushing us both pretty hard.”

“Oh, how’s her hip doing? I didn’t get a chance to ask last time I spoke with her.”

“Better, a lot better. She’s walking around without the cane now, and she’s been a guest trainer a few times with the kids. She’s still got a bit of a limp, but her physical therapist says that’ll go away in time.”

Raising an eyebrow, Doc picked up her pencil. “And how are you two doing?”

“We’re good.” James bit his lip and smiled. “Kinda nice to have a healthy relationship for once. I mean, we have disagreements and whatnot – I told you about the Toolbox bullshit – but it’s good. It’s steady and reliable and… it’s just good to have someone I can lean on. Someone that isn’t Steve, you know.”

“Indeed. I’m glad that you’re both starting to grow as individuals. From what I understand, you two were heavily codependent before Captain Rogers crashed the Valkyrie.”

“Yeah, I think it was a big adjustment for him. I mean, for him it’s only been around two years since he put the Valkyrie down, but for me it’s been… well, it’s been a lot longer than that.”

Dr. Ellmore flipped several pages back in her notepad. “Seventy… two years, to be exact.”

“Something like that.”

“So, getting back to Mickey. Any progress with your sexual trauma?”

“Um… well…” He must have blushed profusely because his face felt suddenly hot.

“I see,” Doc said with a knowing smile. “Communication is good, then?”

James cleared his throat. “Uh. Yeah. Yeah, we’re good. She always tells me if it’s an off day or she just isn’t interested.”

“That’s good to hear. Have you had any moments where you were triggered?”
“Tried having me on my back one time, didn’t go so well. We’re working on it.”

“Desensitization?”

“Finding out what exactly the issue is. It’s not so much that I’m on my back, I think I have issues with any sort of weight on me. Karpov and Lukin both liked to pin me down.”

“I remember. Just take it slow and keep communicating.”

“Yeah, Mickey’s pretty good about that. She doesn’t shy away from how things work with her being trans, either.”

“Good, good. She’s managing her hygiene properly, then?”

“As far as I can tell. We’re using rubbers anyway, so that helps.”

“Good.” Doc absently tapped her pencil against her nose. “I’m pretty sure you can’t contract anything anymore, but better to be on the safe side.”

James scratched at an itch on his neck, tilting his head to the side. “Well… it’s mostly to keep the mess down. You know.”

“Indeed,” she replied with another small smile. “Well, I’ll let you go, then, since we’re running up on the end of our session. Let’s say two weeks out, barring any emergencies?”

“Sounds good.” Standing, James stretched upward before collecting his riding gear and turning toward the door. He paused, one hand on the door frame. “Thanks, Doc. Really. For everything.”

“You’re quite welcome. Have a safe ride home.”

His CBR liter bike was waiting for him in the parking lot – he’d become rather fond of the peppy Honda after the first time Hill had loaned it to him so he almost immediately went out and bought one for himself, complete with Repsol graphics. It felt different than the Harley, sleeker and with a howl instead of a rumble, but he couldn’t deny the boyish thrill he felt whenever he opened up the throttle.

Mickey had already flown up to New York with all of their stuff; she’d wanted to join him for the ride back but after her second dose of Vicodin since she’d woken up with a throbbing hip at three in the morning, James had insisted that she take the plane.

The trip would take him a little over five hours with the route he’d planned, time which he intended to spend decompressing from several weeks of intense training as he wound the bike through whatever mountain roads he could catch.

He stumbled on a brilliant little twisty road completely by accident, taking the wrong turn off the highway and deciding to just go with it. Leaning into each of the corners, his inside knee hovering just above the ground, trail braking to keep things smooth, James quickly lost himself in the calm zen of carving his way up the road.

It took him two corners to notice the red and blue flashing lights behind him.

Sighing, he coasted to a stop as soon as he could, shutting off the bike and turning on his flashers. He flipped up his visor and set his hands back on the handlebars as the cop’s feet crunched towards him through the loose gravel.
“Afternoon,” James greeted him.

“You know why I stopped you?” The officer’s hair was close-cropped black fading to a salt-and-pepper gray, his eyes wrapped in crow’s feet that wrinkled through his tanned skin. He looked fit and trim, several inches shorter than James but every bit as confident.

“No, sir. Mind if I get off the bike and take my helmet off?”

“Sure.” The cop stepped back, looking at James expectantly. His eyes widened after James smoothed down his frizzy hair. “Damn, I can’t say I was expecting that.”

“Well, not all of us have Quinjets in our garages, so…”

“Ain’t that the truth,” the cop muttered. “So. You know why I pulled you over?”

“No, sir.”

“I clocked you going 56 in a marked 45. Can I see your license and registration?”

“Sure.” James unzipped his jacket. “In the inside pocket.”

“Go for it.”

Digging through his wallet, James pulled out his paperwork and handed it to the cop, who nodded once at him and walked back to his squad car. James sat sideways against his bike, leaning into it as it balanced on the kickstand, and fiddled with the straps and visor on his helmet while he waited for the cop to return.

Several minutes later, the cop came back, handing over James’s license and the bike’s registration. “I’m going to let you go with a warning this time, Mr. Barnes, one veteran to another. Just keep the speed down.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you,” James replied as he tucked his wallet back into his jacket. “My apologies.”

The cop smirked at him. “Trust me, I’ve been there myself. What I’d give to be young again, back before ‘Nam, hitting this road with my RC166. Gotta love a good Honda bike.”

“More of a Harley guy myself, but… she’s growin’ on me.” James gave the CBR an affectionate pat as he swung his leg back over. “I’ve got a Street 750 waiting for me back in New York.”

“Can’t go wrong with either of those, son. Have a safe ride home, and – don’t forget – keep it under the limit. I’ll write you two tickets if I catch you speeding again.”

Scooting his helmet around to position it just right, James tapped the side of it in salute. “Understood. Thank you, sir.” He snapped down his visor and started the bike, pulling away as politely as he could.

The road seemed to have run out of good corners anyway, and he wasn’t really able to open up the throttle again until he pulled back out onto the interstate.

Several hours later, he rumbled into the garage at the Tower, ass thoroughly numb and a near-permanent grin on his face. His hair clung to the helmet as he pulled it off, pushing the staticky strands back out of his eyes with a gloved hand before he backed the CBR in next to his Harley. Steve’s own bike sat in the next stall over, along with Mickey’s dualsport that she’d bought for toodling around once her hip had healed enough.
Loud music greeted him as he took the elevator up to the main common area, helmet hanging from his hand and jacket unzipped. He stepped out into the hall, following the sound of Steve’s unusually loud laughter through the scattered groups of people. Looking around him, he spotted a few faces he recognized, but for the most part, everyone there was new.

A chorus of enthusiastic greetings hit his ears as soon as he found Steve, surrounded by a large majority of the Avengers and face to face with Thor, both of them raising a glass of something… purple.

“Oh hell no,” James barked, crossing his arms and shifting his weight to the side. “Where did you even find that, Tony?”

Tony sauntered over and shoved a tumbler of the stuff into James’s hand. “Dad’s archives. Figured it was worth breaking out tonight.”

“Tonight? Why, what’s tonight?”

“Tonight, Anakin, is our favorite Asgardian’s birthday!”

Thor smiled apologetically at James. “Well, in as much as our calendar can be likened to yours.”

“As much as I’d love to celebrate it, big guy,” James admitted, “I’ve been on the back of a rocket on wheels for the past five hours, my legs, ass, and back are killing me, and I really need a shower.”

Raising his glass to Thor, James grinned. “Nazdarovya.” He knocked back the drink, set the empty glass on the counter, and looked around. “Where’s Mickey?”

“Waitin’ for yooooouuu,” Steve slurred, his shoulders swaying as he stepped sideways. “Someone’s gettin’ laid toniiiiight!”

“How much has he had?” James sighed and shook his head. “Don’t answer that, I don’t wanna know. Just don’t let him do anything stupid.”

“Oh, Buckeroo, do you know nothing of how I work?” Tony gave him a devilish grin as he smacked James on the ass. “Now get outta here and go bone that girl of yours.”

Raising one hand over his shoulder, James gave his teammates a one-fingered salute as he left, rolling his eyes and chuckling despite himself.

As soon as the elevator doors closed, he leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. “I’m guessing Tony does this a lot.”

“With great regularity, though not as much as he used to.”

“Let me guess. Pepper.”

“Indeed.”

“She’s good for him, JARVIS.”

“I would be inclined to agree. Here you are, sir.”

“Thanks, pal. Keep an eye on Steve for me. Alcohol robs him of what little impulse control he’s got left.”

“I will do my best, given the circumstances.”
The apartment was refreshingly quiet, the lights at a comfortable level. Hanging his helmet by the door, James slowly shrugged off his armored riding jacket and hung that below the helmet, setting his boots at the bottom with the heels against the wall.

“How was the ride?” Mickey’s voice drifted over to him from where she was curled up under a blanket on the couch, absorbing the gentle warmth radiating from the fireplace.

He reached up his arms then swung them out to the side, twisting his back to crack it. “Long. Probably should’ve just hit the interstate and stayed on that. Got pulled over on a backroad, got off with a warning.”

“Speeding?”

“Yeah. Found a great road for a hill climb. How’d the flight go?”

“Let’s just say having a private jet available here has definitely spoiled me. I think that’ll be the last time I fly with civilians, and thank fuckin’ god I can’t have kids.”

“Screaming baby?” James asked as he walked into the bedroom and tugged off his riding pants. “Those are the worst.”

“Poor kid had an ear infection or something, I don’t know. Sometimes you just have to let them scream because that’s the only way to relieve the pressure in their ear canals. Gave me one hell of a migraine, though.”

“Is that why you aren’t downstairs?” He put on a shirt, then tied the drawstring on his sweatpants as he went back out into the living room. Plopping down on the couch next to Mickey, he wiggled under the blanket and pulled her towards him so her back was against his chest. “Are you okay?”

Her eyes were red and tired, lips pale, and she leaned back against his shoulder before closing her eyes. “Yeah. I spent a bit of time there, just enough to be polite, wish Thor a happy birthday and whatnot, you know. Tony offered me some weird purple stuff—”

“Yeahhhh you’re gonna wanna leave that shit alone.”

“Mm. Speaking from experience?”

“First time I had it, I was sloshed in less than a minute, and that was after my first dose of Zola’s serum. Steve says I tried to jump him.”

“What I would’ve given to see that,” Mickey chuckled.

“Oh, fuck off.” He bit the top of her ear gently, snorting when she yelped and pulled away.

“What about the second time?”

“I’m a bit better at holding my liquor now. Starting to get a bit buzzed, though; stuff still works, that’s for sure.”

“Wait, seriously?”

“Mmhm.” He knew that he’d have to have another drink or two – or five, like Steve – in order to feel anything more than a pleasant tingling sensation. “Tony handed me one, Steve was already pretty far gone, and even Thor was starting to look a little pink. They’re the only two that can handle that stuff besides me. Told them I had saddle sores and needed a shower and left.”
“Well, you weren’t kidding about the shower.”

“Mm. Five more minutes?”

“I’ll still be here when you’re done.” Mickey slapped his leg. “Go de-stinkify.”

“Fine, fine,” he grumbled, extracting himself and swinging his hips as he walked away. “You just love to watch me go.”

“Oh for- you look like a fuckin’ twink!” Mickey shouted after him as he laughed his way into the bathroom.

Half an hour later, he found Mickey sitting upright, opening up a pizza box on the coffee table. “I ordered dinner up, didn’t feel like cooking.”

“Fine by me. Scoot over.”

“Netflix?”

“Doctor Who?”

“Sure.”

Mickey selected the next episode in their queue, and then settled in under James’s arm as a gigantic spaceship began exploding on screen.

“Shut up,” James mumbled when he buried his face in the blanket after watching Madge lead her family home and save her husband, and Mickey turned to look at him. “’s not funny.”

“Never said it was, love. You okay?”

He grunted noncommittally.

“Need to take a break?”

“Just… gimme a second.”

Her hand rubbed over his shoulders soothingly. “Sorry. I should’ve warned you.”

“’s fine. Just… we lost a lot of good men in the ocean when their planes went down. Bunch’a boys from my neighborhood, all that came home was a flag an’ a gold star for the window.”

After a few minutes, James raised his head and wiped his face, leaning back. “Got any surprises for me in the next one?”

“Let me check.” Pulling out her phone, Mickey looked up the episode synopsis. “I’ll start reading over these again like I used to. Sorry about that. Um, next one should be fine.”

“Oh boy, another Moffatt story. Who’s gonna die in this one? Rory or Amy?” James muttered after the introduction.

“Hush.”

And he did, seconds after she’d spoken, as his jaw dropped to the floor. “What the f- Pause it. JARVIS, pause.”
“…James?”

“Her! That girl! What the fuck – how – I… Jesus.” He stared at the face on the screen as it frowned at an overcooked soufflé.

“Um, what?”

James took a minute to collect his thoughts, then ran into the office, grabbing one of his sketchbooks. He thumbed through the pages until he found the right one. “Her.”

Raising an eyebrow, Mickey studied the drawing. “So… you’ve seen Jenna Coleman in a movie before?”

“No. Jesus. Um. That’s Constance. Steve and I went on a double date with her and Bonnie at the Stark Expo right before I shipped out. That’s the night Steve managed to enlist, too.”

“God, he hasn’t talked about that at all, maybe only a few thousand times. Bitches about the girls like you wouldn’t believe.”

James smiled awkwardly. “Never did get the chance to tell him I was chaperoning a couple of lesbians on a date.”

“Get out.”

“No, really. Brooklyn in the 40s? Queer capital of the North Coast.”

As she held up the sketchbook to compare Connie to the actress on screen, Mickey frowned. “I have to admit, there is a striking resemblance. Coleman’s British, though.”

“Didn’t stop Steve from thinking President Carter’s first name was Margaret.”

Mickey laughed. “Fair point.”

“Well, that was weird. I swear to God, if this whole damn season is like this, let’s just skip it and go to 8.”

“I took the liberty of sifting through the rest of it, sir. You might find the episode ‘Cold War’ exceptionally amusing, but aside from that I was not able to identify any potential risks.”

“Thanks, buddy. Go ahead and keep playing it, then.”

Several hours later, both of them were sound asleep, stretched out on the couch, Mickey’s head resting on James’s chest. JARVIS quietly faded out the video, marking that episode for repeat, and dimmed the lights before reducing the oxygen flow to the fire, pulling it back to tiny flames licking over glowing embers.

***

“Agent Carter,” Bucky mumbled into his drink as he leaned on the bar, eyes tracking Carter as she walked toward him with prim, delicate steps. Carter sat next to him, facing outward and crossing her legs as she slid her elbows back against the bar’s surface.

“Sergeant.”

“Can I help you? Because if not, I’d like to continue burnin’ the rest of my pocket lettuce tryin’ to get swacked.”
“As a matter of fact, you can help. I’d like to talk with you about Captain Rogers.”

Bucky groaned, dropping his forehead onto the bar. “You and half the fuckin’ Army. Get in line. Or, wait. I’m invisible now, so go ask ‘im yourself.”

“If this is about last week-”

“Y’damn right it is,” Bucky spat, lifting his head to glare at her. “Don’t you fuckin’ dare lead him on like that. You break his heart, I’ll-”

“You’ll what?” Carter gave him an amused smirk, dropping into an impeccable Brooklyn twang for her next words. “You gonna break my face?”

“Somethin’ like that.” He turned back to his drink, swirling it around in the glass.

“Trust me, Sergeant, I have no intention of getting between you two. I just wanted to make that clear.”

“Between – oh fuck no. No, we ain’t fellas.”

“Really.” It was clear by her flat tone that Carter didn’t believe him.

“Really. Swear t’ God. No, he’s just… he’s like a little brother, you know? Still feel like I gotta protect him, even though he’s twice my size and clearly better looking.”

Carter’s face softened. “Indeed. Isn’t it the way of the younger sibling to rush ahead into danger, simply because we know our older brothers will save us?”

Bucky glanced up, surprised. “You…”

“Mine, um, he was killed in action shortly before… well, he’s the reason I’m here.”

“I’m… Aw hell, I’m so sorry.”

Carter smiled at him sadly. “Needs must.”

“No, really, Carter. I just… here I am, passin’ myself off as some sort of… and you’re just tryin’ to… Jesus.” He dragged a hand over his reddening face and exhaled sharply.

“I’ll admit, it was quite amusing that Captain Rogers managed to flirt so effectively without saying a word. Almost as if he had his own Cyrano de Bergerac.”

“Hmf.” Bucky tossed back the rest of his drink, setting his glass down and waving the bartender back over. “Never could sweet-talk a dame back home. Now he looks like a goddamn Greek god but he’s still as tongue-tied as ever.”

“Speaking of- oh. Hello.”

Bucky turned, following Carter’s sight line, and had to look upward to find the face of the huge brute from Bravo Division standing behind him.

“You with the 107th Tactical?” 107th Tactical Team. Invaders. Cap’s Crazy Commandos.

“What’s it to you?” Bucky shot back.

“Barnes…” Carter held out a hand, her voice low.
“Wanna have a word with the Jap and the nigger. You point me to ‘em and I’ll leave you alone.”

Bucky stood and crossed his arms, tilting his head back. “Ain’t gonna happen, pal.” His skin tingled in excitement, a feral grin starting to spread across his face.

The big guy sneered at him. “Well, I guess I’ll have to teach you a lesson, too.”

Ducking under the punch, Bucky twisted and swung his fist straight up into the man’s sternum, pushing up with his legs and sending the brute flying back to crash into the wall. The barroom went silent, half of the soldiers standing.

Bucky turned to Peggy and shrugged. She rolled her eyes, slid off her stool, stepped out of her pumps, and lifted her fists as she and Bucky stood back to back.

“Hey, boys,” Bucky taunted. “Anyone hungry? Got two great knuckle sandwiches ready to go, just step right up and get in line.”

Carter and Bucky received two stinging reprimands after the fact: one from Colonel Phillips, which had involved quite a bit of shouting and spitte, and the other from Steve, who’d merely stood there, shaking his head with a disappointed sigh.

“Gave our unit shit for bein’ integrated,” Bucky told the Invaders later as he pressed a wet cloth wrapped around a pungent bundle of herbs to his swollen eye. “Plus, a good barfight never hurt anyone.”

“You know, Sarge, you probably get in more fights than the rest of us combined.” Dum Dum shook his head as he poked at their small campfire with a stick. “Only reason you ain’t a buck private again is because o’ the Captain.”

Steve walked up, tossing Morita the pack of cigarettes he’d promised him earlier that day. “Old habits die hard.”

“I wasn’t getting into fights, Steve, I was just pulling your sorry skinny ass out before someone kicked it into the next county.”

The Invaders hooted and laughed as Steve playfully shoved Bucky to the side and sat down next to him. “If I didn’t know you better, I’d say you enjoyed it.”

“Fuck off, you fairy.”

***

The first time the Soldier – Barnes, he had to start calling himself Barnes, he had a name – was allowed to leave his cell, it was under heavy guard with tracker bracelets around each of his wrists and ankles. Steve had argued with SHIELD for weeks and had gotten nowhere, until Barnes had bluntly informed his doctors that if he wasn’t allowed to keep up his conditioning, his arm would literally kill him.

Empty and silent, the small gym they took him to was well-equipped. His guards took up positions at the door, giving Steve a cursory glance as he followed the last guard in.

“Bucky, hey.”

“Hey.” Barnes walked through the machines, basketball shorts swishing around his knees. The shoes they’d given him were exceptionally comfortable, designed for running and jumping in ways
that his boots weren’t. He’d also been issued what they’d called a compression shirt, tight-fitting and sliding smoothly over the plates of his arm.

He recognized most of the weightlifting machines from the conditioning HYDRA made him do, but instead headed out to the open floor in the center of the gym and sat down, beginning to stretch.

“Got anything in particular planned?” Steve sat down next to him, stretched his long legs straight out in front of him, and wrapped his hands around his feet.

“Not really.”

“Just gotta exercise?”

Leaning into the stretch, Barnes pulled his right foot into his left knee and flattened his chest over it. “Yeah.”

“I know the feeling. How about some calisthenics?”

“Sure.”

Memories tickled through his mind as Steve led them through one of the old Army routines, the motions eerily familiar. Barnes had to blink regularly to clear his eyes of the strange, dusty training field that superimposed itself over the gym.

Eventually, Steve brought him over to an open space against the far wall, hoisting up a pair of punching bags. “I come in here a lot when I’m angry or stressed. Stark’s working on a set of prototype bags that he claims I won’t be able to destroy.”

Barnes stared at the odd bandages Steve handed him.

“It’s to protect your hands. You remember them from boxing, right?”

Something clicked in his head, and his hands moved through the motions on their own, winding the wraps around his fingers and securing them on the backs of his wrists.

“Yeah, there you go. That’s right.” Steve smiled at him, then nudged him over to the bag on the left. “You were a three-time welterweight champion when we were kids. Used to train over at Goldie’s. The prize money kept food on the table better than any job you ever got, even if I had to patch you back up each time.”

Barnes stared at the bag, hands in front of him, blinking as his brain twitched again. “Started taking you there after… after… something happened.”

“Yeah, Buck. Pearl Harbor. We were in art class. You grabbed me by my collar and dragged me out, made me promise not to try enlisting until you had a chance to train me up a bit. Told the teacher to fuck off when she called us back inside.”

“Fruit. Goddamn fruit.” His right hand thudded into the bag as Steve laughed.

“Yeah, you used to hate doing still life drawings.”

“Models were… some of ‘em were cute.”

“Remember the time you got a hard-on in class?”

Left fist. Right fist. “Girl had some nice gams.” Left. Right.
Steve leaned against the wall, eyebrow cocked and a smirk on his face. “Yeah, you took her dancing afterwards. Said you couldn’t wait to get all her clothes off again.”

“Never did.” Right. Left. Spin and kick.

Snorting in surprise, Steve shifted his weight to his other leg. “Why not?”


“Well, she wasn’t wrong.”

“Still.” Spin and kick. Right. Left, left.

Within a few minutes, Barnes grabbed the top of the bag and leaned into it, panting. “Outta shape.”

“We’ll get that fixed.”

He shot Steve a questioning look.

“I bullied Hill into clearing you to come here with me every other day, and any time you ask as long as you’ve got your shadows.”

Nodding into the bag, Barnes let out a long sigh. “Thanks.”

Steve clapped a hand on his shoulder as he walked away. “Of course.”

***

James stepped forward hesitantly, scuffing his feet on the carpet to catch the attention of the two men who sat at the window, staring intently at their game of chess.

Well, ‘sat’ might have been stretching it. One of them slumped towards their small table, elbows resting on the arms of his wheelchair, and the other sprawled across his chair like the cocksure circus strongman he’d been a lifetime ago.

The men looked up at James, who stood there awkwardly, his right hand covering his left elbow as he tried his best to smile. Sam was waiting in the main lobby – he’d offered to come with, but this was something James had to do himself.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Gabe Jones leaned back in his wheelchair and raised a thick gray eyebrow. “Didn’t you fall off a train somewhere?”

“…yeah. Um, surprise. Not dead.” Reaching up to scratch the back of his neck, James winced slightly. “It was a pretty nasty fall, though, so… I don’t blame you. Um…”

“That you in the papers? In DC?” Dugan asked, his face unreadable.

James hesitated, chewing his lip. “Yeah. Sort of.”

“Ain’t no two ways about it.” Dugan crossed his arms, tilting his head back. “You gonna tell us what happened?”

Gabe twisted around, managing to snag a chair from the table behind him, and clumsily spun it leg by leg til it faced their table. “Sit down, Sarge. You got a story to tell.”

“Well, first things first…” James sat, and carefully, keeping his hands in his lap so as not to draw
“Attention, drew back his sleeve to expose a sliver of his arm above the silicone skin. “Lost my arm up to the shoulder.”

“No, shit.” Leaning forward, Dugan reached out and tapped his fingernail against the metal plate.

“Zola found me… again. Got tossed around from division to division. They scrambled my brain like eggs. Ended up having to fight Steve in April, that’s how I got on the news.” He tugged his sleeve back down and wiggled his fingers under the silicone.

“Good thing everyone thinks I’m a crazy old coot,” Gabe snorted, his dark skin wrinkling as he grinned. “Otherwise, they might’ve believed me.”

“You’re still a crazy old coot, you’re just havin’ a good day. Shut up and make your move.”

“Alzheimer’s.” Gabe stared at the chessboard, hemming and hawing for a few seconds before shoving a pawn forward. “Some days are better than others.”

James held up his wrist and pointed to his bracelet. “I know the feeling. Whatever they did to my head… I can’t remember a lot of stuff, and my brain shorts out a lot. Doc calls it epilepsy, says I have some sort of amnesia too.”

“Damn, Sarge. What I would give to’ve been able to kill Zola for good… thought we did that when we took out all his fuckin’ robots, but…”

“He got away, you know that... so did Sarkissian.”

“Wait, Madame Hydra? Seriously?”

Gabe looked between them, confused. “You talkin’ about that crazy bitch in the castle?”

“That’s the one,” James muttered. “She just loved her poisons. Zola used her expertise to help with the serum they ended up using on me.”

“Peas in a pod, you and the Captain.” Dugan moved his knight, capturing one of Gabe’s bishops.

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

James stared out the window for a while as his old friends played chess, images flashing through his head of Sarkissian’s gaunt face as she taunted him, tortured him in a way that none of the men ever could.

“Hey.” Fingers snapped in front of his face and he jumped. “Barnes.”

“Sorry.” James rubbed his fingers over his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I get lost like that sometimes.”

“We all do,” Gabe told him gently. “We all bring part of the war back with us, and sometimes pieces of us get left behind to make room.”

***

James woke up slowly, groaning softly when he realized he had an awful crick in his neck. Mickey was still asleep on his chest, snoring ever so softly, hands tucked under her collarbone like a cat, the heavy blanket pulled up to her neck.

Slowly, James pushed himself up just enough to let his neck straighten, wincing as a muscle spasmed
and one of the vertebrae cracked loudly in protest. He pulled the blanket off Mickey, folding it as best he could before draping it over the back of the couch, and lifted her up in his arms.

She woke up on the way to the bedroom just enough to mumble something, the words blending into each other so much that he couldn’t understand her. Shushing her softly, James laid her down on the bed and crawled in next to her, wrapping her up in his arms again as she snuggled up tightly against him.

He fell asleep again with the smell of oranges in his nose, her hair tickling his cheeks, and the sound of her breathing lulling him back under.

***

If he dreamed any more that night, he didn’t remember it when he woke up. The pale early morning light filtered in through the sheer curtains over the window, and Mickey was still sound asleep with her head pillowed on his arm. Carefully extracting himself, James rolled over and checked his phone where it sat charging on the nightstand. He grunted softly when he saw that it wasn’t much past 0600.

His metal hand was cold against his face as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes. On a whim, he pulled open the drawer to the nightstand, grabbing the thin notebook out from under Mickey’s Beretta 950.

It had been over a month since he’d made his last entry into this particular notebook. So far, it was about three quarters of the way full, the pages he’d written on wrinkling slightly, pushing apart even though the thin strap over the cover held them together.

Casually, he shuffled through the remaining pages, blank white surfaces staring at him with a certain desperate hopefulness that they would stay that way. Just as he was about to close the notebook and put it back, however, a handful of written-on pages flashed by. He lifted the back cover again and there, in Mickey’s looping handwriting, was a list of names.

Steven Rogers
James Morita
Timothy Dugan
Jacques Dernier
Gabriel Jones
James Montgomery Fallsworth
Howard Stark
Margaret Carter
Norbert Kellerton
Michael Hendricks
Peter Wesson
Paul Richards
Daniel Sousa

The names continued for several pages, and James’s vision began to blur. How on earth had she even known about some of these? he asked himself. She must have talked to Steve. At least a hundred of them were soldiers he barely remembered from the war except for a few fuzzy memories of the scared eyes of boys far too young to see what they’d seen. Several names were completely unfamiliar until he remembered a parent frantically shouting her daughter’s name as James scooped the girl up, shoved her to safety, pivoted, and raced towards the bomber at the Mall.

Then, one name caught his eye.
Understanding dawned on him, and his breath caught in his lungs. She’d mentioned how depressed she was after Jack’s reported death, and had even hinted at the bullshit with Shelby driving her to contemplate suicide. She’d laughed it off after that, saying it wasn’t an issue any more, she was doing better now, she’d tell him if she ever got there again, she promised.

He hadn’t considered himself a factor in preventing it from happening in the first place.

“Jim?” Mickey’s voice was thick with sleepiness. “Wha’s wrong?”

Wordlessly, he rolled onto his back and held up the notebook.

“Oh.”

“Didn’t know you’d done this,” he finally choked out, slowly flipping through the four pages covered in the names of people he’d saved.

“I was saving it for a day you got really low.”

“…thank you.” Closing the notebook, he dropped it back into its drawer and pushed it shut.

“Steve’s in there three times, you know.”

“Yeah, that’s intentional. Once when you saved him from an ass-kicking as kids, once when you pulled him out of the river, and once when you finally agreed to talk to him again.”

“Should be every other goddamn name, with how many times I dragged him out of messes,” James muttered, looking down at his metal hand. “But yeah… when I dragged him out of the Potomac… that’s the first time I remember using this thing to save a life instead of take it.”

His phone buzzed on the nightstand, and he picked it up to see a text message from Natasha moments before Mickey’s phone chirped at her.

“Secret Santa? The shit is that?”

Mickey frowned at her phone, scrabbling blindly for her glasses. “You randomly assign people to each other and there’s a gift exchange thing. Saves you having to buy a bunch of Christmas presents for a big group of friends.”

“Aw, shit.”

“Yeah, me neither. Thank God for Amazon Prime.”

Tapping the link Natasha had sent him, he waited for the page to finish loading before it told him his gift recipient: Tony.

“…are we allowed to ask for help?” James managed to squeak out.

“Depends. Who’d you get?”

“Stark.”

Mickey snorted. “Dude, you’re on your own for that one. Maybe talk to Pepper or something.”

“Perhaps I can be of assistance?”
“JARVIS, you’re a saint.” Locking his phone, James dropped it on his chest and stared up at the ceiling.

“Well, not exactly, but... I do try.”

“Who’s yours, Myshka?”

“I got Nat.”

James grinned. “That one’s easy. She wears a 9.5, I’ll send you the link to the site that sells the ballet shoes she likes. She needs a new pair soon anyway.”

“Well, there we go.” Mickey leaned over and gave him a kiss before sliding out of bed. “Shower call.”

“All yours.”

James waited until the water was running before he quickly opened Amazon on his phone, sifting through the list of stuff he’d set aside for potential gifts, a personal one for Steve and smaller ones for Pepper and Nat. Mickey’s was already sitting in an envelope, tucked away carefully in a drawer in Clint’s apartment. His embarrassment at forgetting about Christmas presents finally eased when he finished checking out and the email confirmation popped up.

“Got any ideas for Tony?” he asked JARVIS. “I’m all ears.”

“I’ve just finished scanning Mr. Stark’s wishlists, and unfortunately all of the items I found were either well outside of affordability or outright illegal.”

“Sounds like Tony, yeah.”

“I do, however, have one suggestion. I’m not sure how well it will be received, so I’ll consult with Ms. Potts before I make that recommendation.”

“Thanks, pal. I owe you one.”

“You do, in fact, owe me several, sir, but I try not to keep count.”

James snorted, pushing himself up into a sitting position to raise an eyebrow at the deadpan avatar on the opposite wall. “Did you just sass me?”

“Quite possibly.”

Chuckling, he turned and stood to rummage through his dresser for clothes. “Never change, buddy. Never change.”

***

James waved awkwardly at Mickey as he took a seat near the back of the group. When Sam caught his eye, he did his best to smile, fiddling with the seams on his gloves as the other veterans gradually trickled in. A few of them casually greeted him, introducing themselves, but James was far too nervous to even try to remember their names.

Sam opened the session by asking each vet for a quick check-in since their last meeting; James was the last one he called on.

“We’ve got someone new here, some of you might’ve met him already. He just got out of the Army,
hasn’t been back stateside for too long. We’ve all been through some pretty tough shit, but this guy’s had it worse than most of us, so don’t scare him off too quickly, okay?”

Biting his lip self-consciously, James gave everyone a little half-wave. “Hey. Um. James Grant, Army, ten years.” At Sam’s subtle prompting, James clasped his hands and leaned forward in his chair. “Um… my unit got ambushed, we ended up getting taken hostage. I, um…” His hand shook slightly as he reached up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “My shrink says I got really bad PTSD, triggers, shit like that. Figured talking to some people like me might help.”

Understanding murmurs rippled around the room, and several of the vets gave him empathetic smiles.

“So, Grant,” Sam continued. “One good thing and one bad thing, just like we were doing before. Take your time.”

He chewed his lip. “Haven’t had any seizures this week. That’s the good thing. Bad thing, um, I haven’t really slept for more than a few hours at a time in weeks. Nightmares, you know.”

James didn’t have to speak the rest of the meeting; he simply sat and listened, absorbing the stories of the men and women who had followed in the footsteps he and Steve had made so many years ago. On the one hand, it upset him that veterans still struggled with the same issues they had a hundred years ago, but on the other hand, he felt a warm, soothing pride that Sam, one of his closest friends, was dedicating his life to helping them.

After the meeting was over, James headed over to the small coffee bar on the edge of the room, exchanging a quick greeting with the Navy Seal that was there.

The small man was unassuming, almost generic-looking, but the way he walked held a certain controlled power that James immediately respected. This man, slight of build and a full foot shorter than James, was probably one of the few that could truly relate to where he’d been.

“Hey, man, if you need anyone to talk to… about your nightmares, the triggers, anything.” The Seal held out a business card. “My cell’s on the bottom. Any time of day or night. Most folks here, they’re vets just like us, but…” He shrugged, giving James a wry smile. “They’ve never been tortured. So. Like I said. You need someone to talk to who’s been there, call me.”

“Thank you.”

“Take care of yourself, soldier.”

James saluted him with his coffee cup and studied the Seal’s controlled, precise gait as he walked away. He turned when Mickey cleared her throat behind him.

“Good to see you here, Jim. Is that ok? Or do you prefer James?”

“Um, either works. How’re you holding up?”

The bags under her eyes were noticeable – had she slept at all since he’d seen her at the bar?

“Rough night several nights ago,” she admitted. “Called one of the counselors here and they talked me through it.”

“Are you okay?”

Shrugging, Mickey looked away. “Just some residual depressive stuff. Nothing you need to worry
“Mickey…” James frowned as he tried to find the right words to use. “The training I got. I can read people pretty well. Also, I haven’t seen you at the gym in a week. Are you okay?”

She sighed. “No. But I will be. I got in to see one of the emergency counselors, went in for monitoring for a few days. I’m better now.”

Nodding slowly, James stared into his coffee. “You know I’m a hell of a night owl, you can get my number from Sam if you need someone to call.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.”

Steve’s voice drew his attention, and James reached out to give Mickey’s shoulder a quick squeeze before he walked away.

It had been three months since he’d last seen Steve, and he felt himself hesitating as he walked forward, afraid of another reaction like the one that had driven him away from the Tower in the first place.

When Sam’s eyes flicked over to James, Steve turned around and blinked.

“…hey,” James mumbled, not quite able to meet those piercing blue eyes.

“B- James. You, um, you look well.”

He laughed. “No, I really don’t, but thank you for pandering to my vanity.”

Crossing his arms, Steve snorted and smirked at him. “No, I actually mean that. You’ve put on some weight and there’s color in your face again. Seriously. You look like you’re doing a lot better.”

Suddenly, James found his coffee very interesting. “Thanks.”

“Sam says there’s a good deli around the corner, wanna grab lunch?”

He was about to decline when he saw Sam glaring at him from behind Steve, mouthing, ‘Don’t you dare say no.’

“Um, sure.” James turned and gestured to the door. “After you?”

The deli was quiet, a hole in the wall with a staggering sum of two tables inside and one outside. Sitting outside to enjoy the sun, Steve and James waited for their sandwiches; James fiddled with the nearly-empty coffee he’d carried from the VA.

“So.” Steve’s voice was low. “Sam’s been giving me really general updates – oh, don’t look at me like that. You’re my friend, I wanted to know. All he said was stuff like ‘We went to a restaurant for the first time today,’ or ‘He’s going to the library.’ Just little things like that.”

Chuckling, James drained the last of his coffee. “Fair enough. But you will not believe who I met at the library.”

“Who, Santa Claus?”

“Dolores Cartwright.”
Steve’s jaw dropped. “No way.”

“Yeah, and she’s still a firecracker. She’s pissed off that I was avoiding you.”

“You told her about everything?”

“Come on, Steve. She isn’t stupid.”

Raising his eyebrows and laughing softly, Steve shook his head. “No, no, I guess not. How is she?”

“Here.” James reached into his pocket and pulled out the palm-sized sketchbook he always kept on him. Flipping through the pages, he found the one he was looking for and pressed the sketchbook flat against the table, sliding it over to Steve.

“Wow.” Steve’s long fingers gently traced the lines on the paper. “That’s really her.”

“Yeah.”

Their sandwiches arrived, and they spent the next several minutes eating in companionable silence. Eventually, his plate clean, Steve leaned back and tapped a toothpick absently against the table.

“Look, Buck. I, um, I want to apologize for pushing you away like that before.”

“‘s fine,” James mumbled around a mouthful of bread.

Steve’s eyebrows drew together as he stared intently at the toothpick. “No, it’s not. I’m supposed to be there for you, help you heal, help you… help you remember. And I just dropped the ball and kicked you out.”

“Steve. Look at me.” James waited until the blond finally dragged his eyes up. “I left. It was my choice. You can’t be everything. I can’t rely on you for everything. Doc says that’s part of getting better, making new friends and learning how we’ve both changed. I’m not the same guy that got on the boat to go to war, and you’re not the same guy that I left behind, either. We’ve both changed.”

“Sometimes I wish I could go back to how things were,” Steve admitted, eyes falling back to the toothpick. “Simpler. So much simpler.”

“Yeah, I miss having to hold you up and smack your back when your lungs stopped working.” Shoving the last bite of sandwich into his mouth, James brushed off his gloves and leaned back in his chair.

“I’ll admit it’s nice to be able to breathe properly. And hear properly. And see colors. And…”

“Mm.”

Suddenly, Steve’s face broke into a small smile. “Remember those pencils you bought me?”

“The colored ones?”

“Yeah.” Steve reached out for James’s sketchbook and flipped it open to a blank page. Laying out a few lines, he quickly began to fill in the details of a very old box of pencils.

“Had to describe the colors to you, since you couldn’t tell half of them apart.”

“Emerald green: the grass in Central Park in summer, the leaves on the trees, celery, lettuce, and that stupid little cactus,” Steve recited, his voice almost singing through the familiar words.
“Blue for the ocean under the Brooklyn Bridge, the sky on a sunny day, Mrs. Granger’s flowers.”

“Purple: the color of the plums you stole from the grocer.”

“Borrowed.” James stabbed his toothpick at Steve.

“Stole; it wasn’t like we were gonna give ‘em back, Buck. Red for my nosebleeds, the cherries and strawberries you’d bring home, the warmth of a fire, the coals in our stove.”

James smiled thoughtfully, looking down at his hands. “You know, HYDRA was always a little weirded out that I’d describe how colors felt instead of looked. And how I’d always make my men go up the stairs first, I’d walk on their left, I’d keep all my munitions in my right-hand pockets. They never could figure out why.”

“Oh- geez, Buck, I’m-”

“No, it’s fine. I’m fine. It… it helps to remember this stuff. Part of who I am now.”

Steve shifted uncomfortably, pencil hovering over the paper.

“It’s kind of funny, actually,” James said with a laugh. “I’d get really protective of the young ones on whatever squads I was leading. One time I ended up screaming at a few Russian soldiers, these scrawny little blond kids, because they were being reckless and God help me, if I saw them doing it again-”

“You’d kill them, bring ‘em back, and kill ‘em again just to make your point.” Flashing him a grin, Steve started shading in the face he was drawing.

“Yeah. I didn’t realize at the time that I was yelling at ‘em in English. Karpov was pretty pissed off. Apparently I called the smallest one Styopa.”

The blond barked out a laugh and stared at James, his face wrinkling into a horrified smile.

“Seriously?”

“Yes.” James traced his fingers over the seams on his gloves. “Who’re you drawing?”

Steve slid the sketchbook back over to him, and Mickey’s face stared out from the paper. Raising an eyebrow, Steve leaned back in his chair.

“She’s just one of the other vets. Navy, I think. Goes to my gym, her name’s Mickey.”

“Seems nice.”

James took his pencil back from Steve, clipping it to the spine of his sketchbook, and tucked it back into his pocket. “Yeah, I guess. Haven’t really talked to her much, she’s kind of quiet.”

“Well, I’m glad you and Sam are getting along, at least. I have to admit, I was a bit worried about that.”

“No, no,” James assured Steve, holding up his hands. “He’s cool. He’s helped a lot. Got me in with a really good brain doctor, too.”

“The first one didn’t work out?”

Scoffing, James crossed his arms, pressing his hands against his sides. “Steve, the first shrink thought I was… fuckin’… I don’t know what. He treated me like I’m made out of glass. Kept asking
me how I felt about being forced to do horrible, horrible things, wasn’t that so awful, blah blah blah.”

“Well…”

“Look, I did some pretty awful shit. But…” James reached up and massaged his temples with his fingers. “When I just, you know, gave up, stopped fighting, they… they didn’t really have to force me to do it any more.”

“…Buck…”

“I’m getting better, Stevie, I really am. But you gotta understand, I’m still responsible for everything I did. My hands did that stuff, no matter who was driving, and I’m the one that needs to pay the price. I’m gonna spend the rest of my stupidly long life trying to find a way to live with myself for it.”

***

The team gift exchange ended up scheduled for something Pepper called ‘Little Christmas Eve.’ Sam, Clint, and Thor were travelling back to their families for proper Christmas Eve and Day (Thor called it the Midwinter Feast), so the team festivities were shifted a day earlier.

As such, they all sat sprawled in a circle around the common area coffee table, Jane tucked under Thor’s arm, Pepper with Tony, and Mickey with James. Sharon and Steve were sitting closer together than usual, and Steve’s near-constantly blush threatened to make James giggle every time he looked over. Natasha’s head was resting in Clint’s lap as he idly played with her hair, her eyes fixed on the pile of presents still waiting to be opened. The oversized tree in the corner twinkled and shimmered, the lights buried deep in the branches giving it the illusion of glowing.

Steve was wearing the thick, soft sweater that Darcy had knitted for him, styled to look like his uniform, and everyone had a good laugh when Bruce unveiled a Hulk-sized tutu. Natasha was overjoyed with her new toe shoes, and Sharon was studying the thigh holster that someone (Barton) had bought her. Sam’s present had hovered up and beeped at him, chirping softly as Tony launched into a rapid explanation of the drone’s flight mechanics, quickly interrupted with a, “It’s great, Stark. Thank you.”

Once he’d unwrapped a large, blow-up, squeaking toy based on his hammer, Thor had promptly run around bopping each of his friends on the head with it until Jane had threatened to throw Darcy’s new iPod at him. Her planet antennae bobbed over her head as she scowled at Thor. Hill had smiled discreetly at James when he’d opened the large box with his name on it, finding an impressive collection of classic records still in their shrink-wrap. Her smile had fallen straight off her face to be replaced with a fake scowl, however, when she’d lifted up her new ‘HBIC’ shirt to show off.

Pepper was still staring at the gift certificate for a year’s membership to her favorite spa, and Rhodes had practically teared up when he’d seen the vintage 107th Tactical Team challenge coin that Steve had somehow procured.

“So0000 Clint.” Tony wiggled his finger around before settling onto the archer. “You’re next.”

Nat sat up with a grumbled complaint as Clint scooted forward, looking at both of the gaudily wrapped boxes until he found his. Lifting it, he shook it experimentally, lips pulled to the side in exaggerated concentration. Finally, he tore off the wrapping paper with a flourish, revealing a box conspicuously labeled Cuisinart.
“Holy cow,” Clint muttered with a grin, turning the box over in his hands. “Thanks.” Natasha’s knowing smile told James that the bread machine was as much for Laura as it was for Clint. Snapping his fingers, Clint pointed at Mickey. “You next.”

She wiggled out from under James’s arm, and handed him her beer with a stern, “If you drink this, you’re sleeping on the couch til New Year’s.”

James lifted the bottle, wrinkling his nose as he sniffed it. “Eugh. It’s a sour. That won’t be a problem.”

There were two presents left, a huge box that nearly covered the coffee table, and a small card in an envelope. Mickey checked them both over before pulling the box towards her. Without any preamble, she dug her nails into the paper and tore it off, lips parting in surprise as she saw the large label stenciled across the box.

“What the…”

She wasted no time in ripping the rest of the paper off and opening the box to find a beautifully crafted guitar case. Popping the latches, she reverently lifted out the guitar and placed her fingers into a chord, strumming softly. “Okay, whoever decided to up the ante by buying me a Taylor, go fuck yourself because I can’t beat this.”

Steve’s look of innocence was just too good, and James burst out laughing.

Finally, Rhodes slid the card across the table. “It’s for you, Tony.”

“Wow, I feel so loved.” Tony drawled as he showed off the card. “You know, they’ll tell you otherwise, but size really does matter.”

Clint grinned at him tauntingly. “Yeah, you keep tellin’ yourself that, Stark.”

Grumbling to himself, Tony tucked a finger under the flap and ripped the envelope open, pulling out a plain white card. He unfolded it and began reading aloud.

“Tony. I’ll admit I had no idea what to get for you, especially considering our… history. Christmas is kind of a foreign thing to me after so many years, so I’m a little rusty on how this all works. I asked for some advice, and ended up deciding to give the man that has everything something he hasn’t had in a very long time.”

Tony’s voice had softened as he read, his eyebrows drawing together, before he looked up and scanned the faces of the people around him. Finally, his eyes settled on James. “This is yours, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” James stood, straightened his shirt, and walked around the couch to sit at the piano. “I’m gonna apologize in advance if this completely explodes in my face, but… here we go.”

Hesitantly at first, James rolled his hands through the opening arpeggios, taking a deep breath to quiet his nerves before he opened his mouth to sing.

*Try to remember the kind of September*

*When life was slow and oh so mellow*

A tangible hush fell over his friends, and he saw Tony’s shoulders stiffen out of the corner of his eye.
Try to remember when life was so tender

And dreams were kept beside your pillow

His voice grew stronger the further he got through the song, deciding that if this did completely backfire, he’d be damned if it wasn’t well performed anyway.

Deep in December, it’s nice to remember

Although you know the snow will follow

He finished it out with a short recall to the bridge, rolling his chords up the keyboard before finally letting the sound die as he took his foot off the pedal. Nervous, he stared at the keyboard for several seconds before raising his head to see Tony, head in his hands, shoulders shaking, Pepper hugging him from the side.

Shit, he thought.  Shit, shit, this was too much.  I fucked up.

After a moment, Tony wobbled to his feet and walked over to James, held his arms out, and pulled him into an unexpected hug.

“Well,” Rhodes finally said.  “You’ve done the impossible, Barnes.  You gave Tony the feels.”

James slowly wrapped his arms around the smaller man, realizing after a moment that the damp patch spreading across his shoulder was from Tony… crying.

“Is this something I need to apologize for?” he mumbled softly enough that only Tony could hear him.

Shaking his head, Tony tightened the arm that wound under his shoulder and up his back.  “Thank you,” he managed to choke out.  “I mean, fuck you, man, but thank you.”

“Merry Christmas, buddy.”

“Merry fuckin’ Christmas.”  Straightening, Tony laughed awkwardly and stretched his face as he wiped it.  “God, I wasn’t expecting that.  Warn me next time?”

“Kinda the whole point of a present, Stark,” James admonished with an embarrassed laugh.  “It’s supposed to be a surprise.”

“Hate surprises.  Especially when they’re handed to me.  Unless it’s a drink.”  Right on cue, something amber in a glass with ice cubes swirling in it appeared in Tony’s hand.  “Thank you, Pepper, you’re a darling.”

Later that night, after everyone had retired to their quarters, James leaned on the counter, hands on either side of his sink, and stared at himself in the mirror.

“Was that okay?” he asked, knowing his voice would carry through the apartment to wherever Mickey was.

She walked into the bathroom a few seconds later, tugging on a tank top.  “Hm?  Was what okay?”

“I can never tell with Tony if he’s being sincere or if it’s just bravado.”

“Oh, James.”  Mickey rubbed his shoulder as she walked past him.  “You did good.”
“You think so?”

“Yeah.” Squeezing out her toothpaste, Mickey glanced up. “I don’t know entirely what the story behind that song is, but Tony doesn’t hug people. Like, ever.”

“It’s… um… JARVIS said it was the song that his mom was playing, that she never finished, the night that they, um, that I…”

“Ah.”

“If it helps, sir, Mr. Stark just used the word ‘closure’ when discussing tonight’s evens with Ms. Potts.”

Despite himself, James blushed, smiled, and looked down at the sink.

Mickey spat out her toothpaste, then reached across James to grab her hairbrush. “See? Good thing. Told you.”

He took a few more minutes to think before starting in on his own routine for the night. Once he was in bed, Mickey curled against his chest, James closed his eyes and nestled his forehead against the curve where her neck met her shoulder.

The sound of his voice surprised him, the words coming out before he realized he’d spoken.

“You know I love you, right?”

There was a pause, then Mickey shifted, her hand wrapping around his.

“Always.”

Chapter End Notes

James’s new sport bike:

I imagine James using this piano arrangement for Try To Remember: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yWjfvcPuL8
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

**Trigger warnings:**
- Delirium and mild hallucinations during Bucky’s imprisonment after his fall
- Mickey refers to her past childhood self as male
- Mentions of James raising/training girls in the Red Room inside Department X
- Implied/referenced child death
- Mild withdrawal symptoms of psychotherapeutic medications
- Mild aches and pains because James’s arm is a medical nightmare
- A LOT of swearing
- Implied/referenced sexual assault and abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*He wasn’t sure how long he’d been there. Or how long he’d been missing his left arm for. Or how long he’d been hearing voices in his head, the voices of people that should have been dead a long time ago.*

*They were the only thing that made sure he remembered his own name.*

*“James,” his mother’s voice scolded, her voice lilting with the subtle, round tones of her Romanian heritage. “James Buchanan Barnes, you come down from there right now!”*

*But ‘there’ was a fire escape in Brooklyn over fifteen years ago. The only place he had to come down from here was the low, hard cot bolted to the wall of his cell.*

*“Bucky! Buck – Oh my god… I thought you were dead.” Steve’s voice echoed in his head, loud enough to be real. Bucky opened his eyes, blindly scanning the cell, only to feel the familiar, wet prickle of disappointment. Steve hadn’t come for him yet. He would. It would just take time. He had a war to fight. Bucky wasn’t important.*

*His guards had tried to talk to him, at first. It wasn’t surprising to be reminded that not every kraut was a mindless lemming, doing the bidding of Hitler or HYDRA. One of the younger boys had confessed, in broken English, that he was only here to earn enough money to feed his mother and sister.*

*Bucky had reached out his hand, clasping it around the young soldier’s, giving him as much empathy as he could with a gentle squeeze and a knowing look. He’d never seen the young soldier again.*

*He had no idea if Becca was still alive. Her man should be taking care of her – he was listed as 4F immediately due to his scoliosis, and his job at the accounting agency paid well enough to support them, maybe even a child. All Bucky could do was pray.*

*One day, he woke up from his devil-haunted dreams to hear the strangest thing. It took him almost a full minute to recognize it.*

*Music.*
The words were in German, but the melody was familiar.

For the first time in months, Bucky’s voice shaped something that wasn’t a scream. It was rough, hoarse at first, slipping away unpredictably from where he told it to go. Eventually, though, it steadied and broadened.

The slap of running feet made Zola lift his head from the microscope he was peering into, studying the way that the American’s blood fought off every pathogen he injected.

“<What?>” he demanded irritably. The soldiers knew better than to interrupt him in the laboratory unless it was something important.

“<It’s the American, sir. He’s…>”

“<He’s what? Having a baby?>”

Swallowing, the soldier paused, mouth working as he tried to form words to the mixture of surprise, dread, and amazement.

“<He’s… singing, sir. He’s singing.>”

***

James stood in front of the microphone, staring at it, studying the intricate pattern of the mesh screen. He swallowed, swept his eyes over the expectant faces watching him, and sighed softly. “So, I guess this is what happens when I lose a bet, and the whole damn team knows I can sing.”

Chuckles rippled through his unexpected audience. James still didn’t know how Tony managed to invite that many people, let alone pack them all into the large common area.

“Well, anyway, welcome, Merry Christmas, it’s an open bar, don’t do shots against Steve, trust me, you’ll lose, and try the pierogi, they’re amazing. Tony, this one’s for you.”

He stepped back and motioned to Mickey. Plucking the strings of her Strat quietly to check the tuning, she glanced up at him and grinned. She flicked a switch on the face of the guitar, twisted a knob, and placed her fingers on the strings.

Clint stuck a hand up in the air above his drum set, signaling he was ready; James glanced over at the starstruck intern trying to hide behind his bass guitar, and waited.

He’d been impressed the first time Mickey had pounded out the intro to ‘Thunderstruck,’ but he hadn’t expected Tony’s boyish whoop of delight when she blazed her way into the first few bars.

The energy of the song was infectious, and James felt himself slip effortlessly into the suave, sassy stage persona he’d perfected so many years ago on the dance floor. The partygoers joined in, and somehow he managed to drag Steve up on stage for back-up vocals.

After several songs, Steve suggested that they play some of their music, what they’d grown up with, a suggestion met with cheers and encouragement. So, James sauntered over to the piano, sat down, and plinked out the opening chords of a song that put a wide grin on Steve’s face.

Their voices, practiced after so many years singing in barbershop quartets, blended well together as they belted out ‘Bei Mir Bist Du Schön.’ When James shamelessly wagged his eyebrows at Mickey, she giggled and rolled her eyes.
Eventually, James found himself sitting off to the side with a drink in his hand as he watched Mickey quietly pick out the rolling arpeggios of some of the classical guitar music she’d been working on. The energy of the party had gradually calmed down, gentle chatter filling the expansive room as people sat and talked with each other.

He smiled and greeted everyone that came up to him, but kept to the edges of the room as he sat and observed. It was easy to let his mind wander and he found himself remembering the previous night’s service at the church with a fond smile.

Steve led the way in, dragging James and Mickey behind him, followed by Pepper as she herded a reluctant Tony after them. They filed into one of the pews in the middle of the church, and James craned his neck back to stare at the myriad of candles everywhere.

The Christmas Eve service was every bit as breathtaking as he’d remembered it, and he still knew all of the carols by heart. One thing he hadn’t known, though, was that not only could Tony sing, his rich tenor voice rolled through the harmonies in the hymns as he read them straight from the music in front of him.

Heads were turning around every so often, and James glanced to his left when he heard a soft, hesitant voice, a new one. Mickey gave him an awkward smile, and then her whispery alto gained strength when he reached around to rub her shoulder and pull her into a one-armed hug.

The congregation was invited to sing along during the communion hymns, and James found himself closing his eyes, head tilting back, as the haunting harmonies of ‘O Holy Night’ wrapped around him.

When he finally opened his eyes, a large number of the other people were looking at him and Steve; he didn’t entirely understand why until Mickey leaned over and whispered, “I don’t think they were expecting to hear the whole thing in French.”

He blushed and glanced up at Steve to see a similar spattering of red across the blond’s cheeks.

Towards the end of the service, they held up the small candles they’d been handed on the way in, lighting them from their neighbors as the lights in the church dimmed.

James smiled softly – another one of his favorites. ‘Silent Night’ was more than just a beautiful carol to him and Steve, it held the immense weight of an impossible peace in the middle of the Great War. James’s father had told the story every year of how his unit had met with the Germans in No Man’s Land, their chaplains holding a joint service in both languages. ‘Silent Night’ was one of the few carols that everyone had known.

On the last verse, James looked to his left again, startled, as Mickey’s voice rose up into an unfamiliar descant. He stopped singing, awestruck, when her light, smooth voice carried through the rest of the church, caught in the swell of the choir’s a cappella singing.

Her cheeks flushed pink when they finished and she caught him staring. “Used to sing in the choir when I was a kid,” she mumbled. “Boy soprano and all that.”

“That was amazing,” James whispered back, hugging her tightly and kissing her forehead. “I’d love to hear you sing more.”

“Maybe.”

After the service, not many of the congregation stuck around, wrapping up in scarves and coats and hats to ward off the bitter chill. When the small group of Avengers made their way through the
church and to the doors, Father Saunders greeted them enthusiastically.

“I should draft the lot of you for the choir,” he joked, and turned to Mickey. “Especially you. You have an amazing voice, and we can always use more altos.”

She blushed again, smiling, and looked down at her boots. “Maybe after I learn how it works again. It’s been a while.”

“Of course. It’s lovely to see you again, Miss Draymond. We’re taking this Thursday off from the group sessions, but I’m looking forward to seeing you both at our first meeting of the new year.” Father Saunders gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze, winked at James, and walked away.

James turned to Tony, expecting one of his typically snarky comments, but he was looking back through the church with thinly-veiled interest. “The acoustics in here are amazing,” he murmured to Pepper. “And I have to admit, I enjoyed that.”

“Told you.” She smiled at him and snaked her arm through his before stuffing her hand back in her pocket. “Come on, let’s get home. Happy should have the car outside by now.”

“Jim?” Mickey’s voice jerked him back to the present and he jumped slightly. She sat next to him on the small couch, holding out her beer. Obligingly, he popped the cap off with his left thumb. “Thanks. You okay? Kind of got some thousand-yard stare going on.”

“Hm? Oh. Yeah. Just getting a little over-stimmed. The adrenaline from earlier wore off, I guess, and Doc said I’d get like this more often after dropping my dosage.” He chuckled softly. “First real Christmas I’ve had in a really long time, though. Feels good.”

“Yeah, that was something special. You and Steve, you sound good together.” Mickey leaned against him and tucked her head into his shoulder.

“Tony’s got a pretty good voice, too. And speaking of which, I really do think you ought to sing more.”

She sucked her lips in, chewing on them. “I dunno. I don’t feel like I sound very good.” She sat up. “What? What’s that smile for?”

Reaching into his coat, James pulled out a small envelope. “Here. This is for you. Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”

She took the envelope with a confused smile and absently handed him her beer. “Ah-ah, don’t,” she said, raising a finger as he jokingly lifted the bottle to take a drink.

Snaking her finger under the flap, Mickey popped the glue apart and pulled out the folded paper inside. Her eyes widened when she read through the certificate. “You… oh. Wow.”

“First year’s already paid for.” The corners of James’s mouth twitched up as he remembered the conversation with the vocal coach. “I mean, there’s no obligation to stick with it that long, but…”

“James…”

“Mm?”

Mickey stared at him. “This… he’s… but…”

“I know. That’s why I called him.” This particular coach was different – he specialized in voices
just like hers. “I heard you singing a few weeks ago, some sort of old folk song. You didn’t notice me come in and I didn’t want to startle you. And then the Christmas service… You sounded good, so…”

“…thank you.”

James pulled his stunned girlfriend in for a hug and kissed her forehead. “Love you, babydoll.”

“…love you too.” She stared at the certificate. “How in the name of all that’s… but… He works with Broadway stars.”

“You think I’d ask for anyone but the best? Pepper helped me set it up, called in an old favor.”

“Remind me to thank her at some point.”

Laughing, James rested his head against hers and swept his eyes across the room. His friends – his family – were celebrating a holiday just like anyone else, the world wasn’t in danger, and they could just relax. After the first few awkward autograph requests, the guests had left him alone for the most part and he’d chatted quietly with a few of Rhodes’s friends on the fringes while Mickey and Clint provided calm background music. The older veterans were delighted when he’d offered a few war stories to their conversation, and somehow, he actually found himself enjoying one of Tony’s parties for the first time.

“Hey.”

He looked down to see Mickey smiling up at him warmly.

“Merry Christmas.”

“Fröhliche Weihnachten,” he whispered back.

***

New Year’s Eve saw him curled up in a blanket while he waited out another bubble day, staring out over the brightly lit city with bloodshot, purple-ringed eyes. He leaned against the wall, curled up on the cushions in one of the bay windows, the soundproofing in the apartment preventing him from hearing the party downstairs.

Mickey had fully intended to stay with him and keep him company, but he’d shaken his head, pointed to the door and smiled as best he could. You should go, he tried to tell her, but his voice wouldn’t work. Reluctantly, she’d followed Steve downstairs.

For the next two hours, James had watched the snow flutter around, swirling in the air currents that wrapped the Tower in their freezing embrace. His thoughts were too scattered to focus on any one thing, a blessing in disguise since it kept him from falling into flashbacks yet again.

“Sir? Miss Draymond is asking if you’d like anything to eat. She is offering to bring you some food from the buffet.”

After a moment’s thought, James nodded. “Sure.” The word was hoarse, barely a whisper.

“Very good, sir. I’ll send her up.”

Several minutes later, the door swished open and Mickey padded across the room to sit next to him. She set a tray between them with a big bowl of soup and several small plates with various side
dishes. “Hey. Is soup good today?”

He nodded, then turned, leaning his back against the wall and crossing his legs as he lifted the tray and balanced it over his knees. Mickey had given her recipe for the tortellini soup to the cooking staff, and judging from her proud smile, it had been a success.

Pointing toward the door, James raised an eyebrow as he swirled his spoon in the soup.

“Oh, it’s great. Tony’s using recorded music this time, though. Too many people, not enough room for the piano or drum kit. There’s people from every branch of the service; most of them know Rhodey somehow. Thor brought a few of his Asgardian friends and they’re having a great time drinking the butterbars under the table.”

James snorted in amusement, listening to Mickey prattle on about the various people at the party while he started in on the side dishes. She told him about how she’d bumped into one of the admirals she’d served under, and how Steve was thankfully holding off on any of the Shrinking Violet super-tequila, as they’d taken to calling it. Thor turned out to be surprisingly good at darts, and Mickey had left for the buffet table when Clint dared Thor to try drawing his bow in an attempt to save his dignity.

When he’d eaten everything, he stacked up the small plates and set them in the soup bowl, doing his best to arrange the dishes so they were easier to carry back down. Mickey reached out for the tray, rocking back on her ankles.

“I’m going to head back downstairs. Just let JARVIS know if you need me or anyone else, okay?”

He reached out and gave her hand a quick squeeze.

Mickey smiled, brushing her thumb over the back of his hand. “Always.”

Turning back to the window, James rested his forehead against it, the cold glass grounding him as his thoughts swirled like the snow outside. The rough, rich tones of old radio music echoed through his head, the first music he’d heard since being captured… or saved, depending on perspective. ‘Silent night’ indeed, or it had been until his voice, broken and raw from screaming, had finally sounded beautiful again.

If it hadn’t been Christmas, if it hadn’t been that specific carol, if the Christmas Truce hadn’t been held with the same reverence by the Germans as it was by the Americans, James knew Zola would have done his best to kill him right then and there. As it was, the guards had quietly moved their radio closer to him, listening to their little bird sing song after song until his voice gave out.

The next day, he’d done the same.

For so many years, the only words he’d uttered were short, blunt orders to his teams, but he never stopped singing. It was one of the only things that preserved what little shred of humanity he had left, and it secretly elated him to force such a checkmate on his handlers. They couldn’t destroy his voice for fear of making him ineffective in the field, and every time they’d shattered his larynx, it had simply healed and regrown.

Eventually, his cell began to look more like proper quarters, despite the heavy iron door; he was given a small bookshelf, a radio, a stereo with a cassette deck, and if he was lucky, one of the less cruel guards would sneak him a pack of cigarettes and matches.

James looked down, smiling as he remembered reading stories to the young girls in the Red Room. At first, he’d simply stood at the front of the classroom and dictated from the books, but after a week
or so he sat down, stretched his long legs out in front of him, and beckoned the confused girls forward. Lukin and Karpov had found him with two of the tiny assassins-in-training in his lap, two more tucked under his arms as he reached around them to hold the book in front of him, and the rest of them curled up together around him in the corner of the classroom as he read *The Hobbit* aloud. The girls had begged him to ‘do the voices, Dyadya,’ and he was only too happy to oblige.

When he was sent to Lukin’s office later that day, the Soldier had expected swift, brutal punishment, but instead he was awkwardly commended. Lukin had informed him that the girls’ progress with their accents was phenomenal and they’d been scratching their heads over the sudden improvement – he was to continue this method of training, as unorthodox as it was.

The small Russian man had looked decidedly disturbed when his weapon smiled at him.

For the next several years, the Soldier had raised the girls like his younger sisters, teaching them to make daisy chains and singing soft lullabies that he barely remembered hearing, guiding their hands through swinging a baseball bat and catching a pop-fly, slitting a throat and snapping a neck. The walls of his cell were covered in scraps of paper, some of the drawings clumsy, some of them minutely detailed, some of them making him frown at the dichotomy of the small, innocent-looking children and their lethal training.

He’d placed flowers at the foot of the unmarked grave of each girl that had died, fixing the nervous guards with a challenging glare as he stood and walked away.

But his little Nataschenka, little Lisichka, the girl with the hair made of fire and the face of a fox, she’d survived. The Soldier retreated inward again when they took her away, surrendering to the robotic monster that took over whenever they prepped him for missions. Floating in that numb void, it was years before he was tugged back to reality to stare into Natalia’s face, her teeth bared in a snarl as she shielded his target with her body, daring him to fire, eyes blank of recognition. His hands had moved automatically, the mask over his face covering his anguish.

And then last April, the sickening drop in his stomach when fire-red hair had appeared in his peripheral vision. Her cautious approach across the hospital room, hands out, palms showing, body language telegraphing her every move. She was afraid of him.

James slowly scratched his scalp, easing the tension that made his hair feel like it was standing on end. Natasha - her name was Natasha, now - had worked hard to earn his trust and, eventually, his friendship. She was the only one other than Mickey that hadn’t shied away on the days that the only language he could speak was Russian, simply responding in kind until it became habit. After all, they were more alike than either wanted to admit: she didn’t know the full extent of what the Red Room had taken from her mind, but she still felt the echoes of the holes left behind.

He remembered her emotionless, flat tone as she’d described in sickening detail Department X’s methods of indoctrination, brainwashing, and post-hypnotic suggestion at his trial. The ashen, horrified face of a four-star general as he stared at the unassuming woman at the stand. The defense attorney’s delicate dance as he tried to maintain control of his case.

He’d sat woodenly through hours and hours of testimony, decrying him as a cold-blooded traitor or lauding him as a victimized hero.

Eventually, James stood, shuffled his way into the bedroom, robotically moved through his nighttime routine, and curled up in bed to stare sightlessly at the wall under the window. He hadn’t been able to sleep since dropping the dosage of the SSRIs he was on, but Dr. Ellmore had emphasized the importance of maintaining regular resting periods even if he wasn’t sleeping.
Trouble was, lying in bed and letting his mind wander was the perfect recipe for intrusive and cyclical thoughts. He tried focusing on Steve’s delighted smile when he’d unwrapped the set of oil paints James had given him, Pepper’s murmur of thanks and quiet smile when she’d opened a small box to see the pearls that Tony told James she’d been lusting after for a while, and the quirk of Natasha’s lips as she laced on the reel shoes that he’d obsessively researched as soon as she mentioned she was interested in Irish dance.

Mickey’s gift to him – a subscription to an expansive digital sheet music library – was accessible through Steve’s, a device that replaced the music stand on his piano and acted as a touchscreen display. He felt guilty for not sitting down to play since Christmas, but his hands had been shaking so badly for several days that Mickey had started giving him steel mugs and plastic cups to avoid another mess.

The sound of the apartment door opening and closing and quiet footsteps shuffling their way into the bedroom pulled him out of his thoughts.

“Have you been able to sleep?” Mickey asked him softly as she walked into the bathroom and started filling the oversized tub.

“Mm-mm.”

“Come keep me company while I soak my hip like a geriatric.”

Reluctantly, James unfolded himself and slid out from under the warm, soft covers, stepped out of his sweatpants and tugged off his shirt as he tiredly followed her into the bathroom.

Mickey had already stripped, sliding into the tub gingerly as she favored her left hip. She lowered herself into the water with a slightly pained sigh and smiled as James joined her, sinking into one of the large corner seats.

As he leaned forward to scoop up some of the blisteringly hot water and splash it over his face, James heard Mickey spin the top off of a jar.

“Whuzzat?” he mumbled as she started spreading a strange, gritty… something… that smelled like lavender across his shoulders.

“Sugar scrub. It’s good for your skin and it’s also supposed to help you relax, I figured it might be worth a shot. Here, scoot forward so I can get behind you.” Her hands expertly kneaded the muscles as she focused on increasing blood flow to each of them before gently smoothing out the knots. Scooping up more of the scrub, Mickey gently pressed her fingers in small circles over the scar tissue around his left shoulder, the zigzagged patches of grafted skin covering messes of synthetic muscles.

She was the only one outside of his small team of doctors to touch that ring of scar tissue and live to tell the tale. The first time she’d reached out ever so gently, James had forced himself to sit stock still, not moving a muscle until her hands retreated. But now, after months of trust and their growing bond, he relaxed into her touch and even welcomed her warm hands as they worked to soothe the constant, dull ache that throbbed through the rippled scars.

James and Steve had always been this tactile, this conditioned to seek touch as a comfort – it was part of why neither of them slept well alone. After so many years of curling himself around that frail, coughing body, trying to share what meager warmth he had, Bucky had lost the ability to sleep through the night without the weight of a head on his chest. For the Soldier, that had become destructive insomnia combated with a nasty cocktail of drugs, and for James, Mickey’s constant
presence through the night served to ground him and drive away the lesser monsters that crawled through his head.

Gradually, gently, Mickey’s hands worked down his back, then slid around his waist. He caught them as she reached lower, though, sighing as he laced his fingers through hers and pulled her arms around his chest.

“Not tonight, babydoll.”

She nodded, forehead pressed between his shoulderblades, and gently squeezed with her arms. “Everything okay?”

“Brain static.”

“Want me to keep working on your back?”

Reluctantly, James shook his head.

“…well, I need to pee soon anyway, so…”

He scooted forward to let her stand, and then leaned back into the corner seat, letting the jets gently push into his back.

A towel landed next to the tub with a fluffy thump, and James smirked at Mickey before pulling the tub stopper and standing up. “Is this my cue to leave?”

“Unless you want to watch me piss, yeah.”

James quickly dried himself off, then wrapped the towel around his waist and left the bathroom, pulling the door shut behind him. He stood at the large bank of windows in the main room, hair dripping onto his shoulders as he watched the brilliant lights shining from Times Square. After a few moments, he pulled open the drawers of their dresser and started tossing clothes onto the bed.

“Going somewhere?” Mickey asked as she walked into the bedroom. Despite the long day and aching joint, her gait was more even and stable with each passing day.

“Gonna take a walk. Clear my head a bit.”

“How long do you need?”

“Not sure,” James responded as he shook his head, tugging on a pair of thermal leggings before he pulled on heavy jeans. “I’ll keep my phone on me, JARVIS can monitor and let you know if anything happens.” He leaned over to shove his feet into his more presentable pair of combat boots, lacing them up and then smoothing the cuffs of his jeans over them.

A thermal shirt, long-sleeve Henley, soft hoodie, and a thick wool pea coat followed, but the outfit was only complete when Mickey offered him a soft scarf to wrap around his neck and plopped a newsboy cap on his head. She smoothed his collar down, then grasped the lapels gently in her hands as she rocked up on her toes to give him a quick kiss.

“Stay safe, okay?”

“Always.”

“Oh, and don’t forget these.” Halfway through the door, James turned, catching the small box she tossed at him. “You keep forgetting to put a new pack in your coat when you run out. I topped up
your Zippo last week, too.”

“Thanks, doll.”

She wagged her fingers at him as she pulled on a pair of shorts and a loose t-shirt.

JARVIS locked the elevator once he was inside, taking him straight to the ground floor and letting him out without having to encounter any of the partygoers. The bracingly cold air outside of the main doors made James breathe in sharply, squeezing his eyes shut at the small gust that hit his face with the change in air pressure.

It was less than fifteen minutes to midnight, and he could hear the crowds in Times Square cheering already. Turning, he began walking in the exact opposite direction, letting his feet wander as he wound his way through the sleepless city.

The snow wasn’t really sticking this far down, congealing into sludgy masses in the gutters and making the ground slick and dark. Streetlights glowed warmly through the night air, and the neon signs of the shops made the streets glitter like Christmas trees.

Eventually, he found himself at a small park barely more than a pond a few hundred feet across with some grass, benches, and trees. A few restaurants – if you could call them that – sat back from the edge of the park, their lights casting a warm glow onto the water through the fogged-up windows. James ambled up to the sturdy wood railing that ringed the pond, leaned over on it, and squinted up into the sky. The tiny flurries of snowflakes whirled around just like they did outside the windows of the apartment, and James smiled a bit as he pictured Steve’s paintbrushes dappling their way over a canvas to recreate the scene.

The pond’s surface rippled softly, pushed this way and that by the small air currents swirling about, tiny waves lapping at the reedy, mossy banks. A couple, college age and arm in arm, walked slowly around the other edge of the pond making eyes at each other as their cheeks pinked from the cold air. James reached into his coat pocket to draw out the box of smokes and tapped one out into his hand before he dug into the inside pocket for his lighter.

It felt a little strange to be holding a Zippo now – they’d been around during the 30s, but neither he nor Steve could even dream of affording something so frivolous as a lighter when matches worked just as well. And, once they’d formed the Invaders, neither of them had the time nor inclination to smoke much anyway. Steve no longer needed his asthma cigarettes, and nicotine was as ineffective as standard strength booze.

Even though it wouldn’t damage his lungs the way it would with most people, James rarely smoked, and only well away from his teammates. Neither Mickey nor Steve cared for the smell, and it was more a physically soothing habit than a chemically soothing one anyway, the familiarity helping to bridge the strange gaps in his memory. He went through a pack maybe every four or five weeks, justifying the expense of premium cigarettes with the sluggish rate at which he smoked them.

He was about to tuck the small stainless-cased modern marvel back into his coat when someone called out to him.

“Hey, do you mind giving me a light?” The voice was male, low, roughened with the cadences of a Slavic burr.

Flicking the lid back off the lighter, James turned – and had to work hard to mask his horrified surprise when he found himself staring into the last face he expected to see.
What had once been a thin wiry man with a narrow face, intelligent eyes, and soft brown hair had aged into something broader and harder. Karpov’s skin was pockmarked and lined with the signs of many sleepless nights, his eyes hooded and dull. His shoulders were slumped as if his loose canvas coat dragged down on them heavily, and his thin, dirty clothes provided little protection against the late-night chill.

Pulling one corner of his mouth up to hide his quickly growing discomfort, James flicked the flint wheel and held the lighter steady as Karpov lifted a cigarette, sucking in until the end glowed with a small ember.

“Thanks.”

“Sure thing.”

Karpov leaned back against the railing, staring out blankly at the glowing shop signs. “Happy fucking New Year.”

After a moment’s hesitation and a drag from his own cigarette, James replied with, “И вас также.”

Karpov’s head whipped around. “<You’re Russian?>”

Shrugging, James kept his expression neutral. “<Not really. Just spent a lot of time in Europe when I was younger.>”

The shorter man nodded and studied the railing in front of him. “<You know, there was a man I worked with once, had an accent much like yours, Moldovan. He could hide it when he had to, but…>”

“<Sounds like an interesting guy,>” James said blithely as he tapped the ash gently away from the end of his cigarette.

Karpov’s eyes narrowed as he turned toward him. “<Looked a bit like you, too. Big guy, dark hair, light eyes. Broad face like yours, but… he had a…>” His words trailed off as James raised his gloved left hand, wiggling the fingers just enough to make the motors whir quietly.

“<Metal arm?>”

The blood drained out of Karpov’s face as he swallowed, throat bobbing, and his eyes widened. He took a half-step back, eyes fixed on James as his feet scuffed through the dirt.

“<Relax, Vasechka. I’m not here to kill you.>”

“<If anyone has reason to, it’s you.>” Karpov’s cigarette hung forgotten from his fingers, sending wispy curls of smoke up into the air.

Sighing, James pushed his cap back slightly to scratch at his forehead. “<Yeah, maybe. I mean, you did basically…> Oh, what the fuck is the word. <Rape. There we go. Twenty goddamn years, Karpov. Twenty fucking goddamn years.>”

Karpov shuffled to the side to lean back against the railing several feet from James. “<I was a sick man. I still am, but now I… try not to be.>”

“<That’s not a fucking excuse.>” Scoffing quietly, James turned away. He couldn’t bear to look at Karpov, not after so many years of it all. “<Only reason I haven’t laid a hand on you yet is because, come on, look at you. I could snap you in two with my pinkie. Have you been eating or sleeping at
The response was quiet and soft. "<It’s hard to, when the ghosts of your sins beg reckoning every
time you close your eyes.>"

"<And since when have you cared about your sins?>" James sneered back, eyes narrowed.

Silence fell between them as Karpov stared at the ground, the lines on his face deepening. "<My
actions… my job… what I did… the Red Room has more than one way of ensuring loyalty. The
right man will perform unconscionable acts with the right… persuasion.>"

James fought down the bile rising in his throat as he remembered lying facedown on Karpov’s desk,
unable to fight back, unable to move, conditioned into compliance, numb as he listened to the man
choke out a name as he shuddered and stillled. Irina. The Soldier hadn’t understood then. It was a
common enough name.

But James – with the gift of hindsight - remembered, and understood. One of the girls in the Red
Room, the smallest and youngest, so terrified of Comrade Karpov… The Soldier hadn’t put the signs
together, but for James they slotted into place as he leaned over the railing, nauseous.

"Oh, you sick bastard. You couldn’t stop with me, could you?” he whispered, reverting to English,
then suddenly whirled around and hauled Karpov forward by his lapels, roaring. "They were
CHILDREN!"

“They were weapons! Just like you!”

Growling, James leaned closer, his nose less than an inch from Karpov’s. The fear in the man’s eyes
was intoxicating, and James slipped further and further away from the calm control he worked so
hard to maintain. "Call me a weapon one more time and I’m going to rethink that promise not to kill
you with my bare fuckin’ hands. Because of what Mother Russia did to me – because of what you
did to me, I take enough happy pills every day to choke a goddamn horse. You wanna talk about
being fucked up, you wanna talk about ghosts? Wanna trade ghost stories? How about the time I
woke up getting hosed off, and there was brain matter in my hair? All the times I’ve had to tell my
girlfriend no, we can’t do anything tonight, I’m still remembering getting rammed by my handler?
How about waking up in the middle of the night screaming because you can still feel the pulse of a
dying child under your hands as you press the life out of him?

“How about seeing four jeering faces watching you as you get the ever-lovin’ shit beat outta you by
some juiced up science experiment? The nightmares still haunt me even though I know I killed them
– I remember putting bullets in their brains. I remember the sedatives you had to use to knock them
out. I counted the bodies of the doctors and soldiers that died in that massacre – and you used me as
a chew toy for those freaks. You threw me in that mothafuckin’ room and told them to kill me. You
wanna talk ghosts and nightmares?” He leaned in closer and felt a thrill of delight when he noticed
the terrified sheen of sweat on the smaller man’s forehead.

“You wanna talk about being haunted by the ghosts of the dead?” he hissed, his hands starting to tear
the thin fabric of Karpov’s jacket. “Son, you ain’t been haunted yet by the ghost you left alive.”

The muscles under Karpov’s eyes pulsed and twitched as he tried to keep his composure. His eyes
flicked to the left, behind James, as heavy footsteps ran towards them and repulsors whistled through
the air. Tony thudded down next to the two men as Mickey circled around, icer pistol drawn and
held at the ready.

“James. Stand down,” she ordered. Steve moved into his field of view on his other side, shield held
out defensively.

Snarling, James shoved Karpov away from him, sending the man stumbling to the ground.

“Okay, Buckyball, you got about thirty seconds before Twitter starts blowing up,” Tony said, his voice low and forceful as he grabbed James’s arms. “You gonna make this fire any bigger than it already is?”

Karpov was standing up slowly, hands raised, favoring his right knee. “He just attacked me – you know who he is, he’s dangerous, he’s a weapon-”

With a feral roar, James shoved Tony bodily to the side and tackled Karpov, holding him flat on his back with his left hand while he drew back his right. His fist slammed into Karpov’s face over and over again, he felt the cheekbone and jaw give way, and simply continued punching until-

“Sputnik.”

The word cracked through James’s head.

He was unconscious before he hit the ground.

***

“You said you was goin’ on a gawdamn walk!” Mickey bellowed at him, throwing her arms out to either side. James stood uncomfortably in one of the small briefing rooms as Steve and Tony watched him from behind Mickey, arms crossed and wearing matching looks of disappointment.

“I was.” He tried to keep his voice level, fighting down the residual aggression and rush of anger. “Went for a walk and a smoke, ended up by the pond. Then Karpov shows up outta nowhere and-”

“And you attacked him?!”

“I didn’t think-”

Mickey stalked up to him, slapping a hand against his chest through the wool coat. “That’s right, you didn’t. No, you couldn’a just, I dunno, said Happy Fuckin’ New Year back and walked away? Maybe not let him know who you were? Called for fuckin’ backup? No! Instead you go an’ start yellin’ at the fucker, in plain fuckin’ sight in public on a fuckin’ holiday-”

“You put me to sleep!” If anything, that was what stung the most - that Mickey had made the call that he was so far gone, she needed to resort to a command word.

“You killed a man in public!” she roared, her face red and tight. “I shot you three fuckin’ times with a tranq and you just kept hitting him! What the hell else was I s’pos’to do?!”

“Barnes, Pepper’s going to be up for the next four days running damage control and trying to keep this out of the papers.” Tony rubbed at his eyes with a frustrated sigh. “I had to send everyone home from the party, the NYPD’s banging on our doors, and – Jesus Christ man, you just got done with your trial, and…”

Steve stepped forward, putting a hand on each of their shoulders. “Mickey. Tony.” He nodded his head toward the door. Tony and Steve stared at each other for several seconds before Tony closed his eyes and sighed again.

“C’mon, kid.” Tony stepped forward, grabbing Mickey’s arm.
Fuming, Mickey let herself be led out of the briefing room, and it was only after the door closed behind them that Steve sighed, his shoulders slumping forward.

“What the hell was that, Buck?” he asked quietly. “Are you okay?”

James finally pulled the scarf from around his neck, tossing it onto the conference table and following it with his cap and coat. He reached up and rubbed his hands over his face, exhaling sharply. “I don’t know. One minute I’m there, just having a nice, peaceful evening away from people and shit, and then he shows up outta the blue. And… and then, I… I don’t know what happened. I just lost control.”

“Well, yeah, that’s pretty obvious.”

Holding his hands up placatingly, James sat down heavily in one of the chairs. “Look, I know I messed up, but-”

“This is a PR nightmare, Bucky. Pepper’s currently on the phone with the papers making some strategic donations to keep this off the press, but we can’t control social media. There’s already a trending hashtag on Twitter.”

James dropped his head into his hands. “Let me guess. Winteriscoming? That didn’t get old fast.” He glanced up at Steve, expecting at least a smirk, and did a double-take when his friend looked back at him stony-faced and concerned. “What?”

Steve’s silence made him even more uncomfortable, and the single word that followed it made James’s blood run cold.

“Prizrak.”

Chapter End Notes

_Dun dun DUUNNNNNN!_ Seriously, though. We won’t have a lot of the shit-hits-the-fan chapters, but this is definitely one of them. Karpov’s a disgusting creature and I wanted to explore his character a bit more than they did during Civil War. Also of note, this is roughly where the story starts to really dink around with MCU canon (as if _Recovery!Bucky_ doesn’t do that enough).

_Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen on YouTube_

_Silent Night on YouTube._ The descant Mickey sings is similar to this one - not quite the same, but similar. I grew up in the choir at my church, so Christmas Eve is pretty special to me because of the music, and the organist when I was a kid wrote this staggeringly beautiful descant that I only somewhat remember. All of the choir ladies have it memorized, but I think my mom has it written down somewhere. I’ll need to dig it out soon - I’m at a new church now and can’t wait to share it with my new choir.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Cookies to whoever correctly guesses the identity of the unnamed young man in this episode’s flashback!

Trigger warnings:
- Severe leg injury (non-graphic): tourniquet, bleeding, pain
- Severe abdominal injury (non-graphic)
- Implied/referenced rape
- Implied/referenced torture
- Appearance change (hair, makeup, contacts/glasses, beard)
- Hypervigilance
- Aggressive dogs
- Mild dissociative/personality slip/flashback episode including speech problems
- Argument caused by someone (cough James cough) being a fucknut
- Depression-caused pessimism and self-doubt

Bucky ducked, his arm swinging reflexively above his head as he flinched away from the explosion. “Frenchie! Little further away from us next time!” he barked before hoisting his rifle back up and charging into the newly strewn rubble. Dernier simply shrugged at him and prattled off something in French that made Gabe snort.

Shaking his head and grumbling wordlessly to himself, Bucky advanced through the remnants of the building, the rifle bucking in his hands as he gunned down anything that moved as soon as he could identify it as friend or foe. He nearly tripped over a particularly huge fragment of wall, a cartoonish face and KILROY WAS HERE carved into it. Had it been anywhere else, anytime else, he might have smirked or laughed.

Hours later, covered in dust and sweat and blood, Bucky carried a screaming man over his shoulder, arms awkwardly positioned as he tried not to jostle the bloodied mess of the soldier’s leg.

The medics took him immediately, carrying him away on a stretcher as he writhed in pain. Running after them, Bucky stripped off his jacket, tied it around his waist, and shoved his sleeves up to the elbows. “Tell me what I can do to help,” he shouted over the din at the nearest nurse, who answered him by shoving bandages into his hands and pointing to the man he’d rescued.

“We’ll need a tourniquet to cut off the femoral artery. Wrap up the shrapnel to stabilize it; we can’t take it out until he stops bleeding.”

“Roger.” Bucky dumped the bandages on the soldier’s bloodied cot, scrabbling through the nearest box of supplies until he found what he was looking for. “Okay, buddy. I ain’t gonna lie, this is gonna hurt. Open up.” He dropped a wood block between the man’s teeth and smoothed back sweat-soaked black hair. “Okay. Bite down. Hard as you can. Scream if you have to.”

Working quickly, Bucky tied the tourniquet, twisting it as tight as he could. There wasn’t any saving the mangled mess of a leg, so he just did his best to stop the bleeding until the doctors could get
there. Next, he quickly went to work winding bandages around the twisted piece of metal embedded in the soldier’s thigh.

“Hey, pal, stay with me. You’re gonna be okay.” The soldier reached up and gripped Bucky’s hand so tightly that he felt the bones grind against each other. Wide, frightened eyes stared at him, pupils shrunk to pinpricks.

“Don’t leave me. Don’t let me die.”

“I’m right here, buddy. Gonna stay right here.” Bucky waited for the soldier to let go of his hand, then started cleaning the cut on the man’s scalp. “You’re out. You’re safe. Gonna patch you up and get you some well-deserved leave.”

“What’s your name?” the soldier slurred.

“Barnes. Folks call me Bucky.”

The soldier’s eyes shot open and stared at him. “No fuckin’ way. I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

Bucky laughed despite himself and hoped it didn’t sound as bitter as it felt. “Nope, I ain’t an angel. You want that, you gotta look at Cap. He came up with the plan that got all o’ you boys outta there.”

The soldier sank back into his pillow. “Captain America wasn’t the one that carried me out.”

“Yeah, but you’re gonna tell your boys that ‘cus that’s what they need to hear. Am I gonna get a name for the sack o’ bricks I had to drag outta there?”

“Sousa. Daniel Sousa, Sergeant in the 101st.”

“You got a girl back home, Sousa?”

“No,” Sousa told him with a bitter laugh. “I’m in the Brush-Off Club.”

Bucky winced. “Hell, man. I’m sorry.” When Sousa’s eyes started to flutter, Bucky slapped him gently. “Hey, pal, stay awake for me. Doc’s gonna be here any minute, they’re gonna do what they can for your leg and we’ll get you back on your feet in no time.”

“Back on my foot, you mean.”

“Sousa…”

Sousa stared up at him, his face pale. “Let’s be real, Sarge. I lost the leg soon as I got hit.”

Unable to respond, Bucky simply reached out a hand and gripped Sousa’s shoulder tightly, his mouth pressed into a thin line and his eyes prickling.

Decades later, lost to both himself and the world, the Soldier held the hand of a young man as he lay bleeding in the Croatian dirt. “Stay with me, buddy.” The Soldier’s voice rolled with a strange blend of a Slavic tinge and a Brooklyn drawl, muffled slightly through his mask. “Gotta stay awake for me, your team’s gonna be here any minute. I gotta be gone when they get here, but I gotta make sure you’re gonna stay awake.”

The boy sputtered, coughing up red flecks. “‘m I gonna be a flag on Aimee’s doorstep?”

“No, buddy, but you gotta stay awake for me.”
“How’m I gonna tell the boys I got out? You’re a fuckin’ ghost story.”

The Soldier held both of the boy’s hands in his right, gripping them as tight as he dared. He wanted to put pressure on the wound, but the knife was still firmly lodged in the boy’s ribs and pulling it out would kill him. “Just like you, though. One ghost story saved by another.”

“Whaddo I tell ‘em? Angel carried me out?” The bitter sarcasm lost its bite when the kid grimaced and squeezed his eyes shut, pressing his head back against the ground.

“You’re gonna tell your boys that ‘cause that’s what they need to hear,” the Soldier said, the words stirring a faint memory that twitched once before fading back into oblivion. “Can’t tell them the devil did it, they’ll still believe you.”

As soon as the sound of a Jeep rolled into the Soldier’s ears he stood, slunk into the bushes, and waited to make sure the boy was found.

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“There were six of us.” James’s voice was flat as he sat at the end of the table furthest from the projection screen. Five faces, photographs this time, stared at him. “I talked about them during the trial. The other Winter Soldiers.”

“I thought that was just your code name,” Sam commented, eyes narrowed.

“It was the program name.” Natasha sat straight and stiff, eyes fixed on the table in front of her. “Just like Black Widow.”

“My code name inside the program – I was the first, so they named me first, years before the others were even a thought – was Prizrak. They couldn’t always just call me Soldier, not when we had Army troops on a mission.”

Clint shuffled through the file he held, then glanced up at James. “So what – or who – is a Prizrak?”


Sneering, James curled his left hand into a fist on the table. “Their perfect killer. Fire a shot, snap a neck, disappear into the night like I wasn’t even there, no traces or evidence to track me. It got even better when Pierce took over. He started out as just another handler, but… he could control me better than anyone else, without having to torture me.”

“Any idea why?” Steve asked, and James waved to the screen as it shifted to show a picture of Pierce in the late 90s.

“Because he looked like you.” James traced the wood grain in front of him slowly with a finger. “No matter how much they zapped my brain, how many times they tied me down and had their way, no matter what they did to me, they couldn’t get you out of my head completely. That wasn’t a problem until they found you and thawed you out, but they used Pierce’s resemblance to you to their advantage.”

“Makes strategic sense,” Tony said thoughtfully, nodding. “Torture’s expensive. It takes advanced equipment for someone like you, and people who know what they’re doing. It’d save them a lot of time and money if they had other means of control.”

Looking sick, Steve gripped the edge of the table with both hands. “Did he ever…”
“He looked like you,” James repeated softly. “I wouldn’t - couldn’t - fight back. Karpov, Lukin, the guards, the soldiers… they all had to restrain me or beat me senseless. But Pierce, I couldn’t fight back. Never knew why, until . . .”

“Until DC.”

“Yeah.”

Without warning, Bruce slapped his folder down on the table and stood; his chair skittered back and James looked up to see his skin tinged green. “I’m going downstairs,” he growled as he practically ran out of the room.

Tony reached for the abandoned file, flipped it open, and scanned the pages quickly. “Karpov’s notes. Lists the best methods of . . . control. No wonder Bruce is upset.”

Leaning over, James quietly asked Steve, “Where’s Mickey? Is she okay?”

“Oh, she’s still fifty shades of pissed the fuck off, but she’s with Pepper and Darcy working the press. They’re trying to put a spin on this. Make it a sting op or something.”

“Isn’t the fact that Karpov was one of my handlers enough?”

“In case you forgot how the law works, James,” Natasha interrupted, flat and furious, “you killed a man without obvious provocation. And given your enhancements, ‘self defense’ doesn’t really work in this case. The only way you’re getting out of this is if we make it official Avengers business and backdate a deployment order.”

James frowned. “But I’m not on the team, not officially.”

For the first time, Hill and Fury looked up from the laptop they were staring at. Fury tilted his head down and eyed James sharply. “Well, we don’t have much of a choice now, do we? I got five different governments callin’ for your immediate arrest, and eight more callin’ for your head on a spike. You wanna play by the rules for once and make this easier on the rest of us that have to mop up your messes?”

“I- but-” Growling in frustration, James stood abruptly and walked over to the large window overlooking the city, bracing his hands against it. He took several deep breaths before speaking again. “The bomb in DC, I couldn’t just let him kill people. And how was I supposed to know there was a HYDRA cell in the National Guard? And then Siberia, Frederic gave the order for that. How was I supposed to leave one of her men behind? And don’t even get me fucking started on Smithson.”

Hill closed her laptop. “Barnes, what we’re trying to say is, you’ve got a high profile. That attracts attention, and you’ve still got active conditioning. There’s a lot of people trying to get you under their control. We can’t let that happen. Until everything calms back down again, you’re going to have to follow your orders to the letter, no leeway.”

“So you’re making my decisions for me, then?” James snarled, turning to face her. “Sounds like you’re one of the people tryin’ to control me.”

“That’s not what she said, Buck-”

“Shut up, Steve.”

“You know,” Clint said thoughtfully. “Maybe it’s best if he disappears for a while. I’ve got a few
safehouses he can lie low in. They know where to find him here, maybe he needs to be somewhere else.”

Fury nodded slowly. “That’s one idea. Gonna take some planning, but we might be able to make that work.”

“Better not be fuckin’ Wisconsin.” James turned back to the window and shoved his hands in his pockets, glowering at the glass in front of him.

“How’s Portland sound? Little wet this time of year, but I got a little cabin on the outskirts that might be to your liking. Just stocked it up on food and firewood last week.”

Forcing himself to think it over, James finally nodded. “Sounds good, Barton. Thanks.”

“Now, you understand that we can’t let Agent Draymond go with you until we successfully convince everyone that you’re undercover and rooting out HYDRA.” Hill was already seriously considering the safehouse, by the tone of her voice.

“Understood, ma’am. And to be honest, I’m not sure she wants much to do with me right now anyway.”

“She’ll come around,” Steve reassured him quietly. “She’s just upset.”

Snorting, James shook his head. “I promised her this wouldn’t happen. That I wouldn’t lose it.” His voice cracked on the last few words.

Steve stood, walking over to James, and pulled him in for a hug. They stood looking out over the city, Steve’s arm around James’s shoulders, as the rest of the team began to hash out details.

Finally, Natasha wrapped her hand around James’s and tugged gently. When he looked up to meet her eyes, she gave him a tight smile. “We need to give you a haircut.”

An hour later, James stared at himself through the selfie camera on Mickey’s tablet, his long brown hair now sitting in small piles on the floor of his kitchen. Short and fluffy, his new haircut stuck out in all directions as it tried to figure out where to go now that it wasn’t weighed down any more. At least Natasha had left it long enough to hide the serial number tattooed above his ear.

“We’re going to fly you out next weekend, so don’t shave between now and then. Can’t have people recognizing you.”

He tiredly rubbed a hand over his face, already scratchy with a day’s stubble. “Yeah…” Trying to smooth his hair down only gave him marginal results, and eventually he sighed and scratched his nails over his scalp. “Feels weird.”

“It will, for a few days.” Mickey’s voice startled him, and he raised his head to look at her. She closed the apartment door behind her and dropped her bag on the floor by their shoes. “You have no idea how weird it looks to the rest of us though.”

“Thanks, doll.”

James helped Natasha sweep up the remnants of his hair before she left, unconsciously reaching up to brush back strands that no longer fell in his face. Once the floor was clean again, he went over to the couch and flopped down on it, covering his eyes with his arms.

“Jim.”
He grunted in response as Mickey’s footsteps passed by him. She tugged upward on his shoulders and he raised himself up enough for her to sit down, then lay back down with his head in her lap. Her fingers started to card through his hair and he closed his eyes, sighing slightly before speaking.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t have yelled at you. I was pretty pissed.”

_Pissed enough for Detroit to be at bat_, he thought. “How bad is it?”

“You don’t want to know. The good news is that Darcy’s a wizard when it comes to spinning stories. She’s the one that came up with the idea for a covert deployment.”

“How’s you Sputniking me work into that? Pretty obvious to any bystanders that I was outta control.” The command words only worked when pronounced correctly; the sloppy Americanization of the pronunciations made them safe to use in conversation if necessary.

Mickey paused before responding, her hands stilling momentarily. “We’re working on that one. I think the best way to do that is that the mission went south when we realized who we were dealing with. No one was close enough to hear what was going on, so we can always say that Karpov intentionally triggered you and then committed suicide by proxy. He’s got medical records dating back ten years at a local clinic for the homeless that indicate suicidal tendencies and severe psychosis.”

“Wait, homeless?” James’s eyes snapped open.

Mickey’s eyes were red-rimmed, purple bags underneath them. “Yeah. He was living on the streets for at least the past decade, ever since his wife died… cancer, just like Mum. Records indicate that HYDRA promised him a cure to keep him compliant. Turns out it was just a masker, suppressed the symptoms until they stopped giving it to her after your transfer. He’s been hospitalized three times in five years for suicide attempts, under the name Basil Carpenter.”

“…oh.” James didn’t realize he was idly playing with one of the panels in his arm, shifting it out and running his thumbnail under the edge, until Mickey gently pulled his hand away. “Are… are you still mad at me?”

“Oh, I’m fucking livid,” she said tonelessly. “I’m just too exhausted to do anything about it right now, haven’t been able to take a nap since we brought you back here. It’s gonna take a lot of work to undo this and I’m not looking forward to the press conferences.”

“…press conferences?”

She nodded, running her fingers through her hair until it stuck straight up. “Darcy and I are the only two non-enhanced, non-powered, affiliated, and qualified parties who aren’t the CEO of a company, pretending to be dead, or publicly recognized as the Director of SHIELD. So, we get to take all the flak for this one.”

“I’m sorry, Myshka,” James whispered, and pressed his hands against his face. “Not for killing Karpov, you know full well why I did that, but god _damn_ if the fallout is more than I expected. And now I have to go hide away in a little cabin in the woods and pretend I’m someone else while you wade through another one of my messes. I am _so_ sorry.”

Mickey leaned down awkwardly to kiss his forehead. “You know, even without the whole relationship thing, it is kind of my job. Like, it actually lays out stuff like this on my official contract. So, as much as it sucks, just trust me to do my job, and I’ll trust you to not let this happen again,
okay?"

He nodded, then let his hands fall onto his chest. “Did I seriously have to get a haircut, though? And Tashka said we have to bleach it. I really don’t look good blond, had to do that once in the 70s and it’s just… wrong.”

“Mm.” Mickey smiled, her fingers combing the fluffy strands back and forth. “I kinda like it like this. It’s fun to play with. I don’t think we’ll need to lighten your hair that much, probably just a lighter shade of brown.”

“Am I gonna need to get hair goop or something? Used to use pomade back in the war, but Pepper told me there’s better stuff out there now.”

“Depends on what you want to do with it.”

“I’ll defer to your judgement. My hairstyle library currently consists of hanging in my face, ponytail, man bun, or braids.”

“Tell you what,” Mickey yawned. “I really need a nap - yes, I know we just had breakfast - but I really need a nap. Let’s go lay down for a bit and then I’ll help you with your hair a little later.”

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James scratched absently at the scruff covering his face before eyeing his motorcycle helmet warily.

“Stop stalling, I gotta be wheels up in five.” Clint took the helmet out of his hands and shoved it down on James’s head, quickly threading the strap together and snapping down the tail. “Your visor readout will give you directions to the safehouse. Try not to get pulled over again.”

“Thanks, man.” Rolling the Harley forward, James leaned back to take some of the weight as he headed down the ramp at the back of the Quinjet. He tapped his helmet in salute and swung a leg over, kicking the engine to life before pulling away.

Relief filled him as the glowing, crisp lines he’d begun associating with JARVIS’s readouts filled his visor.

“Good afternoon, sir.”

“Good to hear you, buddy. You linked into the safehouse too?”

“Of course. Director Fury made sure the linkup was active three days ago. Take a left at the next intersection if you can.”

“Roger wilco.” James glanced over his shoulder, then swung the bike through the turn, rolling easily with the motion. “Any neighbors I need to be aware of?”

“Not presently. Most of the people living in the neighborhood tend to keep to themselves.”

He waved a thank you at an orange Challenger that gave him enough room to merge, then leaned into the bike and twisted the throttle open. JARVIS’s directions led him to a small community nestled in the tree-studded foothills just east of the main part of the city.

“Barnes Road? Seriously?” James muttered to himself as he straightened from the turn onto the final road. “This some kind of joke?”

"I believe it is no more than an amusing coincidence. "
“Better be.”

The safehouse was an unassuming, gray, boxy-shaped building with a two-stall garage facing the street and second story windows looking out above the garage. James nudged the kickstand down, digging in his pocket for the garage door key, and a few seconds later lifted the large door up with a grunt.

The garage was tidy, organized, with a few essentials like engine oil and coolant lined up neatly on a small metal shelving unit. A utility sink sat in the corner, and a large white freezer hummed next to it. Something vaguely sporty-looking sat under a shapeless, dusty gray cover in the second stall with jackstands poking out from under the dull fabric, and James gave it a cursory glance before turning away.

He tugged the garage door down, tripping the latch from the inside, and pulled off his helmet to set it on top of the shelving unit. Letting out a soft sigh, he clomped up the stairs to the main part of the house.

The furnishings were comfortable if generic-looking, and James gratefully dropped his backpack on the white-painted table. A quick glance down the hall confirmed that the large Army duffel he’d packed the day before waited for him in the main bedroom. Tossing his jacket onto the hook on the wall, James sprawled out in one of the armchairs after pulling a large file out of his backpack.

He snaked a finger under the elastic strap, pulled up the cover flap, and shook out a passport, a trip itinerary, and a packet containing his cover story. Turning the passport over in his hands, he lifted the navy blue cover and quickly read over his new information. “Aussie Aussie Aussie.” Within a few seconds he’d slipped into the rolling lilt of an Australian accent as he quietly mumbled through the first few paragraphs of the packet for practice.

A phone and a ring fell into his hand as he upended the file a second time – a cheap Android, an effective burner if necessary. Booting it up, he noticed that it had been already prepped with a set of cover contacts and a few accounts in his new name.

“Huh. I guess I like social media.” His new Instagram feed was mostly of food and beer, with a healthy dose of Australian slang thrown into each of the captions. The few pictures that showed his face were strategically chosen so that his hair was obscured and the angle or lighting was strange.

The ring was a thin, flat band designed to mess with the alignment and movement of his left hand as little as possible, but it would never be comfortable. The low-level pressure triggering the sensors under the plates there was the same sort of distracting as tinnitus, brought to his attention every single time he shifted his fingers.

James powered off his normal phone and dropped it into the Faraday sleeve Tony had provided, tucking it back into the file with all of his documentation. He read through the cover story packet one more time, committing it to memory, and then crumpled up the pages and tucked them into the neatly piled logs in the fireplace. Within minutes, a small fire crackled cheerfully at him, and the file would pass muster as a travelling student’s stash of important documents.

It took him about an hour of fiddling with his new phone to adjust to the different interface, and after he’d changed around the settings to suit him, he tapped on the phone icon and dialed Mickey’s number.

“’lo?” she answered, voice groggy.

“Sorry, did I wake you up?”
There was an awkward pause, and then, “Who is this?”

“It’s Aaron.” He had to stay in character, especially if the safehouse turned out to be bugged. “Just touched down in Portland, the flight from Sydney wasn’t so bad. Rental place had the bike like I set up, and the house is ripper.”

“...the fuck? James?”

“Yep. Had to get a new mobile because mine won’t take the network here.”

“So I take it you’re at the safehouse and settled in?”

“Yeah. How’s things on the home front?”

“Well, we’ve put out most of the fires when it comes to the major networks, and Darce and I just wrapped up our second conference this morning. Had to lay down for a bit, Pep’s got us working ‘round the clock right now.”

Standing, James pressed the phone between his ear and shoulder and grabbed his backpack and the file as he headed toward the main bedroom. “Sounds like you’ve got it sorted, then.”

“Yeah. I checked in with Franklin by the way, he says he’s got everything under control for training until you’re cleared to come back.”

“Thanks.” He tossed his backpack into the corner of the room, grimacing a bit at the plaid bedspread. “Eugh. This place reeks of redneck.”

Mickey laughed. “Well, I should be able to fly out in about a week. Think you can keep from going crazy that long?”

“Yeah. Doc gave me a dosage chart to follow, and I got a back stash if I need it. Plus, I’ve got…” James picked up the book that sat on his nightstand. “…a hundred and one beautiful Portland tourist traps to visit.”

“God, you sound so weird. Especially because I’ve heard real Aussies that sound less Australian.”

“Ain’t the weirdest I’ve done, love.” Dropping the book back onto the nightstand, James spun and landed with a thump on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. “Looking forward to when you get here.”

“Me too. I’ve got a meeting in a few more hours and I’d like to get some more rest so I’m gonna have to go, sorry.”

“No worries. Take care. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

The phone beeped quietly at him when she hung up, and he glanced at it before setting it on the pillow next to him.

“If I may suggest something, sir,” JARVIS’s voice said from the set of speakers on the dresser, “a walk downtown would help familiarize you with the area. There are a number of well-reviewed tourist destinations that I can recommend.”

“Sure, why not. Got an earwig for me?”

“In the top drawer of the dresser, on the right, there’s a small box.”
James found the earpiece and carefully pushed it into his ear, making sure the tiny wire to pull it back out was accessible. “Check.”

“*Loud and clear, sir.*”

“Alright, let’s hit the road.”

Checking his appearance quickly in the mirror, James twitched his mouth into a frown when an unfamiliar face stared back at him. Brown eyes, short grayish dark blond hair, thick black-rimmed glasses (prescription, to counter the correction in the color contacts and maintain the illusion), and a well-groomed beard made him nearly unrecognizable. It felt… wrong. The only thing he liked about it was the new module Tony had hooked up in his arm, allowing him to project a hard light hologram around it that was infinitely more realistic than the silicone glove.

He shook his head as he clattered down the stairs back into the garage.

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In the late afternoon on his sixth day in Portland, James dug his camera out of his messenger bag, ducked through the neck strap, and began snapping pictures of the bridge with the city lights reflected on the water. Eventually, he waved a hand at a nearby tourist.

“Hey, mate, mind snappin’ a picture for me?”

The lady blinked and smiled. “Y-yeah, sure. Um, this button?”

“Yeah, that one there. It’ll click atcha.” James walked away, turned, and smiled at her as she held up the camera. Once he heard the shutter click, he took it back from her. “That’s ace, thanks! Gotta have something to send back home, right?”

“Sure thing. Where you from?” Tossing her brown hair over her shoulder, the lady gave him a winning smile. After a moment, James returned it.

“Sydney. I’m out here looking at unis for my master’s. My fiancé and I are gonna move out here if things work out.”

The tiny flicker of disappointment that crossed her face was barely noticeable. “Oh, you’re engaged?”

Tucking his camera back in his bag, James gave her a bashful look and fiddled with the still-not-quite-comfortable ring on his left hand. The metal plating wasn’t nearly as pliable as flesh, so while they’d opted for the thinnest band possible, he still noticed it. “Yeah… Really supportive, she’s got a potential job lined up here in the city if we end up here.”

“Wh- what are you studying?” If she was fazed by his cover story, it barely showed.

“Architecture.” James turned back to look at the bridge and breathed in deeply through his nose. “Air smells different, here. It’s… crisper. Anyway.” Turning back to the woman, James held out his hand. “Name’s Aaron. Nice to meet you, and thank you!”

“Katrina. Good luck with your search!”

He waved again at her as she walked away, then mumbled, “Hey, mate, find me some wifi?” into his collar, and within seconds JARVIS had sent him an address.
The building was large, brick, and plain-looking except for three rows of nearly-identical windows. James squinted up at it as he trotted up the steps, threading his way through the tables and flagging down one of the serving crew.

He ended up seated in the back, the warm, friendly environment making him feel right at home. His cover involved a love of craft beer, something he was only too happy to indulge in and especially when it was on SHIELD’s dime. Once the waitress had left, he pulled out his laptop and booted it up, slotting the memory card from his camera into the side of the case.

Within a few minutes, he’d pushed several pictures to each of his fictitious social media accounts, then tweeted something about #BridgeportBrew before his beer arrived. “Ta,” he mumbled absently as the black-haired waitress set down a coaster and a pint, browsing through the scattered, speculative news feeds attempting to piece together what had happened at the park on New Year’s Eve, and where the elusive Winter Soldier had vanished off to. So far, the covert op story was spreading and stabilizing quite nicely, and he got a good chuckle reading through the Twitter feeds of the few holdouts and their wacky conspiracy theories.

His dinner slid onto the table as the waitress gave him a bright smile. “Thanks, Amy,” he said, making a point of reading her nametag. He’d asked her to surprise him and she’d delivered - it was some sort of tilapia on a bed of greens with rice and some asparagus. The beer paired up nicely, and he found himself asking her to bring him another pint of whatever she recommended as he handed the plate back.

Small table cleared, James let his eyes sweep over the pub again, instinctively scanning it every thirty seconds or so. Something crashed behind the bar and he nearly jumped out of his skin, looking around in mild alarm, and saw a girl’s head disappear behind the tall counter as she grumbled about having to clean up the broken glass on the floor. He looked down at his table, embarrassed; no one else seemed to have even noticed the noise.

The sky outside the pub caught his attention and he leaned to his right to peer through the large window next to his table. After a few seconds he twisted, reached into his bag, and tugged out his sketchbook. He’d specifically looked for one with heavier paper because as much as pencils were convenient and portable, he really preferred to work with brushes.

The watercolor tray had baffled him at first - he’d thought it was one of Mickey’s makeup pallets, until Steve had picked up a brush, dipped it in water, pulled it over the surface of one of the pigment cakes, and made a few quick strokes on the paper between them. Now, months after his initial confusion, he flagged Amy down and asked for a small tumbler with some water, sink water is fine, thanks, and chewed gently on the end of one of his brushes as he studied the colors outside.

Smiling up at Amy again as she set down the small cup of water, James reached forward, wet the brush, and began to quickly sketch out the brilliant oranges, reds, golds, and yellows he saw in the rippling clouds above the buildings. The lid of the tray served as a small mixing pallet, and he wiped it clean with one of the paper napkins from the dispenser whenever he needed more room.

His phone buzzed quietly – Finally able to come see you! ETA 2245 at the house, I’ll grab an Uber, enjoy the food ;). James couldn’t hide his smile completely, biting his bottom lip as he grinned and quickly tapping out a reply.

See you soon, tell Clint to fly safe.

The level of his second beer gradually dropped, and eventually Amy returned to ask what he thought, giving him a pleased smirk, and set a third down next to his check. “This one’s on the house, my boss is trying out something new and he nearly giggled like a little boy when I told him
we had someone adventurous here.”

His brush pausing over the paper, James reached forward with his other hand and lifted the pint. “Color’s a little bonkers, can’t say I’ve ever seen something quite this… fluorescent before.” It may have been a trick of the light, but he could have sworn the beer was bright orange.

“Yeah, Alec’s one of those chemistry guys, likes to science his way through brewing. Eliot’s always yelling at him about it - Eliot’s the chef, they own the restaurant together. Constantly grumbling about pairings and whatnot.”

James took a tentative sip, his eyebrows shooting up. The thick, rich, hoppy taste had started to become more prevalent with the craft beer craze, but when the war had hit so long ago, almost everyone started drinking light, bland brews for the simple reason that it was the only stuff available. “Well, give them both my compliments. Never expected to find good tilapia in a pub, and I haven’t had beer like this in - well, a really long time.” He’d almost slipped up and said, ‘seventy years.’

Almost.

Amy flashed him another smile and patted his shoulder - his left shoulder. “I’ll let them - whoa. Sorry. But wow, you must work out a lot.”

“Shake weight.” James smirked at her and popped up an eyebrow.

She stared at him for a good second before bursting out laughing. “Oh, man. I like you. You can come back any time you want.”

“Only in town for a few weeks, sorry. But I’ll be sure to come back as much as I can while I’m here. Especially if you’ve got more stuff like this for me to try.” James lifted the pint in salute as she chuckled, walking away.

The next hour went by much quicker than James thought it would, and he stopped looking up at the sky after the sunset had faded, reconstructing the last few details of the building across the street from memory. He pulled out small, durable pots of black and white ink and a few clean brushes and started blacking in shadows and touching up the highlights once the watercolors had dried.

Footsteps, heavy and slow, scuffed up behind him, and James raised his head, looking around. He was the only one left except for a few other guys at various spots on the bar. A glance at his watch told him it was nearly 2150.

A burly man in a chef’s jacket slid into the other seat, leaning back and regarding James with curious eyes. His long brown hair was held away from his face with a bandana folded and worn like a headband, and his narrow jaw had faint stripes of tastefully groomed facial hair. Blue eyes looked at him from under heavy eyebrows, tracking slowly around James’s face. James kept his expression carefully blank, hiding any sign of recognition as he made eye contact with yet another ghost from his past. He pushed the memories down as hard as he could before the young boy bleeding out in the dirt in Croatia so many years ago recognized him now.

“Eliot Spencer,” the man said, holding his left hand out across the table.

“Aaron Fletcher.” Cautiously, James took his hand, keeping his grip light to avoid giving away the hidden prosthetic. Tony had assured him multiple times that the hologram projection would pass muster with any but the best. “How can I help you?”

“That’s a pretty awesome drawing there. You an art student?” His voice was low, soft, somewhat gravelly, with a trace of a Southern drawl.
James allowed himself a small, self-conscious smile, and gently nudged the paints and inks to the side so he could lay the sketchbook flat on the table. “Architecture. Double-majored in illustration while I was at uni. I’m doing a tour of a few schools over here to see if anyone’s got a graduate program I might be interested in.”

Eliot pointed to the sketchbook and glanced up at James, cocking an eyebrow. When James made a go for it gesture, Eliot spun the book around and began thumbing through the pages, keeping his fingers over the painting James had just finished to protect it while the ink finished drying. “You definitely got an eye for this sort of thing. You do bigger pieces? I’ve been trying to find some stuff to go up on the walls here when we redecorate for the spring.”

Blinking, James leaned back in his seat and huffed out a breath. “Uhhh… sure, I guess. Hadn’t really thought about it, you know? I do them mostly as studies, it’s not really my main focus.”

After flipping through to the start of the sketchbook, Eliot laid it back out with the sunset painting facing up and slid it back. He chuckled a bit, eyebrows furrowed, then glanced up at James. “Where’d you serve?”

James had to call on his training again as he clamped down on the shit shit shit echoing through his head. “Um… come again?”

The chef gave him a small, sympathetic smile. “It’s how you look at the buildings. You draw them like you see them, but the way you fill in the details… it’s what a soldier looks for. Hypervigilance. I know, I get it too.”

Trying his best to look confused and not alarmed, James shifted in his seat to hook an arm over the back of his chair. “You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to - or you can’t. I’ve been there, I know what it’s like.” Eliot reached up his hands and ran his fingers through his hair as he slid the bandana back and off his head. He dropped the bandana on the table and tapped his fingers against the polished surface gently. “Just wanted to tell you, you need help while you’re here, I’ve got your back.”

“…thanks.” Some of James’s internal debate regarding how much, if anything, to say must have shown on his face because Eliot tilted his head back and fixed James with that piercing gaze again. Finally, James stared at his sketchbook, worked his tongue over his teeth to keep from biting his lips or cheeks, and sighed. “Um…” He glanced at his left hand before he realized he did, and Eliot’s eyes followed. Curling his fingers inward, running his thumb over the tips to feel the metal slide across itself, he spoke softly so that only Eliot could hear him. “Spent some time in the Army when I was younger. Got kind of messed up. I don’t really like talking about it.”

An eyebrow quirked up in response. “You need someone to talk to…” Eliot paused, reaching into his back pocket, and set a black business card down on James’s sketchbook. “…call me. Any time of day or night. I don’t sleep much.”

The corner of his mouth curling upward in an understanding, mirthless smile, James nodded. “You get ’em, too.”

“Every damn night,” Eliot replied quietly, eyes looking at the table but unfocused. “Hear their voices, too.” He pulled himself out of it with some effort, then glanced up at James. “It gets better, I promise.”

Laughing bitterly, James shook his head. “I don’t think it will, not with me. I did some… pretty bloody awful things. No two ways about it.”
The chef nodded, his left thumb slowly spinning the black band around his ring finger. “So did I. But there’s a way up. The friends I own this place with, they showed me that. Picked me up when I nearly fell all the way down, every time.” His eyes softened, fondness replacing the haunted look. “Tabbi, she’s saved me, too. Get yourself good friends, a good family, a good team, and you’ll make it out.”

James’s own face smoothed out, and he bit his bottom lip as he smiled, thinking of Mickey and Steve and everyone waiting for him back home. “I got that, got a family. My girl’s actually flyin’ over tonight, should be getting to our rent-a-flat in an hour or so. She’s good for me, it’s just…”

“It takes time.” Eliot stood, motioning to the door apologetically. “As much as I’d love to sit here an’ chat, I got a kitchen to clean up and a restaurant to close.”

“Right! Sorry.” James checked to make sure the ink was dry, stuffed his sketchbook into his bag, and slung the bag over his shoulder. He shook Eliot’s hand again and was surprised when he felt a gentle squeeze.

“Get home safe.”

James tapped a hand to the templepiece of his glasses in salute, and left the bar.

“I would recommend taking the bus, sir,” JARVIS said in his ear. “Portland is usually safe at night, but one can never be too careful and Director Hill has specifically ordered you to avoid any more incidents.”

“I’ll be fine, mate,” James mumbled back, keeping his voice as quiet as he could while a group of pedestrians passed him going the other direction.

“Very well.” JARVIS didn’t sound even remotely pleased.

He let his mind wander as he hiked back to the foothills.

Towards the outskirts of the city, James heard a strange whuffling sound and realized with a jolt that someone - some thing was following him. He sighed, stopped, heard the muffled half-cough again, and turned around.

“I can hear you,” he called to the empty street. “If it’s money you want, I’m sorry, I’m a broke uni student. All I got is plastic.”

He blinked in surprise when he didn’t see anyone, and looked down to see three huge dogs advancing towards him slowly. The dogs were mutts with matted coats and dirty paws that reeked of junkyard; they growled at him as they paced forward and James swallowed thickly, feeling his pulse rise quicker than he liked.

James raised his hands up slowly as they padded towards him, his eyes flicking between the dogs, trying to gauge whether any of them would attack. If he timed it right, he could reach the combat knife tucked in his boot or Mickey’s Beretta at the small of his back.

Scuffing his right foot back ever so slightly, James loosened his posture and let his hands relax as much as he could with that many fangs visible. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his head, and he couldn’t look away from the black eyes of the dogs. Don’t, he reminded himself. You promised. You made Mickey a promise.

One of the hounds sprang forward and James stumbled back with a strangled yelp as over a hundred pounds of canine muscle crashed into his legs. Rapid, ragged breaths dragged their way out of his
lungs as he scrabbled backward, eyes wide and streaming from the rank smell, hands raised in front of him, trying to push the dog away. Every time he blinked, he flashed between Portland and Siberia, the giant war dogs and their Russian handlers superimposing themselves over the junkyard dogs.

His back hit a wall and he tried desperately to twist his right arm behind him to grab his gun, but only got his hand tangled up in his coat. Shaking so badly he couldn’t even think of standing to run, James stared at the dog, his eyes wide with pure panic as fangs scratched and squeaked over his metal wrist, strong enough to slide straight through the hard light hologram.

He didn’t realize he’d started babbling in Russian.

James didn’t see the car pull up, or the man that lunged out of the driver’s seat, or hear the loud roar that sent the dogs scurrying away. Lost in shattered flashes of waking nightmares, he stared sightlessly at the sidewalk in front of him as the dogs snarled and wheeled, disappearing back into an alley. His shoulders rose and fell rapidly as he struggled not to hyperventilate, and it took the new man almost thirty seconds to get James’s attention.


Choking back a startled yell, James blinked and suddenly Eliot was kneeling in front of him, hair mussed up and knuckles bruised. He had James’s bag in one hand and the other firmly gripping James’s shoulder.

“Hey, man. What happened?”

Stammering, James couldn’t make his words come out in the right order, his accent completely forgotten, Russian, Gaelic, and German mixing in with the English. The smaller man helped him up, half-carried him toward the car, and got him into the passenger seat.

Several minutes later, James sat hunched over at the table in the safehouse. His shoulders and hands shook uncontrollably and as soon as Eliot had brought him inside, the other man had started digging through the closets until he found the heavy quilt that now draped over James’s shoulders.

James stared in surprise at the remnants of a mug of tea in the white chunks of ceramic and liquid rolling gently down the length of the table.

“…sorry.”

He blinked, his eyes still absorbing the sight of the shattered mug in front of him, when a towel wiped under his hands and swept the ceramic fragments into a bin. A few seconds later, a steel mug slid in between his hands, hot water was poured in, and another tea bag dropped in with a quiet plop.

“Just don’t crush that one, that’s all I can find that won’t shatter.” Eliot leaned back against the counter behind him and looked at James with obvious concern. “You okay, man?”

No.

After the tea had steeped enough, Eliot lifted out the teabag, squeezed it against the side of the mug, and dropped it into the trash. “Drink.”

James automatically raised the mug, the hot, herbal liquid soothing and sweet on his tongue. Eliot calmly watched him until he was halfway through the tea, then sighed and frowned.

“Can you tell me what happened?”
His eyebrows tightening, James tried to speak but couldn’t. Sighing in frustration, he reached for his bag, detoured to take the medications he’d nearly forgotten about, and tugged out his sketchbook and a thick black pen.

Quick, loose lines on the page drew Eliot’s attention, and the man sat down across from James as he laid out his explanation. After a minute, James spun the sketchbook and pushed it toward Eliot.

The chef stared at the drawing of two large men and a team of gigantic, growling dogs that circled around the point of view. Hand tracing over the edge of one of the figure’s uniforms, Eliot glanced up at James. “These are Spetsnaz.”

James nodded. “Белорусская Овчарка,” he croaked, stumbling slightly over the words when his tongue wouldn’t completely cooperate.

“Attack dogs.” Eliot’s voice was quiet and he leaned back in the chair, his eyes hard as he looked at the drawing. “You got hit with attack dogs in Russia.”

Yes.

“Can you tell me what you did?”

No. As much as he wished to.

Eliot was about to ask another question when a key grated through the lock on the door and it swung open. Mickey stepped in, her hair mostly covered with a beanie, strategically placed makeup contouring her face, and a thick coat hiding her build. Her hair, eyelashes, and eyebrows were practically white, framing unfamiliar ice blue eyes. She froze when she saw Eliot, her hand immediately going to her smaller bag.

James waved a hand at her, signing okay. Reluctantly, she shut the door behind her and dragged her suitcase over next to the shearling boots she stepped out of. “Who’s this?” Her Aussie was close to perfect; Natasha had given her as much training with her accent as possible over the past two weeks.

“How was your flight?” he managed to ask, his voice hoarse, barely holding on to his fake accent.

“The color drained from Mickey’s face when she heard, ‘dogs’ and saw the open sketchbook on the table. “You alright, Aaron?” She crossed over to the sink, discreetly glancing in the trash bin and relaxing slightly when she saw that the tea bag was just basic chamomile.

James nodded, reaching up to squeeze her hand when she hugged him from behind. “Aces all around, just a couple’a bitzers. How was your flight?” he managed to ask, his voice hoarse, barely holding on to his fake accent.

“Flight was fine, but the Uber driver kept makin’ eyes.” Mickey gave James a quick peck on the cheek then stood behind him, hands on his shoulders, looking over Eliot. “Thank you for bringing him home, Mr. Spencer.”

Standing, Eliot grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair and shrugged it on, heading for the door. “Well, I’ll be heading out, then. Please, stop by the brewpub again before you leave.” He opened the door, giving them a lazy salute. “Fletcher, ma’am.”

James waited until he heard the Challenger’s engine rumble to life and fade away before he leaned forward onto the table, head cradled in his arms.
“Hey, hey…” Mickey dragged a chair over next to him, hugging him tightly. “Did any of them bite you?”

“House ain’t bugged, we’re good,” James mumbled in his normal voice when she didn’t drop the accent. He held up his left hand, letting the hologram fizzle out. “It only got the metal one.”

“Good.” She snuck her arm under his shoulders, forcing him to sit back up and pulling him into a tight hug. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t able to be here this week.”

James pressed his nose into Mickey’s hair and breathed deeply, holding her tight, his shoulders loosening as the last remnants of tension released. “’s fine. How’s the cleanup going?”

“Managed to get all of the respectable sites to pick up Darcy’s story, now it’s just the tabloids running whatever bullshit they normally run. Darce and Pep have a good handle on things so they sent me out. Sorry I couldn’t give you much more warning.”

“No, it’s fine,” James murmured, eyes closed as he buried his face in the thick collar of Mickey’s jacket. “Just glad you’re here now. I missed you.”

“Mm.” Mickey squeezed him tightly, then leaned back and brushed a hand over his cheek. “I don’t know about you, but I’m wiped.”

Laughing softly, James closed his eyes and stretched, groaning as his joints popped quietly. “Been a hell of a day, that’s for sure. Just went there for a good beer and-”

“What?” Mickey pushed away, eyes blazing. “You were- you- you were drinking?”

Holding up his hands placatingly, James stepped towards her, only to get slapped in the chest. “… Doc said it was-”

“Doc told you not to! Dammit, James!” She groaned as she dropped her head into her hands. “When you’re coming down off of this kind of medication, you- you can’t.” Sighing, she shook her head. “When you’re on a stable dose, when you’re doing well, then sure, yeah, fine, if it’s controlled. But this?” She gestured toward him, hands waving up and down. “You just dropped down twenty milligrams. Your brain chemistry won’t be stable for another three weeks. We talked about this.”

“Mickey-”

“How many did you have?” she asked, voice low and dangerous.

James stammered as he stared at her in disbelief. “I- wha- I’m not a goddamn drunk!”

“How many did you have?”

“Jesus!” Throwing his hands in the air, James turned, facing away from her, and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Three pints. Over the course of like four hours, okay? That wouldn’t even get me close to being drunk, so stop givin’ me shit about it.”

“James…”

“What?” he snapped, rounding on her. “You don’t trust me to manage things on my own any more, is that it?”

She stepped forward, tilting her head, eyes flashing. “No, not when you’re acting like this!”
“Acting like- urgh!” He pressed the heels of his hands to his forehead in frustration.

Mickey sighed heavily. “Look. I’m worried about you. I know about you and dogs, so I know that you’re still upset. But Dr. Ellmore specifically instructed us to make sure you didn’t have any alcohol, caffeine, or anything else that might mess with your medications, okay?”

Stalking away, James sat heavily in the armchair and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, trying to burn a hole in the carpet with his glare. “I’m fine.”

There was a long pause, and then Mickey walked over quietly, sitting on the armrest next to him. “Do you remember when you were waiting at the hospital?”

“What?” He looked up at her, confused. “What has that got to do with it?”

Mickey fiddled with her nails. “Nat told me that it took them a day and a half to convince you to eat. You didn’t leave the room, not even to shower, for three days. And when Hill came to see us, you looked like something chewed you up and spit you out.”

He didn’t answer, just raised an eyebrow and peered at her over his glasses.

“We talked about it, you and I, after I woke up. And you told me that if you ever did that again, if you ever ended up arguing with me about your health, which, by the way, I’m kind of your general practitioner as well as your girlfriend…”

Understanding dawned on him and he dragged off his glasses, leaning his forehead against the back of his wrist.

“You told me to tell you I’d call-”

“Aunt Sarah. Yeah.” James tossed his glasses on the coffee table and pulled his hands over his face. “Okay, fine. I’m being a shithead. I’m sorry.”

“Y’damn right.”

He exhaled sharply through pursed lips, hands still covering his face. “It’s not always how it was, you know.”

“What, the fact that you’re a grumpy ass?”

Reaching up a hand, he shoved her gently. “Oh, fuck off. No, it’s… the dogs. I wasn’t always like this with dogs.”

Mickey leaned into him, an arm over his shoulders. “Yeah, I know. Steve told me about Scout.”

James closed his eyes and he could still see that scruffy white dog with brown and black spots. He could still hear the ecstatic barking as Scout chased after James’s latest pretend audition for major league baseball. He could still feel the thump of Scout’s tail against his leg.

“Just another thing HYDRA took from me,” he muttered darkly. “One more thing I can’t have any more.”

Pushing him back in the chair, Mickey slid into his lap, her eyes gentle. “You know, for a long time, a girlfriend was on that list, too.”

“Yeah.” He pulled her towards him, resting his forehead against hers. “Don’t know what I’d do without you now, though.”
Mickey chuckled as she relaxed into his arms. “You would’ve managed.”

“Like I did tonight? Nah.” Shaking his head, James closed his eyes. “I’m not good on my own. I need people around me that I care about, people that’ll let me know when I mess up.”

“If. If you mess up.”

He kissed her, a short peck on the lips, and laughed mirthlessly. “Mickey, babydoll, I love you, but this is me we’re talking about. It’s definitely a ‘when.’”

Chapter End Notes

Bitzer: mongrel dog (impolite term)

And now you know where the title of the story comes from.

So, Barnes Road actually exists. I was browsing Google Maps for a plausible house for them to stay in and couldn’t resist, especially when I chanced upon a perfect little cabin. I felt like a creeper though, looking at people’s houses like that...
The history of beer, especially around WW2, is fascinating. It always astounds me how so many things are intertwined - history has so many factors at play that it’s almost impossible to get the real picture. But yes, beer did get blander and paler around the war, partially thanks to the sugar shortage and partially due to Prohibition. That’s absurdly oversimplified, though, so if you’re interested in learning more about liquid bread and its role in the war, I encourage you to go on a Google expedition!

Also of note: Bridgeport Brewing in Portland, OR is a real place and the Leverage team actually contracted with the brewery to use their location and even some of their beers in the show. The taps shown in season 5 actually worked, dispensing Bridgeport’s specialty brews.
SIDE FIC ALERT!!! I’ve added another work to the series, one that’ll contain short one-shots and meanwhiles to accompany the main storyline. Read it here!

So Eliot doesn’t really get the same sort of happy ending that the other Leverage characters did - time to fix that.

**Trigger warnings:**
- Dehumanization (in flashback)
- Temporary catatonia
- Childbirth (not very graphic)
- Tonic clonic seizure
- Someone says something that unintentionally puts Mickey through some rough dysphoria
- Self-esteem issues

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“<Report,>” Zola ordered, his small round face glaring up at the sergeant. “<You told me you were here to report on the Subject’s progress, so, report.>”

Swallowing, the sergeant looked down, flipped through a few pages of his notes, then let out a small sigh. “<Subject still tends to approach with its right side against any wall or barrier, and hesitates before climbing any stairs. Subject attempts to direct any fellow operatives up any stairs first, but does not hesitate when climbing ladders or scaling walls.>”

“<Subject still has a noticeable swing in its stride when walking normally. This disappears when in combat or during stealth training. We’ve extensively tested for any injury that may act as a source for the imbalance in its gait but have not yet found anything.>”

“<Subject rarely identifies objects to others by color, instead using other non-color descriptors. However, when directly ordered to describe objects through color, its grasp of detail is… surprising.>”

The sergeant paused, glancing up at Zola’s impassive face.

“<Subject appears to favor its right side for storing weaponry and ammunition. This may be due to residual habits from the loss of Subject’s left arm, despite intuitive usage of the prosthetic in other areas. When in combat, Subject is able to use both hands equally and has repeatedly demonstrated true ambidexterity, but prefers to use the left arm for defense and the right arm for offense.>”

He swallowed thickly, then continued. “<Subject appears to have two main… modes. The first mode, the original, dating back to the point at which it was acquired, is argumentative and often questions orders. This mode favors the right hand over the left, and displays an intolerable range of emotions and… s sass.>”

“<Sass.>”
“...yes sir. This mode is regularly caught talking back to and taunting superior officers. We’ve found a concerning amount of sarcasm in many of its communications.”

Zola pulled off his glasses and rubbed his wrist over his forehead. “<Go on.>”

“The second mode is... almost, um... a machine. This mode favors the left hand and is robotic in communication, responding to orders without question, and appears most comfortable communicating in German. Our main concern is... during training, when this mode is active, we must be extremely careful as the Subject tends to be... violent. Methodical. Ruthless. Subject does not appear to understand the difference between training and full combat when in this mode.”

“How many men?”

Quietly, hands shaking, the sergeant answered, “<Nineteen.>”

“<Nineteen?>” Zola waved a hand. “<Expendable. Use the low-ranking enlisted as cannon fodder.>”

“How many men?”

“<Sir... nineteen... this week.>”

***

Flipping the water bottle over in her hand as she opened the door to the garage stairs, Mickey checked the time on her phone – half past seven. James still had the garage door open, the patter and hiss of the rain acting as soothing background noise while he worked. He hadn’t spoken in two days, his eyes haunted and reddened, simply retreating to the garage to pull apart whatever piece of Clint’s run-down Mustang he laid eyes on next.

Mickey scuffed her foot on the last step, just in case he hadn’t heard her come down, and waited for him to glance up from where he sat hunched over the workbench before she approached. “Here,” she said quietly. “Brought you some water.” He smiled tiredly at her, pushing his glasses back up his nose with one hand as he leaned back and stretched his arms above his head. Twisting off the bottle cap with one hand, he took a long drink, then set the bottle back on the workbench.

His left hand toyed with a tiny jeweler’s screwdriver, tapping it against the table, sliding his fingers down, turning it over, repeating, end over end over end. The Mustang’s carburetor lay in pieces in front of him, laid out as neatly as possible, soot-covered rags soaked in cleaning chemicals in a neat pile in a metal bin at his feet.

“Made any progress with rejetting it?” Even though there wasn’t anyone else around, they still kept up appearances and accents whenever they weren’t completely alone and locked into the safehouse.

No.

James sighed, wiping the back of his wrist across his forehead. He pointed to one of the components and wagged his hand back and forth: so-so, needs replacement.

“Need me to order a new one?”

No. Making a phone with his hand and holding it to his head, he followed that with jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

“Already texted it out? Eliot?”

Yes.
Mickey nodded, sitting down on the shop stool next to him. She leaned back against the workbench and stared at the old Mustang, hood propped up with a piece of wood, various components laid out in the empty space in the next stall. The Harley had been pushed as far to the edge of the garage as possible to make room.

Something rumbled in the distance and Mickey glanced out towards the street – was that thunder? But after a minute, a pair of headlights lanced through the rain, and a bright orange Challenger pulling slowly into the driveway. Eliot cut the lights before he swung the car fully around so that he wouldn’t blind them, shutting off the engine on the rev-down after blipping the throttle one last time.

He practically ran through the rain from his car to the garage, grumbling under his breath, and Mickey had to smirk at the grumpy frown across his face as he carried in a large insulated bag and a smaller paper one.

“Hey, mate. Whatcha got there?”

Walking towards them, Eliot held up the thermal bag. “Dinner. Figured I’d bring something by along with the car parts.” He tossed the other bag at James who caught it easily, grinning as he dug through it. “Don’t go breakin’ those, I’ll have to drive out to Eureka if you need more, and I am not doing that for you, bubba. Damn eggheads are a whole ‘nother level’a crazy; sheriff’s the only sane one there and I’m starting to have my doubts about him, too.”

Waving a hand dismissively, James held up the new part next to the old one, caught Mickey’s eye, and gave her a told you look. She couldn’t see an obvious difference, so she simply shrugged and took the takeout box Eliot handed her. “You gonna eat somethin’ while you still got grease on your hands? Go wash up, love.”

James rolled his eyes, pushed his stool back, and walked over to the utility sink.

“How’s he doin’?” Eliot asked Mickey quietly, and she didn’t have the heart to tell him that James probably heard him anyway.

“Just an off couple’a days. Working on the car helps.” Eliot had packed them basic steak, potatoes, and green beans, definitely welcome given that it was a meal she didn’t have to cook for them. “He just went down a dosage bracket on one of his medications last week. The doctor’s got him on a schedule for it but it doesn’t make it any easier.”

They didn’t trust him with everything – not yet – but enough to tell him that their trip out here wasn’t just for a college tour. So far all Eliot knew, or rather all they’d told him, was that Aaron Fletcher was a recovering Australian veteran who’d been through some rough trauma during his time in the service, here on a long university-shopping holiday with his fiancée.

Mickey still wasn’t thrilled with that facet of the cover story. It wasn’t the nature of the relationship itself that bugged her, it was that they’d simply been told their cover story, without any input or direction. Here, have some rings, go play house.

Eliot looked over the Mustang as the other two ate, hands in his pockets, keeping the zipper of his jacket well away from the paint. “What year?”

James flashed his fingers at Mickey, using the one-handed counting they’d both learned in the military. “Sixty-nine, he says. Told me it was one of the kitted-out ones when we first pulled the cover off.” The faded green paint was now more of a dull, flat gray, peeling up in places and speckled with oxidation and rust in others. James had pulled the wheels first, then called in a mobile tire service to bring him new tires, mount and balance them, and take the old, dry-rotted rubber away.
 Somehow he’d managed to strap huge box of fluids onto the back of the Harley, and through the course of an afternoon had drained, flushed, and replaced every single fluid in the car, groaning at Mickey’s obligatory crack about blinker fluid.

“Blinkers don’t have fluid unless you got shit housings,” he’d told her flatly. “You want fishbowls on your car, go ahead.”

Now, he tossed the empty takeout box into the trash and worked on piecing the carburetor back together. Within a few minutes he had it fully assembled, nudging Eliot out of the way as he leaned into the engine bay and settled the carburetor back in place. He set a paper towel over the open top of the carb, quickly bolted it into place, and scurried around the garage as he put the last bits of the engine back together.

Leaning over, Eliot picked up the flashlight from where it was clipped to a strap on the fender cover and raised an eyebrow as he looked at the engine. “Big engine for this chassis. Shock towers are a bit further out than normal. What’d you say it was?”

“I don’t remember. He’s been working on it for about a week and a half now,” Mickey answered. “Borrowed one of those engine crane thingies from the auto shop so he could take apart the engine and… replace the seals and gaskets, was it?” James nodded in confirmation.

“Damn, you definitely don’t see one of these every day. Carb’s the last thing to go back in?”

Nodding again, James lowered the bottom panel of the air intake down, positioned it carefully, and dropped in a new filter before he secured it all together and then bolted it down to the top of the engine. The valve covers gleamed dully in the flat light of the fluorescent ceiling fixtures, and James did a quick look around the garage, checking each of the parts still laid out before he nodded once, satisfied, and reached into his pocket.

He jingled the keys at Eliot and pointed meaningfully to the gas flap.

Grumbling, Eliot jogged back into the rain and grabbed a red plastic gas can from his car. “You drain all the old stuff first?”

“Remind me why we had to do that?” Mickey asked, grimacing. “Petrol smelled bloody rank.”

“Old fuel messes with combustion.” Eliot twisted off the gas cap. “You’ll gum up pretty much everything if you aren’t careful.”

With a few gallons of fresh gas in the tank, James brushed his hands on his already-dirty jeans, pulled the driver door open, sat on the towels Mickey had lined the seat with, and slotted the key into the ignition.

“You got a battery in here yet?”

James gave Eliot look that just said, *Seriously?*

Shrugging, Eliot stepped back. “Hey, man, been there, done that. I know how it is.” Mickey bit her lip as James held up crossed fingers, gave her a tentative smile, and turned the key one more position.

The engine cranked, and cranked… and cranked. Eyebrows furrowing, James got out, scooted under the car, tapped something, slid halfway out, and motioned Mickey towards the driver’s seat.

“Gotta make sure the fuel pump’s priming,” Eliot explained.
She turned the key, letting it fall back when James waved a hand at her from under the car. He scrabbled out from underneath, stood up, pointed to the fuel pump, and made an okay sign with his hand.

“So… if it’s not the petrol…” Mickey watched him as he leaned back under the hood.

After a long pause, she heard the first words from James in two days.

“Well, sonuvabitch.”

She couldn’t help but chuckle, falling into a fit of laughter when he flipped her off around the hood.

Grinning, Eliot stepped up to the car and Mickey quickly followed to watch James pull and relocate the thick black wires winding around the engine, grumbling quietly to himself. “You got the plug wires in the wrong order, didn’t you?” Eliot asked.

“Oh, bug off.” James unbolted the air intake, lifting it up enough to snake a finger under it, and then pulled his hand back, sniffing it. “Petrol’s good, spark’s fine.” He fussed with something else after reattaching the intake, lifting a cap off of it, then setting it back in place. “Distributor’s good, too, but I’m going to convert her over to direct fire at some point.”

Taking the keys from Mickey, James leaned back into the car, jiggling the gearshift to reassure himself that it was still in neutral. He flicked the key back in and around, and the engine caught almost immediately.

The Mustang rumbled to life, black soot puffing out of the exhaust for several seconds before finally dissipating. James whooped, picking up Mickey and spinning her around.

“God, put me down you filthy thing-” she protested over Eliot’s laughter, cut off with an excited kiss.

For the first time in days, James’s eyes were bright, full of energy and life, and Mickey found herself returning his exuberant smile. “Well done,” she told him quietly. “Now put me down?”

Biting his lip and laughing awkwardly, James set her back down on her feet, then leaned into the car to look at the gauges. Humming to himself, James picked up a few tools from the workbench and set about messing with something in the engine bay. The idle speed dropped and the engine’s throaty whumwhumwhum filled the garage as it finally settled into a smooth, loping rhythm.

James gathered up his tools out of the engine bay, flipping one of the crescent wrenches end over end casually as he carried everything over to the workbench.

Okay, I gotta know,” Eliot said, crossing his arms and fixing James with an intrigued look. “How’s an Aussie Army punk like you end up with a Boss-Nine under a tarp in Portland, and where in the hell did you learn how to fix it?”

“My uncle ran a shop,” James answered quietly, barely audible over the engine. “Wanted me to take it over but… Mum and Dad died in a crash and then I ended up in the Army instead. We worked on a lot of imports like these.”

“Im- imports?” Eliot laughed, scratching the back of his neck as he looked over the car. “Wow. Never thought I’d hear a ‘Stang referred to as an import.”

The corner of James’s mouth twitched up in a half-smile as he reorganized his tools. “Cut the engine, would you, Trace? She’s good to go now, we’ll take her out for an alignment soon as the
Mickey – ‘Tracey’ – leaned through the driver’s window, pulled the keys out, then tossed them to James. “Want me to call the shop downtown in the morning for you?”

“That’d be ace, thanks.” James gave her a one-armed hug, then waved at Eliot over his shoulder. “I’m going to go clean up. Thanks for the food, mate.”

Once the door at the top of the stairs shut, Eliot turned to Mickey and crossed his arms, face suddenly serious. “Okay, tell me what’s going on? All of it.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” she said slowly, sitting down on the stool at the workbench. “He’s just been going through some ups and downs lately, it’s a side effect of the-”

“He’s manic depressive, Tracey. Catatonic when I came in, and suddenly stringing together full sentences? Something’s up.” Sighing, Eliot ran a hand over his face. “I just want to help, okay? I’ve been where he is, I know what he’s going through. Tabbi, Parker, Hardison, Nate and Sophie… I wasn’t able to dig myself out until I had someone reach a hand down for me. I just want to make sure he’s getting everything he needs.”

Mickey stared at the floor, eyebrows pinched together, chewing at her lip, before she exhaled sharply. Glancing up, she met Eliot’s eyes, then looked back at the floor. “We’ve got a team of doctors assigned to him. Trust me when I say this, Aaron’s a special case.”

“Oh, he’s definitely that, all right. I just wish you’d trust me.”

“Eliot, I barely know you. I’ve been here all of a fortnight. I know it doesn’t look like it, but he’s made a huge amount of progress since-”

Narrowing his eyes, Eliot tilted his head. “Since what?”

Shit. Mickey sucked her lips in, trying to figure a way out of this. Might as well use a grain of truth. “Since he got out. They, um… He wasn’t just standard Army.”

“Yeah, I can see that. Guy moves like he’s fuckin’ SOG, and I ain’t ever seen an architect that stacked before.”

“He got… taken. POW.” Fiddling with the ring on her left hand, Mickey took a deep breath. “Um… he was in one of the, ah, the countries out there in the Middle East. Afghanistan? He deployed in, um, 2011, I think. Things went fine for two years, well, um… if you can call what he did ‘fine.’”

“He’s SAS?”

Mickey shook her head. “He couldn’t say. Always had a blank wall behind him whenever we Skyped, had to use a burner account each time. At first things were okay, he was normal, but then he started having trouble sleeping. Got bags under his eyes. Fell asleep in the middle of a call once.”

Eliot swore quietly and glanced up the stairs to the main house. “Tracey…”

“They got his unit. Um, the tenth of March. 2013.” It was the first date that came to mind – Mickey hoped it wouldn’t be an issue. “He didn’t check in the way he always did. The emergency number he gave me didn’t work.” Just the thought of losing James like that made her throat tighten, and her eyes prickled. “I didn’t hear from him for over a year. That August his colonel came by to, um…”
“I’m sorry.” Looking down at his feet, Eliot shifted his arms around, hair falling in front of his face.

“In mid-April last year, right around the time everything happened in Washington, DC, the big ships falling out of the sky, I got a general knockin’ on my door. Asked could I come with him, please, there’s something important. And, they, um…” Sniffing through the wetness in her nose, Mickey closed her eyes and pressed a hand to them. All she had to do was remember the pictures of James, emaciated and practically dying, right after he’d surrendered to SHIELD. “He was there. They had him. Somehow, they managed to rescue him and his men. And he was… he looked like he’d…”

“Looked like he’d been through hell and fought the devil himself,” Eliot whispered, eyes flicking up to Mickey.

“I… yeah.” She sniffed again and wiped at her eyes. “He wouldn’t talk – couldn’t talk for the longest time. Weeks. He was listless, stared off into space a lot like he was seeing things that weren’t there and he couldn’t tell the difference. It was like havin’ a stranger in our home. But I just – I couldn’t leave.” With a pained smile, Mickey closed her eyes. She didn’t notice herself playing with the ring again. “I knew he’d get better, even if he never talked about what they did to him. But, he, um, he came back with some… issues. He’s… he’s got demons he’s fighting. Epilepsy… they shocked him, messed with his brain. Depression, anxiety…”

“Jumped like a gun went off the first night he ate at the brewpub. One of my bartenders dropped a glass, Fletcher nearly jumped out of his skin.”

Mickey laughed; it came out as a tight, wet, barking sound. “Sounds about right. He was right twitchy at first. Hated being touched, especially, um, here.” She rubbed a hand over the back of her neck. “Couldn’t have his face covered, no scarves, no nothing; still has trouble with it on his bad days. Couldn’t do baths, either, unless he got too sick to stand like after his seizures. Had to be showers, and hot ones.”

Eliot swore again and put his hands on his hips, shaking his head. “They waterboarded him.”

“I figured as much.” She looked over at the Mustang. “Spent a lot of time fixing up his dad’s old Holden, I think that’s what helped him get his brain back in order. We knew when he got picked for the team – that’s all he said, just ‘the team,’ that he’d change, he wouldn’t come back the same person. So… right before he deployed…”

“He proposed.”

Nodding, Mickey looked down at her hands. “Asked me to promise to help him find the boy that I fell in love with before he went off to fight in another man’s war.”

“And that’s why you’re still here.” Eliot’s voice was gentle, approving.

“I made him a promise. We’ll wait – I’ll wait – til he’s ready again. For now, I’m just going to be there for him. The week he was here before I flew out, that’s the longest we’ve been apart since he came home.”

Eliot gave her a lopsided grin and reached out to squeeze her shoulder. “It’ll get better, I promise.”

“You think so?”

“I’m living proof,” he chuckled. “Tabbi and I, we’ve even got a baby on the way.”

“Oh my God – congratulations!”
“Yeah, she’s due in about a week actually.” Eliot’s smile was nervous but proud. “We haven’t let the doctors tell us the gender, yet. Hopin’ it’ll be a boy.” He stepped back, jerking his thumb towards his car. “Well, I’ll let you two be getting on with your night. Bring the Mustang by the pub sometime, there’s a group of car guys that meets there on Tuesday nights.”

“Thanks, Eliot.” Mickey did her best to smile. “For everything.”

He pulled his sweatshirt hood up and gave her a casual salute. “I’ve seen the way he looks at you, ma’am. It’ll get better. He’ll get better. He already has.”

As soon as the rumble of the Challenger was gone, Mickey tugged the garage door down and locked it, trudging up the stairs. She found James on the couch in front of the fireplace, hair spiky and wet from the shower, glasses sliding down his nose as he read a book on Mickey’s tablet.

Sitting next to him, Mickey snuggled in under the arm he automatically raised. “What’re you reading?” Dropping her accent was a relief after such a long day.

“Prestupleniye i nakazaniye, by Dostoevsky. They wouldn’t let me read this back when I was in Russia, and I can definitely see why. The similarities between a lot of the soldiers I worked with and Raskólnikov are… kinda sickening, if I’m honest. Gotta say though, I miss good old paper. Even I’m getting eye strain from this.”

Mickey reached out and switched the tablet’s display mode. “That’s because you have the LED display on. Remember, Tony set this one up with a Kindle screen, with that e-ink stuff.”

“Huh.” James poked his glasses back up with one finger, an absent habit after nearly three weeks of wearing them. He’d figured out how to keep them from sliding down, but he knew exactly how cute Mickey found it every time. “That is better. Thanks.”

“Mm.” Closing her eyes, Mickey rested her head against his neck. “You smell like apples.”

“Yeah, Stark sent me some new stuff, supposed to help keep my hair bleached… colored… whatever it is.” Adjusting his arms, James turned to kiss the top of Mickey’s head. “I don’t mind so much, now. It’s kind of growing on me.”

“I liked your long hair.”

He chuckled, low and deep in his chest. “Yeah, me too. Maybe I’ll grow it back out again.”

“Mm, please do. I miss braiding it for you. And I’d like to enter a motion that as soon as we’re cleared, you start shaving again?” She pulled her feet up and tucked them between James’s legs as he smirked and snorted, sticking her toes under his thigh. Closing her eyes, Mickey relaxed into him and let the gentle warmth from the fire seep through her bones. Portland was cold, colder than New York. Even though it usually rained instead of snowed, the winter dug into her bones in a way that it didn’t in New York.

James seemed to be of a similar mind; he’d brought several thermal under-layers with him as well as an impressive assortment of flannel pants and fleece jackets. This had also been how Mickey found out that he loved fluffy socks – particularly if they were striped or brightly colored. His rainbow-covered feet were crossed at the ankles, long legs stretching towards the fire as he tapped through page after page of Raskolnikov being an insufferable ass.

***

Bucky paced slowly forward, footsteps silent as he rolled into each step with an ease he hadn’t had
before Azzano. Before Kreischberg. Before Zola. Before everything. The Tommy gun whispered quietly to him, feeling alive in his hands as he held it at the ready. His Johnson rifle, carefully slung over his shoulder, shifted across his back as he took another step.

His attention snapped to something off to his left and he raised a fist quickly. The others, two ragtag teams of commandos, instantly froze behind him. Steve met his eyes, quickly reading Bucky’s hand signals, and nodded once before shrugging off his shield and slinging it up into a tree.

A dull thwack was followed closely by the thump of an unconscious body hitting the hard, frozen earth.

“Well, shit,” one of the mutants drawled, and Bucky growled at him.

“Put a cork in it, Creed.”

“Y’ain’t my Sergeant, kid.”

Glancing over to make sure the German sharpshooter was getting trussed up like the Thanksgiving dinner they were all looking forward to, Bucky slowly turned to face the grinning mutant.

“I don’t care where you come from, how old you are, or how much of an authority problem you have, Puss.” He stepped forward and narrowed his eyes. Creed tilted his head and sneered in response, baring his teeth until Logan reached out and tugged him back by the shoulder.

“Victor, that’s enough.”

Spitting, Creed turned and stalked off.

Bucky sighed, closing his eyes and shaking his head slightly. “He’s getting more volatile.” Creed had always been a loose cannon, and he’d even come with a warning label stuffed into Steve’s dossiers. As they’d blazed their way closer to the camp, though, Creed had outright fought several members of both the Invaders and his own team. Dum Dum was still nursing a swollen, bruised eye.

“I know, kid.” Logan pulled out a cigar - he had a never-ending supply - and puffed it to life with a match. “Happens when you can’t die.”

“Not to all of us, I hope,” Bucky muttered under his breath as he signaled the group to start moving again.

Four hours later, the Invaders and Team X shifted nervously around each other as Bucky fiddled with the locking mechanism on a giant steel door, Stark’s device whirring quietly in his hands.

“I though Howard said it would work,” Steve hissed at him, shifting his shield nervously on his arm.

“Relax, Steve. It’ll work.” With a clang, the bolt slid free. “Now, we’re supposed to clear out the weapons cache and bring as much as we can back to…”

He never finished the sentence, because the vault they stared into was empty.

Empty, with the exception of a small, terrified boy scrabbling away into a shadowed corner.

Steve crouched down, holding a hand out, palm up. “We’re not going to hurt you,” he said soothingly.

When the boy didn’t respond, Gabe repeated Steve’s words in German.
The boy still didn’t speak, so Steve stepped towards him. With a tight wail, the boy threw his hands up to shield his face and the men recoiled as a strange, hollow, echoing TWANG resonated through the vault.

Dumbstruck, Steve stared at his shield, and slowly passed it over to Bucky.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Bucky muttered, his fingers tracing over the giant dent smack in the middle of the shield.

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“Tracey! Aaron! Hey!” Amy greeted them enthusiastically, ushering them over to their usual spot at the end of the bar nearest the kitchen. The pub was quiet, business finally winding down for the night. “How was Reed?”

To keep up their cover story, James and Mickey had gone on several college tours. With a groan, James sat down heavily on his usual barstool and slumped onto the bar. “They called me Crocodile Dundee, Amy. *Crocodile Dundee.*”

Mickey patted him on the back and gave Amy an apologetic look. “He kept taking pictures of the buildings and wasn’t paying attention to the tour guide. I don’t think she liked that.”

Within a few minutes, Eliot had brought out plates for the three of them, sitting on James’s other side as they chatted about the most recent progress on the Mustang.

“So, did you get the new suspension put in yet?” Eliot asked around a mouthful of salad.

“No, I’m still waiting on new springs to-” James squeezed his eyes shut, twisted his head around to the right, and reached up to rub his neck. “Okay, that was weird. Neck just twitched. I think I’m spending too much time gettin’ intimate with a pony car.”

Mickey laughed, reaching forward to pick up her beer, when it happened again. “…you okay, love?”

His eyes met hers, wide and alarmed. “Smells like burning rubber,” he muttered.

Dropping her fork with a clatter, Mickey jumped off her stool and ducked under James’s arm. “Eliot, get his other side. Now.”

“Um… what…”

“Just do it,” she hissed. “I need someplace private big enough to lay him down in.”

Blinking a few times, Eliot took James’s other arm. “Jesus, how much do you weigh? Can you do the stairs, buddy?”

“Not enough time,” Mickey answered him. “We got about twenty seconds.”

“Twenty seconds til what?”

“*Eliot.*”

James’s breath was hissing in and out between his teeth, his arms and torso starting to shake as Eliot practically dragged them into a side room. He slid out from under James’s arm and grunted as he dragged the large card table to the side so that Mickey could position James on the floor.
“Thank you. Can we have some privacy, please?”

Eliot gave her a nod and pulled the door shut behind him, the latch clicking over as he locked it. Quickly, Mickey glanced around, took in the room’s surveillance system, pulled off her jacket, and tucked it under James’s head as she rolled him onto his left side. Strategically placing herself to block the cameras’ view of his hand, Mickey pulled out her phone and opened up the monitor app.

Reaching out a hand, she pulled off his glasses stroked his cheekbone gently as he stared at her for a few seconds before his eyes rolled back. She started the timer and rocked back on her heels, resting her forehead against her wrist as she monitored James through the seizure.

The hologram on his hand flickered, surged, and died.

Ninety-three seconds later, Mickey let out a long sigh and sat down, stretching her legs out in front of her. Twenty seconds after that, James groaned and pressed a shaking hand to his face.

“How’re you feeling, Aaron?” Mickey asked, subtly warning him.

“Wha’ happ’n?”

Scooting around, Mickey waited for the hologram to reboot before helping him shift so she could cradle his head in her lap. It was mostly autonomous, responding to simple on-off commands, but it was still wired into his central nervous system just like the rest of the arm.

“You had a seizure, love. Not so bad this time, though, so that’s good. You’re at the gastropub, Eliot’s restaurant. We came here on the Harley because the Mustang’s starter is bad. Eliot is letting us use one of the gaming rooms until you’re feeling better.”

“I… what?”

Mickey slid the black-framed glasses back onto his face, trying to get them as square on his nose as she could. “We’re at a pub in Portland, we were having dinner when your seizure hit. Do you remember when you flew out here?”

“Portland? What’re we doing in Oregon? Why am I wearing glasses? What happened to my hair? What happened to yours and…” At least he had the good sense to keep his voice down, barely audible over the noise from the pub on the other side of the door.

Mickey closed her eyes, swearing under her breath. Leaning down, she whispered. “We’re undercover. You’re supposed to be Australian. Your name’s Aaron.”

James blinked at her, confused, then sighed and shook his head. “Alright, then.”

It was almost creepy how he slid between accents and languages without any noticeable effort.

“Tell you what, I’m calling a cab, we’re going to head back to the Airbnb for the night, and I’ll have Eliot pick me up to get the bike in the morning.”

Speaking of which – Eliot knocked on the door. “Hey, I know this is a really fuckin’ weird question but – do either of you know how to deliver a- a baby?” he asked, his words filled with panic. “Tabbi’s water just broke and there’s a big protest downtown, dispatch don’t know when the ambulance is gonna get here.”

“…shit.” James pushed himself upright, lurching to his feet. Catching him as he swayed, Mickey swore at him quietly and pulled his arm over her shoulders as they walked towards the door. “Yeah,
I got you, mate.”

“The fuck do you think you’re doing?” Mickey hissed. “It’s a baby!”

The door opened for them as James fixed his glasses, shoving them up his nose. “Both of my little sisters were home births,” he explained, half to Mickey and half to Eliot. “My Aunt Sarah had me help her with each of the deliveries.” And for an instant, he flashed back in time, a stunned ten-year-old boy cradling the delicate, burbling bundle of squishy pink stuff that his father had named Elizabeth.

“You’re in no shape for this, Aaron!”

“I know. I’ll walk you through it.” They followed Eliot over to a table tucked in the corner where Tabbi sat awkwardly, knuckles white as she gripped Amy and Parker’s hands, sweat-soaked brown hair clumped on her forehead. Parker’s eyes were frantic, doing her best to follow Amy’s lead as they tried to soothe Tabbi.

Grimacing, Mickey glared up at James. “I’m a combat doctor. I pull bullets out, not babies. I’m not a goddamn obstetrician.”

“Well, we don’t have much of a choice, do we?” he growled in her ear. “I’ll talk you through the whole thing.” Slumping into the chair that Eliot pulled up for him, James pushed Mickey forward. “Get her on her knees, facing me. I’ll hold her hands and support her shoulders if need be. Parker, go grab towels and a sheet of plastic – don’t give me that look, you’re in a restaurant. Get creative. Shit’s messy, we need to keep the floor clean. Towels! Go!”

“Shouldn’t she be on her back?” Amy asked as she and Mickey helped Tabbi forward.

“This’ll take the strain off her spine. Trust me. You, get something under her knees, she’s – come on, man. Stay with me.” James snapped his fingers in front of Eliot’s face and the man jumped. “Hey. I need you here. Focus. You got a job to do, Yankee. Seat cushions, under her knees. Go.”

Eliot shook himself and ran to grab the cushions.

Leaning forward, James gently took Tabbi’s hands and gave her a reassuring smile. “Okay, sweetheart. I need you to focus on me, okay? Everything’s gonna be fine.” He looked up at Amy. “I need you to time the contractions. When we hit two minutes, that means the baby’s on its way. Myshka, how far dilated is she?”

“I can’t check visually, I’ll need to do a manual exam.” Mickey pressed her lips into a thin line as they worked Tabbi’s soaked pants off.

“Go wash up. Sterilize if you can.”

She ran off to the kitchen and within seconds James heard water splashing around in a sink.

The past few weeks were finally slotting back together in James’s head, the faces of the people in front of him now just as familiar as the pub they sat in. Eliot drew his attention, turning in place and running his hands through his hair as he looked feverishly around the room.

“Eliot. Take a deep breath. Everything’s gonna be fine.”

“I know, I know, I just, I’m not good with this kind of thing…”
James made sure Eliot was looking at him before speaking quietly. “I need you to stay calm for her, okay? Training. That’s what it’s for. Use it.” He waited for Eliot to take several long, deep breaths before turning back to Tabbi. “Hey, sweetheart, you’re doing great, okay? Squeeze my hands as hard as you have to, you won’t hurt me. Just talk to me, okay?”

She nodded, jaw clenched.

“Starting timing,” Amy reported, glancing up at James as Mickey knelt back down behind Tabbi. Grimacing, Mickey slid her fingers into Tabbi and waited for a second before pulling them back out.

“She’s at a little less than three centimeters, I think.”

Parker skidded back into the room, spread a large plastic sheet under Tabbi as they carefully lifted her knees, repositioned the cushions, and covered the sheet with as many towels as could fit in her arms. “That’s all I could find on a first sweep, should I go get more?” Her voice was high and tight.

With a small smile, James nodded. “Go ahead. We’ll be fine, and if you find anything else then bring them down.”

Parker laughed awkwardly, then shot off.

Tabbi groaned, her hands clamping down tightly on James’s.

“You’re doing great, love. Tracey, how’re we looking?”

“Four centimeters.”

James had Tabbi shift positions slightly between each of her contractions, speaking to her soothingly the whole time, keeping track of the regular updates from Amy and Mickey. Eventually he had to order Eliot to sit down to stop his pacing.

“Aaron, we’re at ten centimeters,” Mickey informed him just as Tabbi let out a holler.

“Okay, Tabbi, darling, you push really hard with the next contraction, right?”

Tabbi nodded, blowing out a breath through tight lips, her eyes screwed shut, face red and shining.

It took another ten minutes before Mickey looked up at James. “I can see what I think is a head.”

“You think?” Eliot squeaked. “You’re a girl, aren’t you? Don’t you know what a baby looks like?”

Mickey stared at him, stunned.

“Eliot, not helping, shut the fuck up or leave.” James tilted his head to catch Mickey’s eye. “Hey. Focus. Baby. Head. Talk to me.”

Clearing her throat, Mickey blinked several times, shook her head, and looked back down. “Uh… I think it’s… is it supposed to come out sideways?”

“Yeah, that’s good.”

Tabbi shouted again, and her whole body shook with the exertion.

“Oh, give me a big push. There you go, that’s it. Tracey, as soon as the head’s free I want you to support it, don’t let it fall. It’s gonna be slippery.”
“Got it.”

“Use your other hand to help work the shoulders loose. Be gentle, and for fuck’s sake don’t pull.”

“Roger.”

It took several more contractions for the baby to finally slide free into Mickey’s hands. Amy immediately swaddled the pink lump of flesh, following James’s instructions as he told her to wipe off as much of the fluids as possible.

“Get it clean-”

“He,” Amy interrupted softly. “Eliot, Tabitha… it’s a boy. You’ve got a baby boy.”

Right on cue, the baby stirred to life and let out a squalling mew.

“Should we do anything about this?” Mickey asked, pointing to the umbilical cord.

James shook his head. “Leave it. The afterbirth’s gonna be about fifteen minutes behind the baby.”

Glancing up, Amy raised an eyebrow. “So…”

“Hold him there. Wrap him up nice and warm, not too tight. Did you clear his eyes and nose? Grab a straw from the table and suck out the gunk. Be careful.”

“Here.” Mickey leaned over and ever so gently, she wiped the mucus from the boy’s face, then cleared the mucus clogging the infant’s nose.

James looked back down to where he held Tabbi’s shoulders up, her hands in a vise grip around his wrists, forehead pressed against his knee. “How’re you doing, sweetheart?”

“Not… done.”

“…what?”

Mickey looked up in confusion, then knelt back down to look. “There’s… there’s another one.”

“Hoookay.” James bit his lip. “Same drill. Eliot, go sit next to Amy and hold your son.”

Moving slowly, as if he was underwater, Eliot took the baby in his arms, staring at it as if he’d never seen one before.

The next one came out in a relative rush, practically falling straight into Mickey’s arms. Within minutes, the rest followed, and Mickey helped Amy arrange each of the twins with their cords and placentas tucked up against their stomachs.

Hands still shaking and legs still unsteady, James bundled up the soiled towels in the plastic and carried them into the back room to dump with the rest of the laundry. When he got back out into the pub, Eliot sat against a column with his legs spread out to either side and Tabbi leaning against him.

“Skin-to-skin,” James mumbled as he dropped onto a chair nearby. “Unwrap them both enough so that they can be against her chest, they need to start nursing. Where’s Tracey?”

“She, uh, she went to go wash her hands.” Amy pointed back to the kitchen.

“Thanks. Give a shout if anything happens.”
Fighting off the bone-deep fatigue in his limbs, James dragged himself to his feet and trudged into the kitchen.

Mickey had shoved her soaked, stained sleeves up to her elbows, and her hands and forearms were red where she’d scrubbed them raw. She leaned heavily on the edge of the industrial sink with her head hanging forward, her breathing shaky and unsteady.

“Myshka?” James asked, walking up slowly. “Everything okay?”

She sniffed, straightened, and wiped her nose, tugging it between her thumb and forefinger. When she turned to face him, he saw that her eyes were red and puffy. James opened his arms, stepping towards her; when she shook her head and crossed her arms uncomfortably, looking away, he frowned in confusion.

“Talk to me, babydoll. You did great. What’s the matter?” He ran over the past hour in his head, trying to remember what – oh. “Is this… is it what Eliot said?”

“No.” Her voice was low and rough. “Well, yes. Not directly.” She sniffed again, then ripped a paper towel off of the roll on the wall and blew her nose. “I pass well enough that most people don’t…”

Stepping forward again, James put his hands on her shoulders and hunched over to look her in the eye. “You’re not passing for a woman, babydoll. You are one. Where’d this come from?”

“I- I can’t…” Her breath rattled as she tried to draw in a steady, slow lungful of air. Wordlessly, she waved her hand at the door to the kitchen. “I can’t do that. Give y- give anyone that. I can’t, ever. It’s- I- I just can’t.”

Closing his eyes and exhaling sharply, James let his head fall forward, then pulled Mickey in tight against him. “I know.” He stepped back, leaning against the wall to support them.

“No, you don’t,” she shot back, voice thick and muffled against his arm. “I’m a girl – a woman – whatever – I got my surgeries, I take my hormones, wear the clothes, change my voice, I do everything and I love who I am now and I love this and I love you and I’m so happy but I just- I- there’s just one fuckin’ gawdamn thing that I can’t ever do and it’s- it’s just- you don’t get it. You can’t understand.”

He didn’t respond, simply threading a hand into her hair and gently rocking from side to side. Closing his eyes, James pressed his cheek to the side of her head, holding her tight as her shoulders shook.

“Look,” Mickey croaked, her words hoarse. “I know that you an’ Nat… I know what they did to you. But you two, well, all of the- the operatives, whatever you wanna call it, they got stuff for people like you. There’s ways to make it work. But people like me, we’re-”

“Don’t you dare say ‘broken.’” James heard his own voice crack.

“But we are, Jim. We are. We always in between, we never gonna be whole like cis people. The guys, good fuckin’ luck with that, most of ‘em don’t even get bottom surgery. Yeah, they gave me boobs an’ a cooch, but they can’t give me the stuff inside… the stuff that matters.”

Squeezing his eyes shut, James curled his fingers in her hair, being careful not to tug. “It all matters, sweetheart.”

“You- you tell me you understand, but… you can’t.” The wet roughness in her voice made James’s
eyes prickle. “Jim, I’m trapped in a body that can’t ever be what I wanted to be born with. I’m like ninety-five percent there, but that last five percent, *that’s* what fucks me up. That’s what messes with my head. That’s what makes me so-.” She coughed out a sob, hands clutching his shoulders from the back. “So gawdamn angry. What Eliot and Tabbi have – I can’t ever have that. I can’t ever hold a child that I birthed into this world. I’m missing pieces and I can’t ever have them.”

He didn’t know how to respond, so he simply held her, stroking his hand over her hair as she gasped and choked back tears.

Quiet footsteps caught James’s attention and he raised his head as Amy peeked into the kitchen. Unfamiliar voices wafted in from the main room - the paramedics must have arrived.

*Is she okay?* she mouthed, an eyebrow raised.

James waved her away with the hand that wasn’t tangled in Mickey’s hair, giving Amy a meaningful look. With a concerned and frustrated sigh, Amy turned and left, shaking her head.

Eventually, Mickey’s sobs faded to little hiccups, and James dug into his pocket for his handkerchief. He gently wiped off her face, then let her blow her nose, carefully folding most of the goo back inside the fabric before pocketing it again.

Her face was blotchy and puffy, eyes rimmed with red and eyelashes stuck together as James cupped her cheek with one hand and raised her chin up with the other.

“Myshka, hey, look at me.” Reluctantly, she did so. The bright blue pigment in the contacts made her eyes look like tiny little stars as they sparkled behind her eyelashes. “When we talked about this for the first time, how you ‘n’ me would work, I told you that I was in for the package deal. All of it. The good, the bad, the parts you do have, the parts you don’t. *All* of it.” He kissed her on the forehead, then rested his own against it. “That’s still true. Every word. I know me sayin’ that ain’t gonna fix it, and I know I can’t ever really know how much it hurts you, but… we’re in this together, me ‘n’ you.”

Taking a deep breath, James pulled her back in and tucked her head under his chin. “What I’m tryin’a say, babydoll, is that I love you – *all* of you. Every little piece. I love every little thing that makes you different, and I’ll love ‘em for you when you can’t love ‘em yourself. You’re the strongest, beautifulest, smartest woman I know, and right now an’ from now on, that’s enough for me.”

“But-”

James interrupted her with a finger to her lips. “No buts. That’s not how this works. We don’t get to pick and choose. The only choice we have is pretty black an’ white. All or nothin’. I don’t know how much you’re hurting, but I can see the way it hurts you. And I wanna make that better, even if I don’t know how. So. We’re gonna figure it out together, okay? We’re gonna figure out your depressed, bipolar, basket’a bananas, epileptic boyfriend, and we’re gonna figure out my self-conscious, short-tempered, anxious ball-buster of a girlfriend. Okay?”

After a long pause, Mickey nodded. “Okay.”

***

“Fletcher.”

“It’s Fury. *How’re things in Portland*?”
“…fine, sir.”

“You sure? That didn’t sound like everything’s fine.”

“No, no, really, everything’s great. Just… why are you calling me? All due respect, sir, you’re the last person I’d expect to-”

“You might be forgetting that I ran SHIELD for more years than I can count. As much as you feel responsible for what HYDRA made you do, son, I’m responsible for not opening my eyes sooner.”

“…sir…”

“So I’m gonna ask again, Barnes. How are things?”

“…they’re good, sir. Tracey’s here. We’ve had a bit of excitement but things are still under control. Hopefully we won’t have a Code Kenobi soon - and seriously, who even comes up with these names? Couldn’t we have picked something from Star Trek, at least?”

“That would be Miss Lewis.”

“…ah. So, Code Kenobi it is.”

“Mhmm.”

“How’re things in the PR department?”

“Getting along. Progress is progress, you know how it is. I’m working on following Karpov’s tracks as far back as I can. I’ve definitely flipped over some pretty interesting rocks in the past few weeks.”

“I can only imagine. Thank you, sir. This means a lot to me.”

“Consider it a favor to a mutual friend. Uncle Gabe says hi, by the way.”

***

The click-click of rifle parts sliding over each other was soothing as Bucky sat cross-legged in the shadow of one of the tents. A heavy canvas cloth covered the ground in front of him, black metal components arranged neatly. The small black bottle of gun oil and several rags sat in the center of the cloth.

His hands were finally steadying, only shaking slightly as he field stripped the Johnson rifle for the third time that day.

A steel mess kit, heaped with generous helpings of their evening chow, slid into view next to his leg. Closing his eyes, Bucky sighed and set the body of the rifle down gently on the cloth.

“I told you, Steve, it’s just gonna come back up.”

“I ain’t Steve,” a voice answered him gruffly, and Bucky looked up to see Logan sprawling out on the dry, dead grass. “But you gotta eat something, kid.”

“Why do you care?” His jaw clenched as he picked up the last piece left to clean, oiling it slowly and patiently, working the thin cloth into all the nooks and crannies. “You’re not even on my team, let alone in the 107th.”
“That look in your eyes? I see the same thing in the mirror.”

Bucky gave Logan a sidelong glance as he began reassembling the rifle. His hands moved automatically, sliding the pieces just right, twisting this one a fraction of a degree, using just the right amount of pressure on that one to trigger the detent pin. He set the rifle down with a small sigh, cleaned his hands as much as he could, and picked up the mess kit.

“Thanks.”

“Don’ mention it.”

Bucky ate in silence for several minutes, doing his best to choke down the food that felt like ash in his mouth. When Logan passed him a flask, he took a liberal swig of the burning liquor before handing it back.

“Why you constantly messin’ with that gun o’ yours, kid?”

“Hm?” Bucky swallowed the mouthful of turkey he was chewing. “What, Vera?”

Logan choked on cigar smoke. “You call it Vera?”

“Well… sure. I name all my guns.” Looking down at the food again, Bucky poked at the mashed potatoes, embarrassed. “They all got personalities.”

“You spend more time runnin’ your hands over that thing than you do women, bub.”

“She needs it.” Bucky picked up the rifle in one hand and passed it over. “They’re a touchy model. Never fires the same way twice, you gotta listen to her. She tells you how she’s gonna shoot, but you gotta know her language.”

“You’re a marksman.”

“Yep. And...” Grimacing, Bucky held up his hands to show off the mild tremors. “Can’t seem to keep my hands from shakin’ unless I got a gun in ’em.”

“Don’t they normally issue a Springfield?”

Bucky guffawed involuntarily. “That thing was a piece of shit! Never worked, the scope was godfuckingawful. You put a skin over the barrel, yeah, that works, but good luck tryin’ to see through your scope after a mud crawl. Had to remove the iron sight, too, so don’t even try shooting one of those without optics. Only, what, three-times magnification? Oh, and it ain’t even a normal sharpshooter either, it’s a basic infantry rifle with a half-assed kit slapped on it. Other guys seem to use ’em fine, but Cap’s got me at a range where I need somethin’ a little better.”

Logan smirked at him and handed the rifle back. “You got some fancy stuff on this.”

“Courtesy of one Howard Stark.” Lifting the rifle, Bucky smoothly settled it into his shoulder. “Gotta be careful how you treat Vera. She’s short-recoil, so if you don’t have her just right, she won’t cycle the bolt properly. Sometimes she won’t even fire if you don’t hold her right. Makes it a challenge if you gotta shoot prone or from a nest, but... you figure it out.”

He finished off the rest of the food quickly, his appetite returning just enough to hold a full meal down. “You don’t seem to get along with the other mutants.”

Logan laughed, small puffs of smoke fading into the night as he did. “Yeah, they’re all assholes.”
“Even you?”

“Especially me,” the scruffy mutant answered with a feral grin. “I’m just the only one with enough good sense to be afraid of you ‘n’ Cap.”

Bucky sputtered, the mouthful of water he’d just taken from his canteen threatening to spray all over. “Afraid of us?”

Suddenly serious, Logan settled back on his elbows and fixed Bucky with piercing, ancient eyes. “I’ve seen the way you move, the way you listen, the way you fight, kid. That ain’t human. They made you two into the perfect soldiers and, I’ll be honest with you, it scares me shitless what you two’re capable of.”

He answered Logan with a derisive snort. “Steve volunteered, and they turned him into a hero. I got juiced up with the equivalent of back-alley crack, and I take the dirty missions. I’m nothing like him. I’m the monster under the bed that keeps kids up at night.”

He could only meet those eyes for a few seconds before he had to look away.

“Sooner or later, kid, you’re gonna need to make a choice. You wanna be like Cap, or you wanna be like Victor?”

***

Eliot sat at the round white table in the Aussies’ kitchen. Or, rather, Eliot leaned onto the table, head cradled in his arms, his loose, messy half-ponytail falling across his neck. Aaron and Tracey were downstairs in the garage working on the Mustang, and they’d happily welcomed him in when he’d shown up unannounced, head pounding and barely awake.

Two cups of tea and a shot of whiskey later, Eliot was starting to feel significantly better, especially as he lay half-sprawled across the unexpectedly comfortable table. It surprised him, how at ease he felt, how he was more than okay with letting his guard down around these two odd Australians.

He knew they weren’t Australian, but Hardison hadn’t managed to pull up anything more than a cover story so watertight that it might well have been the truth.

The hushed words from the pub kitchen last week – American accents. Brooklyn and Detroit. Their Australian accents were impeccable, nearly flawless. Nearly.

Sighing softly, Eliot closed his eyes and turned his thoughts away from them. He had good instincts about this sort of thing; he knew if he could trust someone, and Aaron just felt… right. So, he took advantage of the momentary respite from two beautiful, terrifying, screaming infants, and let his mind wander for the first time in days.

He stared into his drink as Nate spoke about his son, his dad, the trumpet he got for Christmas, dreading his own turn to lay out a secret for his team. As much as he trusted – loved – them, as much as they were his family now…

“Eliot.”

Closing his eyes for a fraction of a second, he sighed. “Um. I, uh…” He cleared his throat, then decided on what he would say. “Gabriel.”

A short silence met his words, before Parker asked, “Huh?”

“…the shit?” Hardison leaned back and crossed his arms. “No way I missed that. No damn way.”

“’s fine, man. Buried it deep when…” The words caught in his throat, and he wordlessly held his glass out to Nate for a refill, downing it before continuing. “Alec,” he began, making a point of using Hardison’s first name. “You remember when we talked about what I did when the girl I loved went an’ married someone else? And I said I liberated Croatia?”

“Yeah, man.”

“That’s only, um, that’s just half the story.” Spinning the glass gently, Eliot watched it rattle on the wood bar so he didn’t have to look at anyone. “That promise ring I gave her, there was a reason for that. We were high school sweethearts, and… things happened.”

“She was pregnant,” Sophie breathed.

“Yeah. So I stuck with her, you know? Did the right thing. Pulled outta college, took on more work at my dad’s store so that I could support us. But when the baby came, the doctor called me in, he- the baby-” Eliot set his glass down and tried to press his eyes shut with his hand, desperately attempting to keep his breathing steady. Someone’s hand – small, calloused, Parker – reached out to squeeze the one he still had laying on the bar.

“There woulda been a third. Gabriel Eliot Spencer III. But he never made it. Never breathed. Never was alive.” Finally, Eliot raised his head and looked up at Nate, blinking to clear the blurry spots from his vision. “So, when I told you I knew how much it hurt, when you lost Sam – I meant it. I’d give anything to have even eight years with my boy. He woulda been twenty-two last month, just outta college.”

He didn’t flinch away when Hardison leaned over to give him a one-armed hug, or when Nate squeezed his shoulder, or when Sophie gave him that piercing, compassionate smile.

“That’s why I joined the Army. That’s why I got so angry. That’s why I ended up in the Green Berets. I was hurtin’ so bad. I ran. I panicked. I disappeared from Aimee’s life, let her lose both of us on the same day. And ever since then, I been runnin’, hurtin’ people ’cause I hurt so bad, until the four o’ you taught me how to stop. I lost my little boy and I just ran and ran.”

Twenty-two years of pain, grief, and anguish came pouring out for the first time… and he wasn’t ashamed.

Eliot jolted awake as he felt himself shift – someone was lifting him. Reacting on instinct, before his eyes were fully open, he twisted and caught his assailant in a chokehold. Dusty grayish-blond hair filled his vision once his eyes cracked open and he loosened his arms immediately.

“Sorry, man. Force’a habit.”

Rubbing his neck, Aaron smiled but it quickly turned into a wince. “No worries, I probably asked for that one. I was gonna move you upstairs into the spare bedroom, you’re welcome to crash there for a bit.”

“…thanks. Here’s my phone, wake me up if anyone important calls.” Eliot rubbed at his temples as he trudged over to the carpeted stairs, hauling himself up the banister with his hands, and found the bedroom on the right. He didn’t bother to undress or pull the covers back before collapsing on the bed and sinking under before his head hit the pillow.
The pub went eerily quiet when the door closed behind the stranger that stepped in and shook the raindrops off his hood before letting it fall around his shoulders. James turned, fingers idly turning his glass of water, as he sussed up any threats as quickly as he could.

The man stood a few inches under six feet, his short, thick gray hair mussed from the hood. Deep lines etched his face and his eyes were shadowed as he frowned, scanning the pub. A narrow jaw was covered in salt-and-pepper stubble, thin scruff kept neatly trimmed. His eyes rested on James for a moment, then moved on as he stepped further into the bar.

A tan hoodie poked out from under a heavy caramel-colored leather jacket, thick canvas pants covering the tops of his sturdy work boots. James raised a curious eyebrow when he saw the cardboard caddy carrying a six pack of beer in the man’s right hand.

“Good evening, sir, would you like a table or a barstool?” Amy appeared at his elbow, a bright smile on her face and a menu in her hand.

“I’m here to see someone.” The man’s voice was soft, a bit rough, and drawn out with a gentle drawl. “I think he’s one of the cooks.”

“I’ll… be right back.” As Amy passed James and Mickey, she gave them a meaningful look. James nodded at her and held up a hand subtly. Any trouble, he’d handle it.

Moments after Amy poked her head in the kitchen, Eliot skidded out of it and then froze when he laid eyes on the stranger awkwardly shuffling his feet near the door. Alarmed, Tabbi started to stand from the table she was at with her sister and the sleeping twins, but James caught her eye and motioned her back down.

Finally, Eliot spoke, his voice tight. “D- Dad?”

There was a long pause, then the man replied, “Hey, son.” He lifted the beer nervously and stepped forward. “Um… got the beer you left. Don’t worry, this ain’t the same pack. Uh… can I…”

“Y- yeah. Yeah, sure. C’mon.” Eliot shot James a stunned look as he put one hand on his father’s shoulder and guided him towards one of the empty back tables.

Mickey flicked her eyes over to the back table as she shuffled the next hand of gin rummy while they sat at their small table closer to the door. They still didn’t know exactly what Eliot and his team did, but they’d agreed to temporarily run interference for the brewpub while Eliot was balancing work and two infants.

Eliot’s voice was hushed but James could still pick it out in the quiet pub. “Not that I don’t wanna see you, Dad, but… why now? I- I came by, I knocked, I… I came home…”

“I wasn’t there for you the first time, son. I didn’t want to make the same mistake for the second.” Two beer bottles lost their caps and clinked together. “I just wish your mother could be here, too.”

“Yeah.” The crack in Eliot’s voice was tangible. “Me too, Dad. Me, too.” There was a pause, then Eliot asked, “Does… does Aimee know?”

“Nah, I ain’t told ‘er yet. That’s your business, that’s between the two o’ you. You want her to know, that’s your phone call to make.”

“Thanks, Dad. And… thanks for listening to the message I left.”
The reply was soft and heartbreaking. “I listened to all of ‘em, son. Every single one. I just didn’t have the courage to do anything about it until now.”

“I- hah, dammit… I thought you disconnected or lost that phone ages ago. Kept goin’ straight to voicemail.”

“I know, son. I’m sorry. I guess we were both cowards in our own way.”

There was another long pause, then Eliot sighed. “How’s Mom?”

“Fresh flowers. Orchids, you know. The yellow ones with the little red spotty stripes.”

Eliot choked out a quiet laugh. “Her favorite.”

“Randy took over the groundskeeping when Pops passed away, you remember. He’s doin’ a good job. Place looks nice. Makes sure to put flowers out for the other boys from the Army.”

“Good. Good…” Letting out a heavy sigh, Eliot set his beer down with a solid thunk. “Um… C’mon. Let’s, uh, why don’t you come and meet the twins?” The booth creaked as they stood, and James and Mickey shared a quiet smile. After a pause, they heard quiet greetings exchanged between the two men and women. “This one’s Samuel, Dad. And his sister’s Elizabeth May. Sammy and Lizzie.”

James had to stop himself from jolting in surprise, shooting Mickey a startled look. She bit her lip in an awkward smile. “They asked if they could name the girl after one of your sisters. I hope you don’t mind me looking through your journal to find her name.”

His eyes pricked as he closed them and reached out to squeeze Mickey’s hand. “No. No, I don’t mind. Thank you.”

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“Fletcher.”

“Barnes. Hi. This is Hill.”

“How goes?”

“Good so far. I can safely say that we’ve got this mess under control. You’re cleared to return whenever you wish, but I’ll leave that decision to you and Draymond based on your progress with your medications. How’s that going, by the way?”

“Fine so far. Down two brackets, it’s a little touch and go sometimes, but that’s nothing new.”

“Good to hear. I’ve got a crate on the next jet to Portland with tac gear for both of you. Stark designed both suits.”

“…is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“Steve gave a considerable amount of input, as well as Sam and your doctors, actually. We tried to give you maximum range of motion. Your left arm will be uncovered to help with that. There’s a mask and goggles for you with all the bells and whistles stuffed in, but that’s completely optional. Also, Stark said he set the suit up specifically to work with your never-ending arsenal of stabbity bang-bang. His words, not mine.”

“Roger. Thank you, ma’am. Go give Tony a slap and a hug for me?”
“With pleasure. Take care of yourself, Barnes. Keep me updated.”

“Will do, ma’am.”

Chapter End Notes

Have some sketches of Undercover Bucky! Bonus Undercover Mickey in there, too.
Also, quick note: gunpowder, gun oil, and gun cleaning products are, y’know, mildly toxic so… wash your hands, kids. Every time you handle a gun, wash your hands before you use them to feed yourself.

Eliot’s dad and the beer is a reference to The Low Low Price Job (5x11), coincidentally the same episode in which Eliot meets Tabitha, his wife in this story.
So I turned my computer into a very expensive brick yesterday. That secondary hard drive that I wasn't using, I wiped it clean and pulled it out and replaced it with a new SSD to store my Lightroom photos. Turns out, that secondary hard drive FOR SOME STUPIDASS REASON had my boot partition on it.

No data loss, thankfully, but I spent the past day reinstalling Windows and rebuilding my work machine. *sigh* I'm back up and running now, but I feel like an idiot now.

Also, just for a quick update on where the rest of the series is, I just finished writing Chapter 8 of Book 2. I'm not sure how long Book 2 will be yet, or how far in the story it'll take us. There's a fair chance there'll be a Book 3, since I already have enough plot outlined to fill up a third volume.

This is the chapter in which James gets to be deliciously terrifying. Fair warning.

**Trigger warnings:**
- Flashback scene of Mickey pre-transition and pre-discovery, internalized transphobia and some pretty serious angst - skip the first flashback if reading about identity questioning is tough for you
- Brief mention of trans reassignment surgery
- Home invasion
- (Flashback) teasing friendly use of period-accurate gay slurs
- Kidnapping, victim is heavily drugged
- Terror tactics used in rescue of kidnapping victim, mildly graphic

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Mikey pulled his knees in tight to his chest, ducking his chin down between them as he squinted through wet eyelashes at the bright yellow sunset. The wind made sitting on the roof cold, the hair on his arms fluffing up against it, but he didn’t care. The burning ache in his stomach was enough to keep him warm for now.

He knew without looking down when Jack pulled in; the old El Camino never ran right, always sounding like it was drunkenly staggering home. Wiping his eyes angrily, Mikey glared at the glowing rooftops on the other side of the street. It was only fitting that Greg wouldn’t help Jack buy a better car. Jack’s fancy job at the security company only paid just enough for Mum’s medical bills, and Jack was nowhere near even thinking about paying down his student loans any time soon.

Grace’s face was burned into his eyes, her disgust and dismissal, attempting to sound older and haughtier than she was. Just two drunk high schoolers fooling around, how had it gone that wrong? How had he not been able to… just… He sighed heavily and buried his face between his knees, hugging himself tightly. He’d never be normal.

A soft grunt told Mikey that someone was climbing up to the roof. A few seconds later, careful footsteps moved toward him and a jacket fell with a whuff onto his shoulders. Jack sat down with a groan and stretched his long legs straight down the roof to hang his feet off the edge past the gutters.
“Tell me you aren’t thinking of jumping.” Jack’s voice was rough and lower than usual. It must’ve been one of his range days; he still had the faint red rings around his ears and the divots from his safety glasses on his nose.

“No,” Mikey said sullenly, dropping his chin onto his arms. “Mum needs me. I can’t do that to her.”

“That’s not what I asked, bud.”

Sighing again, Mikey sucked his lips in between his teeth before answering. “ Tried to do it with Gracie.”

He could almost hear the disappointed look Jack shot him, quickly followed by a hand tiredly pulled over a long face. “Did you use a condom?”

“Yeah, but we didn’t get far enough to need it.”

An arm pulled him closer, scooting him across the roof tiles until he was curled into Jack’s side. “Tell me.”

Hands pulled tight and tucked up to his chest, Mikey felt his eyes get wet again. “Things were goin’ great, just like it was s’pos’to, and then I just… couldn’t.”

“You got nervous?”

“Worse. I dunno what happened. It just wouldn’t work. Felt… wrong.”

Jack took a moment to process that, then reached around with his other arm and pulled Mikey in for a hug. “So you like boys instead.”

“No, not like that. I dunno. I just didn’t feel like it was right. Like… the whole time she was tryin’ to put the condom on me, I just got these weird twitches like I was looking at someone else’s body. Like it was wrong. It wasn’t mine.” Mikey’s voice cracked and squeaked, and he coughed out a sob.

“Hm.” Hands brushing through his little brother’s hair, Jack stared pensively at the ground in front of the house. “Ever felt like you’re a girl? You used to like playing dress-up and messed with Mum’s makeup a lot as a kid before Greg moved in.”

“…I dunno,” Mikey mumbled, and Jack dropped his head back, rolling his eyes.

“You know I can tell when you’re lying to me, Mickey Mouse. You suck at it.”

“So what if I do feel like one?” Mikey shrugged, his tone gruff. “I’m just sick, is all.”

“What the- gawdammit- I’m gonna fucking kill him,” Jack growled low in his throat, hands balling into fists. “Did Greg tell you that?”

Mikey nodded reluctantly.

Swearing, Jack swept the street with his eyes, glaring at anything that moved. “I’mma fuckin’ kill ‘im.” After a moment, he pushed Mikey away from him to look the boy in the eye. “Listen, the next time that fuckwad tries to tell you that you’re sick or broken or whatever poison he’s dripping into yours and Mum’s ears, you tell me and I’ll beat him to death with my own two hands.”

Nodding again, Mikey clumsily wiped his face. “So… I’m not…?”
“Jesus Christ, no!” Jack let his head hang forward, taking a deep breath while his soft brown hair swung in front of his eyes. His lean body had started toughening up quickly under the training regimen at his new job, scrawny twiginess finally giving way to lithe strength. Finally, Jack exhaled sharply and looked up at Mikey, his eyes sharp and red-rimmed. “Look. What you are on the outside, who you are on the inside, who you fall in love with, and who you wanna bone are all different things. None of them depend on any of the others.

“So if you’re a boy who feels like a boy and loves boys and wants to get nasty with girls, that’s fine. If you’re a boy who feels like a girl and loves everyone and gets grossed out by sex, that’s fine, too. You’re my little- my…” He sighed. “You’re my little whatever you wanna be, okay? You just tell me when you feel like my brother and when you feel like my sister.”

Mikey swallowed thickly and nodded once more. “What’s Mum gonna say?”

With a wet smile, Jack patted Mikey’s cheek. “Mum’s gonna be just damn fine with it. You know she loves you no matter what. We both do.”

“Boys!” The harsh shout made them both jump. Greg whacked his beer bottle on the gutter; the echoing clang made Jack close his eyes, his face tightening and lips pursing in barely suppressed annoyance. “Your mother’s too sick to cook us a meal, so get yer asses inside and order a pizza!”

“Down in a minute, you don’t have to yell!” Jack rolled his eyes, then turned back to Mikey. “Hey, let’s come up with a new nickname for you, okay? One that it doesn’t matter if you’re a boy or a girl.”

Mikey thought about it for a minute, fingers playing with the hem of his shirt. “Well, you already call me Mickey Mouse.”

“Mickey Mouse is a boy,” Jack replied flatly, an eyebrow raised.

“Doesn’t have to be.”

After a long pause, Jack began to chuckle and shake his head. “You’re damn right. Mickey it is. Come on, let’s make sure Greg gets those anchovies he hates so much. I’ll take you shopping for new clothes tomorrow, and if Mum’s having a good day, she can show you how to do your makeup if you want.”

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Panting heavily, James swiped the sweat out of his eyes as he trotted to a stop next to the garage. He leaned over, gloved hands on his knees, closed his eyes and forced his breathing to be slow and steady. After a minute, he straightened up - and jumped out of his skin.

“Parker! Jeezus!”

She hung upside down from the balcony over the garage, hair swinging gently under her head as she grinned at him. “You ran, like, fifteen miles. That’s awesome.”

Groaning, James rubbed his hands over his face, shoving his glasses up to his forehead. “How in the fuck do you know where I live.”

“Eliot told me.”

“Why.” Turning, he stalked up the stairs to the mid-level entry, shoulders hunched. He jumped for a second time when Parker dropped down in front of the door. “Girl, I am gonna punch you one of
these days and it won’t end well for you.”

She scowled at him and rolled her eyes, then handed him a small box. “Hardison and Eliot told me you’d need this because you suck at remembering what day it is.” Without waiting for a response, she vaulted off the patio and disappeared.

Sighing, James tilted his head back to throw a grumpy glare into the dull gray sky, then looked down at the box in his hands. Slitting the tape with the knife he pulled from the concealed sheath under his jacket collar, he folded open the flaps.

Inside was a small box of chocolates, a card, and two prepaid admission tickets to… something.

“Shit,” he muttered, checking his watch - sure enough, it was the 14th. A quick thank-you texted to Hardison simply got a winky face in response.

He dug out his keys, let himself in, and strategically hid the box next to his leg as he walked through the living room and into the kitchen. Mickey was crashed on the couch under several thick blankets as a small fire warmed the room; he didn’t want to wake her while he tossed the cardboard box into the recycling and quickly scrawled out a short, sappy message in the card.

Looking at the tickets more thoroughly, he twisted his mouth in an embarrassed frown before tucking them into the card, sealing the envelope, and placing it and the chocolates on the coffee table next to Mickey.

The heat from the shower was blessedly hot after the freezing morning air as it soaked into his sore muscles. He gently kneaded his knuckles into the spots Mickey had shown him after he’d started having issues with his left IT band. Wincing as he hit a particularly sensitive spot, he switched to stretching out the cramps while his muscles were still warm from the run and the hot water.

Several minutes later, hair damp and fluffy and the rest of him wrapped up in thick flannel and fleece, James half-jogged down the stairs and walked over to the couch. He smiled at Mickey as she waved at him, the other hand pressing her phone to her ear.

“Hey, no, it’s totally fine. You call me any time you want to talk, Ricky, okay? I’m here for you.” There was a short pause, and then she chuckled. “I’m just trying to do everything I can to make it easier for people like us. We’re not broken. Remember that. Listen, call me when you get an update on your surgery schedule? Great, thanks. Good luck. Take care, bud.” She hung up and set her phone on the couch’s armrest as James sat next to her.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, sweetheart,” he murmured, leaning down to press his lips to her forehead. “Who was that?”

“One of the patients from the clinic that I got my work done at. He’s scheduled to get his bottom surgery soon and he’s really nervous so he called me to talk things through. Good run?”

“Wet and cold, but yeah.”

She finally noticed the box and card, lunging for it with a half-awake smile. “Ohmygodchocolate.”

James chuckled as he sat next to her, scooting the blanket around to cover his legs and feet. “Figured we’d do lunch first, then go out.”

“...go out?” Her finger snaked under the envelope flap and she opened the card, tickets sliding out onto her lap. “Oh. Oh! How on earth...”
He’d really have to thank the guys for this one. “Lucky guess?”

Shooting him a warm smile, Mickey tucked herself under his arm. “Lucky guess, indeed.”

After a short lunch, James steered the Mustang through the parking lot of the ice rink, and grinned as Mickey belted out the lyrics to ‘City by the Bay,’ her voice blending surprisingly well with the radio.

“Sounds like you’re doing well in the voice lessons,” he commented as he shut the engine off and slotted the shifter into first gear. “I can hear a difference already.”

“They’re fun!” She flashed him an excited grin and practically bounced out of the car. “It’s taking some getting used to, having a weird range like I do, but Kenrick’s pretty patient with me.”

James wrapped an arm around her shoulders as they ambled up to the rink doors. “That’s good. I’m glad it’s working out, you sound great.” He leaned down to give her a quick peck on the temple. “I mean it.”

“Thanks, love.”

They were already fairly bundled up from the cold February air, a blessing in disguise since it allowed James to keep his gloves on both inside and out. While the hologram was relatively easy to maintain, it was a constant low-level distraction. He’d nearly let it slip a few times in public, catching himself just as it started to flicker away. So, gloves. Gloves, he could manage.

Mickey practically dragged him away from the front desk; he stumbled after her, shoulders twisting as she grabbed his hand and tugged. “Oy! Slow down!” he laughed.

Right before the end of the school day, there was a blissfully small number of young children there and the rink was fairly quiet. A few older teens and adults milled about on the ice with varying degrees of skill, and James swallowed down the knot of nervousness that rose in his throat as he took the skates the attendant handed him and sat down to lace them up.

“Here,” Mickey mumbled as she squatted in front of him, boots already neatly laced and skinny jeans tucked into the tops. She took the long laces from his hands and expertly rewound them over the hooks, tugging them around and adjusting the tension. “You don’t want to tie the uppers that tight. There’s a specific way to do this so that you don’t mess up your ankles.”

“You’ve done this before?”

She huffed out a laugh and raised an eyebrow at him. “Well, yeah. Who hasn’t?”

“Skating wasn’t really an everyday thing, back when I was a kid. Once a year on Christmas Eve, and only if it was below freezing.”

Pausing, Mickey looked up at him and cocked her head, frowning. “Right, no refrigeration.”

“Well, I mean, we had indoor rinks like this, but… they cost an arm and a leg. Most folks couldn’t afford it except on the free public days.” He watched her as she tied off the laces, wrapped them around the tops of the boots and tucked the ends in, then pulled down the cuffs of his jeans. “Also, skates were a bit different. Not nearly as advanced.”

“What, like those old wood boards with knives on them?”

Laughing, James took her hands and let her pull him upright. “Not quite that ancient, we still had proper boots.” He tested his balance, shifting back and forth on his feet a few times, rocking his feet
side to side. “Man, this feels weird.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

They walked to the small opening in the rink wall, James’s movements stilted and odd while Mickey rolled comfortably into the change in her gait. She stepped out onto the ice and slid forward, spinning around neatly to hold her hands out to James. “Come on, Frosty, it’s not so bad. I’ll teach you.”

“It’s ice. I hate ice. This is one hundred percent because I love you and nothing else.”

“Didn’t you say you could’ve danced at the Bolshoi?” she teased.

“I did dance at the Bolshoi. Swan Lake, remember? But that was on solid ground where I didn’t have to worry about doing the splits without any warning.”

“Fine.” She pirouetted, stroking off quickly and doing a quick, tight turn some thirty feet away. “Well, come on, Siegfried. Show me what you got.”

Glaring at her, James tentatively set one of his skates down, snapping his hands out to grab the wall when his foot wobbled under him. Carefully, so carefully, he moved forward, sliding slowly, hands out for balance, eyes wide, cursing under his breath.

A *skrrch* noise made him look up, and Mickey was at his side. She slid an arm around his waist and ducked under his left arm. “Keep your feet straight up and down, head up, don’t look at your feet, you’ll fall over. There you go, that’s it. You have the muscles for this from dancing, you got this.”

Within seconds, James was on his ass, legs splayed out in front of him and tailbone beginning to bruise, glaring up at Mickey as she tried to stifle a laugh. She reached down and helped him up. “Next time you start to lose your balance, just crouch down. Keep your center of gravity over the skates. It’s a lot like skiing.”

“Easy for you to say. If I’ve ever skied, I can’t remember it,” he grumbled, but straightened up and reached out a hand to steady himself on the wall. “Okay, let’s give this another go.”

Eventually, they made their way around the rink, and after five more laps, James was skating on his own with some degree of confidence. Mickey’s hand was loosely cradled in his own and he worked hard to match her pace as she smoothly slid from skate to skate with the ease of practice.

She pulled her hand out of his after a few more laps, speeding up and spinning to face him, feet moving expertly as she swung through an arc backwards into the center of the ice. Flashing him a grin, she lifted her arms up to either side and kicked off the ice into a spinning jump, landing smoothly with one leg stretched behind her. She switched legs, leaning over and spinning in place, her skate carving a small circle in the ice.

James leaned against the wall, watching her with an amused smile, his eyes shifting each time one of the other skaters passed in front of him. She swung through the large arcs of a figure eight pattern, using most of the empty inner space in the rink, arms out for balance as she skated forwards, backwards, spun, jumped, and twisted.

Breathing heavily, Mickey finally glided over to James and spun to a stop just as he raised up his arms to catch her. He pulled her into a hug as she laughed breathlessly, cheeks flushed and eyes shining.

“God, it’s been *ages* since I’ve had the chance to do that.” She popped up on her toes, picks digging
into the ice, and pressed her lips to his. “Thank you.”

“And you said you couldn’t dance,” James murmured, brushing a thumb over her cheekbone.

Snorting, Mickey pulled away and tugged him forward by the hand again. “Oh, I can’t. Not even to save my life. But skating, it’s different.” She laced their fingers together once James had fallen into step with her. “I did it a lot as a kid. The ice doesn’t care who or what you are. It’s equally brutal and equally generous to everyone. Doesn’t matter if you’re a boy or a girl, you lose a landing, it’s gonna hurt. But when you do get it right, there’s nothing like that flying feeling when you’re swinging out of a triple axel that you just landed perfectly.”

“Is that what that was?”

She laughed. “Definitely not. I’m not even going to attempt one of those until I’ve had a lot more practice. Muscle memory only gets you so far, especially after two growth spurts and hormone therapy. Everything moves differently.”

Gliding from foot to foot was starting to become automatic, and James relaxed into the swaying, repetitive motion. “Is that why you don’t move like the other skaters?”

“Hm?”

“I was at the Olympics in Sarajevo in ’84, protection detail, mainly for Valova and Vasiliev but I had to keep eyes on the whole team. Most of what I did was get rid of the other operatives before anyone got offed. Got to watch a lot of pairs practice. There were a few more after that, namely when Pierce deployed me to Sochi. God, that one was a mess.”

“Oh.” Mickey chewed her lip for a moment. “Well, I learned to skate before I transitioned, so yeah, that’s probably got something to do with it. There’s different ways you hold yourself, different motions and whatnot.” Looking up at him, Mickey narrowed her eyes. “You know, it’s a little weird thinking about how what’s supposed to be a peaceful, apolitical friendly competition has assassins and whatnot roaming around.”

“Oh, there’s a lot you don’t know about the Olympics, darlin’,” James drawled, earning himself a giggle.

“I grew up watching Olympic skating. My coach absolutely adored the Russian team.”

James barked out a laugh as they rounded the turn. “Oh, if only he could have seen what happens behind the scenes. The number of times I had to kick doors down only to find two of them fucking each other on the kitchen counter…”

Spinning around, Mickey turned to face him. “Wait, seriously?”

“Myshka, dear, I got loaned out as a bodyguard for nearly every Russian gold medalist at one point or another. Which meant that, yes, I’ve seen pretty much every Russian Olympian getting nasty at least once.”

“…lovely.”

“Oh, it was anything but. Most of them got the point after the first time they saw me in full tac gear leveling a gun at them, though.” Smirking, James leaned forward a bit and started skating faster, swinging his arms slightly to maintain his momentum as he slid from skate to skate. After several laps of practice, he’d finally gotten the hang of the crossover motion he’d seen Mickey doing through the turns and leaned into it as he started to swing to the left. A thrill shot up his spine as he felt the
edges of the blades bite firmly into the ice.

When he straightened, Mickey crossed the ice to meet him, taking his hands and pulling him out to the center.

“Wait, no-”

“Relax. You’re doing great.” She smiled warmly at him. “Take a step, stay on one skate, and hold your back leg out like this. Basic arabesque, just like ballet. Point your toe, yeah, just like that. Good!”

He never could resist sinking his teeth into something new, especially when it came to dancing or anything like it. As a result, within an hour he was skating with significantly more confidence, feet moving automatically, gliding through various steps with Mickey as she taught him some basic choreography. The techniques he’d learned in ballet translated remarkably well, with some minor adjustments.

It was only when he held her in the air, hands interlocked, his knees slightly bent as they swept through a tight circle, that he noticed people were watching them.

James carefully counterbalanced Mickey’s weight as he set her down, pulling her in to move through a few basic waltz steps. “They’re staring at us,” he murmured.

“Hm? Oh.” She glanced around and blushed. “Yeah, I suppose they are.” Grinning, she shifted her blades just enough that they stopped together in the center of the rink. Mickey bounced up on her toe picks and wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing him emphatically. “Gotta mark my territory,” she told him with a wink.

“Get a room,” one of the other advanced skaters grumbled as he glided by.

Two hours later, James groaned as he slowly lowered himself into the towel-covered driver’s seat of the Mustang. “How the hell are you still this wired?”

“I just got to teach you how to ice skate, shut up and let me be excited!” Mickey bounced into the seat next to him, leaning over and planting a kiss on his cheek. “That was amazing!”

Chuckling despite himself, James started the car and pulled it out of the parking spot. He winced as he twisted, his right hand braced on the back of Mickey’s seat. “I take it we’re going skating again.”

“Oh hell yes.”

As he waited for traffic to clear at the mouth of the parking lot, James leaned over and caught her chin with a finger, kissing her softly. “I’m glad you had fun.” He smiled at her, that soft, fond smile that he only used with her, Steve, and Natasha, and turned to look back at the road. After they’d rolled into traffic, he glanced back over. “What would you like to do for dinner? There’s plenty of great places around here.”

“Actually, I wanted to cook something for you, if that’s okay?”

“Well, you’ll never have to bully me into having your cooking, that’s for sure. Need to run by Safeway or Whole Foods at all?”

She shook her head. “I’ve got everything I need. It’ll take me a few hours to get it all prepped though, so I’m thinking a nice, hot shower after we get home.”
“I think that can be arranged,” he replied with a smirk.

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Mickey felt her eyes crinkle into a smile as she looked over at James, wrapped up like a burrito in the thick couch blanket with only his bright blue fuzzy socks and hair sticking out from the ends. Within a minute of laying down he’d been fast asleep, one of the side effects of tapering off his meds. The brain zaps were manageable, if annoying, but the spurts of energy followed by lethargy and drowsiness meant they had to structure their days carefully.

She turned back to the cutting board, deftly julienning carrots for the salad she was making. The casserole in the oven was soaking the kitchen in a delicious smell that was already making her mouth water. Leaning over, she checked the timer - ten minutes left - and scraped the carrots into the salad bowl.

It took her five of those minutes to fully set the table. Once everything was ready, she padded over to the fireplace and knelt down to gently roll another log onto the iron grate. She shook the heat out of her hands as she sat on the edge of the couch, then reached out to thread her fingers through James’s hair.

A sleepy squeak preceded the strange wiggling motion he used to worm his arms out of the blanket. He squeezed his eyes shut, rubbed his face with his hands, then blinked slowly up at Mickey. After a second, he winced, twisted over onto his stomach, and started messing with his eyes.

“Did you fall asleep with your contacts in again?”

“Shaddup.”

Chuckling, Mickey stood and crossed over to the bathroom, returning with eye drops and the small case for the lenses.

“Thanks, doll.” He pulled his eyelids back and squeezed a few drops into each eye, then gently massaged his closed eyelids for several seconds. Eyes red and watering when he opened them again, James carefully pinched out his contacts and dropped them into the plastic case before tossing it onto the coffee table next to his glasses. Rolling onto his side, he rubbed his eyes slowly with one hand. “You’d think I would’ve learned by now,” he grumbled.

“Well, this is you we’re talking about.”

James rolled his eyes as he untangled himself from the blanket. “Thanks.” Standing, he stretched, joints popping as he twisted around. “Man, that smells amazing. Is this a new one?”

“Mnnhm.” Mickey leaned over and checked the casserole through the oven door. “Decided to try something a little different from what I normally make. Eliot helped me pick it out.”

The timer started beeping and James picked it up, canceled it, and stuck it back on the fridge. “Here, let me get that.” He hip-bumped Mickey to the side and reached in with his left hand to grab the large glass dish.

Shuddering, Mickey turned away. “You know it gives me the heebie jeebies when you do that.”

“Yeah, I know.” He smirked when she stuck her tongue out at him, setting the dish down and carefully removing the lid. “I can still feel how hot it is, it just doesn’t hurt. I’d rather deal with pissed off sensors than risk you getting burned.”
“How did I ever bake before I met you?” she sassed, picking up the salad servers and stabbing them towards him. “There’s this thing, you know, for people who don’t have metal arms. It’s called an oven mitt, you might’ve heard of it?”

He waggled his metal fingers at her. “This is more fun.” Stepping around the table, James pulled Mickey into a hug and stroked his fingers through her hair. “Thank you, babydoll.”

“Mm. Happy Valentine’s Day.”

Just as he was leaning down to kiss her, the lights in the house flickered off, plunging them into total darkness.

Several loud thumps echoed through the house from the front porch, and James shoved Mickey to the floor just as the front door flew across the living room.

“James, what the-”

“Stay down.” Closing his eyes, James stood slowly, collecting sounds and vibrations as he dropped into a defensive stance. He ducked the first blow, the electric prod crackling as it whizzed past his ear, and spun to land his left fist solidly in the chest of one of the operatives who’d come in. Ribs bent and fractured, and the gurgling grunt and thud told him that one wouldn’t be getting up anytime soon.

Five, he thought to himself. Spin. Dodge. Three quick jabs, grab the gas mask and throw.

Four.

A well-placed kick shattered a knee. So far, he hadn’t heard any guns.

Three.

His next swing didn’t land like it should have, whooshing past the operative’s face instead. Blinking his eyes open, James suddenly swayed on his feet, stumbled, and fell to his knees.

He was unconscious before the boot between his shoulders sent him sprawling across the entryway.

***

Bucky paused, keys in his hand, to take one last drag from his cigarette before stubbing it out. Couldn’t risk Steve having another asthma attack. He jiggled the key into the lock, making a mental note to borrow one of Steve’s soft-lead pencil stubs to get some graphite into the tumblers.

It wasn’t much, with its ugly brown wallpaper, warped floorboards, threadbare area rugs, and low ceiling, but it was home.

He kicked the door shut behind him as he shrugged off his coat and tossed it onto the nail next to the door serving as a coat hook. Steve was so absorbed in his drawing that he didn’t even look up until Bucky stretched his arms up and cracked his neck.

“How was the weather at the docks?” Steve’s deep voice belied his scrawny appearance, a contrast that only Bucky seemed to get used to.

“Cold. There’s a storm moving in so we had some pretty stiff wind.” Bucky glanced at Steve’s sketchbook as he walked through the tiny kitchen. “Working on your poster?”

“Yeah, they want a colored final by the end of this week. Can I use some of your paint?”
Bucky sat down heavily on their old three-legged armchair, propped up by a stack of books, and dragged off his boots. “Sure, but you’ll need to mix up some more green, I’m almost out. There’s a fresh pack of pigment in the box, though. We still got eggs or do I need to go get more?”

“No, there’s three more in there, I think we’re good. Thanks.”

He gave Steve a lopsided grin. “They seriously gonna pay you three dollars for it?”

“Yyyep.”

“Then use all the paint you want, Stevie.” He leaned back and hooked his elbows over the top of the armchair, stretching his feet towards the small stove in the corner. Their apartment was barely an apartment, with a cramped bedroom and two strange partition walls with windows in them dividing the bedroom from the combined kitchen and dining room.

The kitchen table was an old cracked bathtub with a sheet of plywood on top of it; Bucky had frequently offered to build them a proper table with the scrap lumber from one of his jobs, but eventually pragmatism had won out since he needed that time to work.

But with this job, if Steve impressed the studio enough, if painting propaganda posters became regular, reliable work, well… they’d be pulling in enough money to live comfortably for the first time since Bucky’s parents had died. Becca was doing well enough with her beau John, but pride kept Bucky from admitting whenever he’d find a few bills tucked into his coat as he walked home from visiting his sister.

The good news was that this art gig was keeping Steve indoors, off the street, away from bullies, and out of the cold. His medicines were expensive, and the less he needed them, the better they could eat. It was a well-ignored secret that Bucky sometimes went without just to make sure Steve had a full stomach every night.

For now, he closed his eyes and fell into his memories, imagining the crackling fireplace of his parents’ old house - he’d lost it when he’d had to settle their estate after they died. He’d lost everything. Funeral expenses had been a nightmare and just like every other large family in the midst of the Depression, they’d been up to their eyeballs in debt… debt that Bucky inherited.

“Hey.”

Something hard and cold thumped into his lap and Bucky curled up into a ball, stifling a pained groan. “Warn a guy next time,” he gritted out.

“Sorry. Pulled a muscle last week chasing after that Hampton brute, remember?”

“You can’t pull what you don’t have, you punk.” Finally, Bucky cracked his eyes open to see the culprit of his pain: a bottle of beer. “The hell did you get this?”

“Halverson left his door open again.”

“Steve, we talked about this,” Bucky admonished, even as he popped the cap off. “No more stealing the old coot’s giggle juice, he’s gonna notice.”

“He didn’t notice the whole damn bottle’a tequila.”

The beer tasted like heaven. “Yeah, okay, I’ll give you that one. I’m just surprised he didn’t hear you squealin’ that night.”
“I- what-”  Steve spun around and brandished a paintbrush at him. “I don’t squeal.”

“Yeah, you do, you fairy,” Bucky laughed, ducking the crumpled wad of paper that flew across the room at his head.

“Oh, fuck off.”

***

He woke with his ears ringing, his lungs burning, and his limbs feeling like they were made of lead. His left arm shuddered, the motors reacting to his jumbled thoughts as he slowly dragged his arms under him and pushed himself to his hands and knees.

Gradually the whistling in his ears faded until he heard frantic voices in his comm.

“Barnes?  Barnes!  Report!”

“Go for Barnes,” he choked out, his voice gravelly and throat raw. “I’m here.”

“What the hell happened?” Steve demanded.

He bit back a pained noise as he used a chair to drag himself upright. “We got made, I don’t know how. Professionals. Blackout, sweep team. They gassed the house.”

“Do you have a 20 on Agent Draymond?” Hill’s voice.

Blinking the last remnants of the gas fog from his head, James scanned the house.  Shit. Shit shit shit.  “Mickey?” He staggered through the living room, then up the stairs. “Mickey!” Ice-cold panic spread through his stomach as he frantically ran through each of the rooms, calling her name.

“Barnes,” Hill cut in, “we’re go for Code Kenobi. I can have a tac team deployed and in your area in an hour.”

James panted, bracing his palms against the wall in the bathroom, head hanging. “Negative. They won’t get here in time.”

“You need backup, Buck. I’ll be suited up in-”

“Steve, stay there. If this is HYDRA, I gotta get out there while the trail’s hot. They did their research; they know who I am, so they know Mickey’s a walking can o’ whup-ass in high heels and eyeliner. They’re going to be keeping her knocked out if they know what’s good for them.”

“He’s right, Barnes. You need a team.”

“I work best alone.” James forced his breathing back under control. “Get local law enforcement on the horn and have them set up a perimeter once I send you coordinates. I’ll report in when it’s done.”

The stairs to the garage groaned in protest as he ran down them. Hollow snaps echoed slightly as he unlatched the large crate holding their combat gear. Closing his eyes, James took a deep breath, braced himself, swallowed down the mounting nausea, and reached for the black mask.

Several minutes later, dark and silent as a shadow, a tall figure ghosted its way across the rooftops in pursuit of an unmarked black van.

***
Mickey’s eyes were gritty as she blinked them open. She tried to reach up a hand to wipe them clear, and realized with a jolt of panic that both of her arms were strapped down. Her vision still swam, but when she tilted her head forward, she saw that she was held down by thick metal bands, restraints that extended from the arms of a large chair.

Nausea rose up in her stomach and black poured in from the edges of her vision.

***

Several people in the facility screamed as an explosion rocked the west corner. Most of them, scientists and researchers, dove under their desks and tables. The guards and soldiers instantly had their guns drawn and raised, sweeping the expansive room.

The overhead lights flickered, surged, and died.

Pervasive silence pressed on everyone’s ears, broken only by frightened sobs and quiet words.

Something heavy thudded to the floor. The next few seconds were tense and nervous, then a gun discharged deafeningly, the muzzle flash soaking everything in a quick burst of light.

“Hold your fire!” one of the soldiers yelled, then gurgled as he went down.

The frightened whimpers increased in volume; everyone had seen the gleaming reflections of a silver arm holding a combat knife. The next five seconds were filled with the sounds of the guards dying.

One by one, the overhead lights flickered back on.

Standing in the dead center of the research lab was a man, both hands raised in front of him, blood dripping off his knives.

His body armor was advanced; black and red panels fitted seamlessly together, contoured and compact. His left arm was exposed up to the shoulder, shining, stained red up to the elbow. A black mask and dark-lensed goggles covered his face, and his short grayish-brown hair was slicked back.

One of the guards coughed and pushed himself up on his elbows. Without turning, the man tossed one knife to his other hand, drew a gun, and sent a bullet through the guard’s head. The gun was back in its holster before anyone even registered that a shot had been fired.

Slowly, every controlled pace oozing predatory confidence, he approached the lab foreman.

He knelt on one knee in front of the shaking woman, his head tilting to the side almost robotically.

“Where is she?” His voice was low and dangerous.

The scientist shook her head, eyes wide. Leaning forward, the man snagged her coat with his thumb and forefinger, gripping the knife with the rest of his hand.

“Where. Is. She.”

“I- I don’t know! A truck came in, they, I think they took something upstairs, I-”

He released her collar and stood in one smooth motion, fixing her with the blank stare of his goggles before turning and walking away.

Something flashed, blinding everyone in the room.
The power for the whole facility died, and the dull thrum of machines cycling down was the only sound.

***

“Grenade!”

The men dove for cover mere seconds before nine loud bangs and bright flashes lit up the narrow, pitch-black hallway. Disoriented, ears ringing, many of them stumbled and several fell down. Another small black shape rolled down the hall and tiny rubber pellets exploded outwards to stun the rest of Alpha Team.

A dark shadow flowed through the group, spinning and flashing in a deadly dance of knives.

Bravo, Charlie, and Delta Team listened to them scream until the last voice faded into a death rattle.

***

Charlie Team advanced slowly, cautiously, using the half-height cubicles for cover as much as possible without compromising their own approach. Hand signals flew back and forth, glances flickered nervously between the men.

“Daddy! Help!”

One of the men let out a strangled cry and dove towards the sound. The formation broke as Charlie Team raced for cover when a single shot sprayed the man’s brain and blood all over a cubicle wall.

Frantic breathing filled the comms.

“There’s children, oh Christ, there’s children,” one operator whimpered. “He’s got children.”

“Shut up, Connelly.” Charlie Leader’s voice shot through the comms as a harsh whisper. “There’s no kids here. Pull it together.”

With limited visibility, the only light filtering through the blinds from the street lamps, the men twitched and turned to face every new sound.

Feet pattered down the east wall, seven guns following the noise. A dark figure, unseen in the shadows, pulled another tiny black and silver sphere of speakers from its belt. After tapping a few buttons on the sphere, the figure sent it rolling down the south wall before rising to a low crouch and ghosting into the cubicles. Wet slapping noises, carefully pitched low to set teeth on edge and raise hackles, followed the chaos ball.

“I’m scared, please, is there anyone there?”

The sickening crunch of vertebrae separating made three men gag. Within seconds, a wet gurgle followed it.

“Connelly, report.”

Silence.

“Connelly!”

“He heard you the first time,” a low voice growled before Charlie Leader gasped and choked against the knife in his throat.
Shots tore through the eerie silence as the ghost rolled another chaos ball down the center aisle of the cubicle, leaving the remnants of Charlie Team firing wild and blind out of fear. Friendly fire took down the rest of the team within a minute.

***

The men closest to the door dropped their guns, slamming hands and fists against it as they shot panicked looks over their shoulders. The fusion welds were visible down the length of the door jamb, cooled beads of dripping metal looking like silver blood.

After a barked order from Bravo Leader, the men furthest from the door dropped down and raised up their riot shields, forming a defensive wall against the unmoving figure at the other end of the hallway.

Guns raised, sights trained on the intruder, Bravo Team looked to each other for empty reassurance.

“Open fire!”

The black and red figure simply stood there, unfazed by the hail of bullets. The only movement he made was taking a half-step back when a lucky spray hit his leg. After several long seconds, he took one step forward, then another, until he was moving down the hall with long, purposeful strides, reaching over his right shoulder to pull a Skorpion into view.

The men on Delta Team started hyperventilating when they heard aborted screams for wives, mothers, children. The last voice gasped and gurgled through the intercom, strangled to death.

***

One by one, Delta Team dropped. The shots seemed to come from nowhere. The hallway was empty.

***

The voices around Mickey were panicked, high pitched, and speaking rapidly in a mixture of languages. The noises coming through the communications console indicated that the facility had descended into a state of total confusion. Operators were dropping like flies, teams were turning on each other, and the research lab wouldn’t respond.

Eyes still closed, Mickey took a shuddering breath, her teeth bared in an open-mouthed grin as gravity rapidly switched directions around her and the room spun from the drugs coursing through her veins.

“Oh, but if you knew the devil, child,” she slurred, half-singing.

“What?” One of the scientists stepped over to her, distracted.

She flopped her head to the side and licked her lips, trying to focus her eyes on one of the two faces swirling in front of her. “Oh, but if you knew the devil, child, you would forever run. Oh, but if you knew the devil, child, your nightmare’s just begun.” Rolling her head back, Mickey closed her eyes. “Oh, but if you knew the devil, child, you’d never take what’s his. Oh, but if you knew the devil, child, you’d know he’s here for—”

Something thudded into her temple and blessed blackness erupted through her head.

***
James pulled his Glock from the CornerShot and then reached behind him with the rig until it clipped back into place under the Skorpion. Cradling the pistol in his hands as he counterbalanced the added weight of the suppressor, he paced slowly forward, twisting from side to side slightly as he stepped through the bodies.

The frantic chatter of the operators had faded with each one he’d dropped, and now silence rang through his ears.

At last, he rounded the final corner. In front of him was a door, heavy, reinforced, and clearly designed to look intimidating. It was a similar model to the one that had closed him into his cell for so many years, specifically built to contain someone just like him.

A thin window cut through the door at eye level. He walked up to it, pulled out an explosive rod, and slammed it into the glass.

“You have thirty seconds to release her before I set this off and blow the door to kingdom come. Your time starts now.” His voice rang through the intercom, courtesy of JARVIS.

Triggering the adhesive on the bomb, James stepped back and held up his wrist, fiddling with the remote detonator as he counted down slowly.

“…four… three… two… one.”

Nothing happened.

“Well, I did warn you.”

He stepped behind the corner of the wall he’d used for cover while taking out Delta Team, and triggered the charge.

The concussive blast jolted him into the opposite wall and debris crashed through the hallway with impressive - almost alarming - speed.

“JARVIS, buddy, let Tony know he can decrease the power of the breach charges, or at the very least make them adjustable.” He worked his jaw around and cracked his neck. “It’s got one hell of a punch.”

“Noted, sir.”

Before the smoke and dust from the explosion cleared, James raised his Glock up and strode into the room. His goggles outlined heat signatures - two fading, seven cowering behind meager cover, and one in the center of the room. He dead-checked the fading ones and took out all but one of the others hiding behind cover.

The tactical overlay faded as the dust settled, and he holstered his gun, running forward. He made quick work of the restraints around Mickey’s arms and legs, slipped the needle out of her hand, and after a pause, ripped the electrode headpiece clean off of its mounts. She fell limply into his arms as he collapsed to his knees, holding her tightly.

“Hey, doll, I’m here,” he murmured.

“…smell like blood.” Her voice was thick and slurred.

“Not mine. I’m gonna get you out of here. You’re gonna be okay.”
Turning slowly, he faced the last remaining scientist. The man clutched at the machinery behind him, panting, eyes wide with fear, lips working soundlessly.

“I’m going to leave you alive for now,” James growled, “because I want you to deliver a message. You have five minutes to transmit it.” He stood, scooping up Mickey in his arms. “Tell the rest of the disgusting two-head asswipes this: you know who I am. There isn’t a rathole you can hide in that I won’t find you. Good fucking luck if you try, because it ain’t gonna work, and I ain’t gonna stop til every last one’a you is dead.”

“Wh- what are you?” the scientist stammered.

For the first time, James wished the man could see the animalistic grin hidden behind his mask. He settled for furrowing his eyebrows and cocking his head slightly to the side. “You sent a man to hell to face the Devil himself.” He stepped forward, dropping his voice. “I’m what came back after the Devil lost.”

***

He carried Mickey straight out the front doors of the shell of an office building, keeping his eyes fixed forward and ignoring the people descending on the site.

Stopping mid-stride with his knees bent, he finished the count-down in his head.

Glass shards sprayed outward from the building, and the strategically placed charges caused it to crumple inward as pillars and beams crashed into each other. The shock wave rocketed outward, sending bystanders staggering and shielding their heads from the small amount of debris that made it out.

With a shuddering breath, James sank to one knee, cradling Mickey against his chest as he pressed his metal fingers to her neck, sensing her pulse and body temperature.

“Emergency medical is already on its way, Agent Barnes.”

“Thank you, JARVIS,” he whispered.

“Certainly, sir.”

The whispers and questions ricocheting through the crowd was almost deafening. Laying Mickey down gently on the ground, he helped her onto her side as she weakly rolled over. After a pause, he reached up and undid the strap for his goggles and the clips for his mask, letting them fall to the ground at his side. He leaned on his knee, dropped his head onto his arm, and tried his best to focus on taking deep albeit shaky breaths.

Cameras clicked, reporters chattered into their microphones, and cell phones of all shapes and sizes were pointed directly at him. Defiantly, he raised his eyes, glaring down the nearest TV camera, trying to hide how much his head was weaving around on his neck.

A gurney shoved its way through the police perimeter and paramedics ran over to him.

“They had her on a drip, probably sedatives.” He helped them lift Mickey up, then fell to his knees again when he tried to follow. “I’m fine, I’m fine, it’s just adrenaline,” he muttered as he waved away the paramedic that tried to stay behind.

Closing his eyes, he focused on emptying and filling his lungs slowly, rhythmically, leaning forward gradually until he knelt there on his hands and knees with his head hanging in front of a hundred
A microphone stabbed into his face and he jumped back, sitting on one foot while the other leg stretched out in front of him, one hand behind him to support his weight. When the crowd around him recoiled, he glanced down and realized he held a gun in his free hand, leveled at a wide-eyed reporter.

“Whoa, whoa, now. Let’s everybody calm down a sec, okay?” Slowly, a man edged his way in front of James, facing away from him. It took him a minute to place the newcomer as Eliot. “I dunno about you, ma’am, but the last thing I’d do in an active combat zone is run up to one of the guys who’s just been fighting and shove somethin’ in his face. Great way to get yourself shot.”

Eliot’s hand reached back, closed around the muzzle of James’s pistol, and slowly pulled it out of his hands. Quickly, Eliot ejected the magazine as well as the chambered round before dropping the gun to the ground next to him.

“Everybody back up, give him some space, alright?” When the crowd didn’t react, simply pressing further forward with their cameras, Eliot sighed, then roared, “I said MOVE!”

People skittered back as if Eliot was the one who’d just drawn a gun on a reporter.

James blinked tightly as he reached up to brush a hand over his face, then thought better of it when he saw his blood-soaked hands; his half-finger gloves and their interlocking armor plates were sticky and red.

“Hey, man.” Eliot knelt in front of him, waving a hand to get his attention. “Give me a little warning before you go all Master Chief next time. You got an extraction team on the way?”

“…no.” Shifting position slightly, James pulled his knees up in front of them and leaned forward, bracing his arms against his legs and letting his forehead drop down. “Told ‘em I was goin’ in alone.”

“You… you what?” Eliot hissed. “You can’t do a rescue mission without backup, man! What if you got shot? Who’s gonna rescue both your goddamn stupid asses then? I don’t care if you really are the fuckin’ Devil himself, you need goddamn backup!”

“Did get shot.” James raised his right arm up, showing off the shiny streaks from where bullets had glanced off of his body armor. “Well, I got shot at.”

Eliot’s frustrated growl was drowned out by the sound of a van forcing its way through the crowd. He dragged James to his feet. “Get in. Hardison’s tracking your girl, she’s on her way to Providence. We’re gonna take you back home, get you cleaned up, then get you over to see her.”

James blinked as his eyes adjusted to the dim light once Eliot slammed the doors shut. “Where’s Parker?”

“Waiting at the hospital. We’re gonna have her sit in until you get there.” Eliot shoved him into a chair and tossed his mask and goggles onto the desk running the length of the van. “You need any first aid?”

“No.” Squeezing his eyes shut and rolling his head slowly to the side, James didn’t resist when he felt Eliot take a hold of and start wiping down his left arm. “Might need to restock a few grand’s worth of ammo, though.”

“How the hell is this flyin’ under the radar, huh?” Eliot’s voice was furious even though his hands were gentle as they cleaned the blood off of James’s face. “Your girl lies through her teeth to me...
about bein’ here on vacation, then you go blow a building up? Man, I didn’t do all that work settin’
you two up with a perfect goddamn date for it to go to shit like this.”

“They stormed in and took her when we were sitting down for dinner.” His words caught in his
throat. “She made us dinner…”

“Hey.” Fingers snapped under his nose. “Stay with me, man. I know where you’re goin’. Don’t
do it.”

“Does anyone wanna explain to me why we got the goddamn Winter Soldier - the bogeyman of the
criminal underworld, the knife in the dark, the fuckin’ ghost story to end all ghost stories - anyone
wanna tell me why in the hell he’s in the back’a my van?” Hardison complained from the front.
“Anyone?”

“Shut up and drive, Hardison!” Eliot closed his eyes, lips curling and twitching as he fought down
words. Finally, he fixed James with an unhappy look. “What happened in there?”

James shook his head slowly, trying to clear away the haunting picture of Mickey strapped into the
chair. “They had her,” he croaked. “They had her and they strapped her down and… they were
gonna do to her what they did to me. The… the thing.” He gestured around his head. “Zap her
brain. But it wasn’t gonna work, if y’ain’t juiced then it just kills you or makes you into something
even Stephen King wouldn’t mess with.”

Eliot’s eyes narrowed and he stared at James for several seconds before muttering, “Screamers.”

James nodded wordlessly.

“That’s… that’s HYDRA bullshit right there, man,” Hardison called back to them. “No, we don’t
do that. That ain’t what we do, Eliot!”

“It is now!” Eliot turned back to James to help him tug off his gloves. “So. I’d wager a guess that
was Mickey Draymond that you blew up a building for.”

“Yeah.”

“She’s gonna be okay, you got that? Parker’s there with her right now.” Eliot tapped his ear
meaningfully - the team had their own comms. “Says that aside from some sedatives and loopy juice
workin’ their way outta her system, she’s fine. They got her in a private room, should be able to
discharge her once the drugs are gone.”

“Good, that’s… good. Yeah.” James sighed in relief.

Eliot paused, frowning slightly as he listened to Parker over the comm, and then he and Hardison
both snorted and chuckled. “Says she’s asking for Lucky Charms.”

“That’s my girl.” Grinning from ear to ear, James closed his eyes and shook his head. “Kidnapped
by HYDRA, drugged silly, and she asks for her I’ve-had-a-shit-day food.”

“So, kid. Can’t call you Aaron anymore,” Eliot prompted, and James laughed quietly.

“God, it’s weird when you people call me ‘kid.’ I’m at least twice your age.” He looked at his
hands, mismatched, the legacy of so many years of never-ending war, and closed them into loose
fists. Looking up at Eliot, he grinned tiredly. “James Buchanan Barnes, but… you know what, let’s
just go with Bucky.”
He's finally reclaimed his name!

Just a reminder, Screamers are a reference to the Captain America: Super Soldier video game (which is kind of sort of not really canon? Idk). They're pretty terrifying, when you think of the implications of the concept.

Working off of this concept art for Steve and Bucky’s 1940s apartment:

![Concept art](image)

Have another drawing of Mickey and James/Bucky!
Short-haired Winter Soldier:

And this is sort of how his new combat armor looks:
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Put on the feels armor. You're gonna need it.

**Trigger warnings:**
- Lots of rocky relationship stuff in this one
- Unhealthy coping mechanisms (no direct self-harm)
- (Mostly) off-screen barfight - see above, unhealthy coping mechanisms? yeah...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With a barely-hidden eye roll, James quickly rolled up his right sleeve, turning his arm so that the soft muscle inside his elbow was facing up. He looked away, training his eyes on the seam between the ceiling and wall and focusing on his breathing as the nurse gently swabbed his elbow with a cold liquid.

"Is this the arm you normally get blood drawn from?" she asked him.

"Yep. Just don’t like needles." He exhaled sharply through pursed lips. Something poked into his skin a few times and he did his best not to twitch.

"...sorry. I’m just having trouble finding the vein."

James closed his eyes and tilted his head over his left shoulder, chewing on his lip, biting off the tiny bits of dried skin that poked up when his lips were dry.

Finally, the nurse sighed. "Let’s try the other arm."

Before he could stop himself, James rolled his head to the other side and gave her a sardonic smirk. "Sure, if you can find it. I think I left it in a ravine in the Alps somewhere." He pulled his left hand out of his pocket and wagged the metal fingers at her.

"...right." She blinked a few times, then looked back down at his arm. "I’ll, uh, give it another try."

"Here, this might help." James balled his right hand into a fist, reaching up and squeezing his bicep tightly with his left hand to make the veins pop more.

An hour later and lighter two pints, James leaned against the wall of the elevator as he punched the button to take him back up to the apartment from the medical floor. "JARVIS, how’s the game going?"

"The Jets are currently up seven points, sir."

"Thanks, bud. Pull it up on the TV when I get in?"

"Certainly."

He palmed the panel next to the door, shutting it quietly behind him. Stepping out of his shoes, he
set them under the little bamboo rack Mickey had insisted on getting – they weren’t savages, after all – and gently pressed his knuckles into the sore spot under the small square gauze pad the nurse had taped to his arm. The hole had already sealed up, but… procedures were procedures. He humored the medical staff and their procedures for the same reason he humored Bruce by bleeding out on a schedule for him.

Ambling through the apartment, he stopped for a minute to lean over on the back of the couch and watch the football game quietly taking place on the wall next to the fireplace. When the next commercial break hit, he turned, tugged his shirt off, and crossed into the bedroom to find himself a loose sweater.

He hadn’t been anticipating seeing Mickey’s feet poking up from the floor in the bathroom, visible from the knees down as her legs stuck straight out towards the tub.

“Mickey? You okay?”

“Holy shit- yeah – geez – I’m fine, wasn’t expecting you to-”

He stepped into the bathroom and got an eyeful of the last thing he was expecting. Jumping, swearing loudly, and turning so he was looking back into the bedroom, James leaned against the door jamb to hide the bright red flush spreading across his face and neck.

“Um. You’re, uh…” He cleared his throat. “Hokay.”

“Jesus…”

Mickey moved around behind him, and a wet squelching sound made him tightly screw his face up in an embarrassed frown.

“Yeah. Um, medical finished up early. I, uh... Wow, this is awkward.”

“And not what it looks like, I promise,” she mumbled at him. “You can turn around now if you want.”

“No, no, I’m good.” His voice came out higher-pitched than normal. “I should probably, uh, walk away now, right?”

Without waiting for a response, he dug through the closet, grabbed the first decent-looking sweater that fell to hand, and rabbited to the kitchen to make himself a cup of tea for lack of any better options.

Several minutes later he sat at the table slowly sipping the hot, herbal liquid, and looking everywhere but Mickey as she walked out of the bedroom, hair wet from the shower she’d just finished.

“Hey,” she said, bumping into his leg with her knee as she waked by. He jumped like he’d been zapped and sloshed hot tea all over his flesh hand.

“…ow. H- hey.”

A kitchen towel flopped onto the table from behind him, and he picked it up to wipe up the spill and dry off his hand.

“You okay?”
“I- yeah. Yeah, I’m fine,” he squeaked.

“Jim…

“Don’ wanna talk about it if we don’t have to.”

Mickey sighed as she sat down across from him, unwrapping a granola bar. “You didn’t walk in on me jacking off or anything.”

James set down his mug with a thunk and dropped his face into his hands. “Bright fuckin’ orange…”

“Yeah, they color code the medical ones by diameter. Helps me keep track of which is which easier.” When he glanced up at her, she raised an eyebrow and tilted her head.

“Is that why there was a- a ruler on it?”

“Yep. I need to keep the measurements within a specific range to make sure everything’s working properly. If I let it go, then the ‘plasty turns cosmetic instead of functional.’

He chewed his lip uncomfortably, feeling a blush creep back into his cheeks. “But you don’t even do… you’re asexual.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m going to let all that money – Jack’s money – go to waste.” She took a big bite of her granola bar, shoving it into her cheek after chewing a few times. “I usually take care of it when you’re out and whatnot.”

“God, yeah, sorry about that.” His head fell forward into his hands again. “I’ll text you next time or something.”

“Trust me, Jim, this is a thousand times more awkward for you than it is for me.”

“Really? Because I just walked in on you doin’ somethin’ that… I mean, I read about how people like you don’t like talkin’ about this kind of thing…”

The last bite of granola bar disappeared and she crumpled up the wrapper in her hands before answering. “Well, no, it’s always a little uncomfortable talking about the things that still set me apart from cis women, but I had to learn a long time ago that it’s a part of me. If I let all those little things control me, then I can’t be myself. But I fight to own them, make them mine. If I can’t feel comfortable talking about things like that, then it’s just this giant sword hanging over my head all the time.”

James frowned slightly as he remembered something from during the trial. “Is that why you were comfortable saying your deadname and outing yourself in the courtroom?”

“Comfortable? Hah! No.” Mickey fiddled with the wrapper. “It still makes me feel really weird and… twitchy, kind of. But, that’s a legal name I have on record, even though I got it changed and everything. Figured I might as well take control by playing that card from my own hand first.” She smiled softly, looking down at the wrapper in her hands.

“Plus, Tony talked to me after the fact about pushing a lot of money towards a few clinics that help out trans youth. He wrote some pretty big checks.”

“That’s… damn, Mickey, that’s awesome.”
“Yeah.” Her smile grew wider. “We have to live a little different; there’s always things that’ll set us apart, even if it’s just in the privacy of our own homes, but… there’s support out there, now. A lot more of us are being public about it, and it’s getting more acceptable.” She reached up to tuck a few strands of her hair behind her ear. “I left my cell number with a few of the clinics. Told them that I’d take calls from people that were struggling, give them an ear that’ll listen.”

“…wow,” James said, reaching out a hand to give hers a squeeze. “That’s really awesome, I’m proud of you.”

“Well, I’m a public figure now. People know my name and my face, so… if I can use that to help a couple of kids just like me?” Mickey shrugged and gave him a shy grin. “Why not?”

***

Bucky was relieved to find that Franklin had not only risen to the challenge of taking over training, but had delivered remarkable results. His team now topped the boards for scoring, undefeated at the range, in hand-to-hand, and tactics. Surveying their individual scores, Bucky paced slowly around the empty gym as he traced a finger down the range reports.

Peters still struggled with the finesse of long range rifle work, but Evans was head and shoulders above the rest of the team. They all needed to be cross-discipline as much as possible, although specialists were more than acceptable so Bucky decided to let it slide. Carlton had really come into her own, blossoming into the team’s medic and more than proving her worth with her paralytic darts.

Tactically, they moved as a cohesive unit. He’d watched several hours of footage of their training simulations during the weeks he’d been in Portland, decidedly impressed with the quality of Franklin’s instruction and Jackson’s knack for tactical planning. The kid had an uncanny ability to memorize maps and troop movements at first glance, keeping every operator in play on a giant chess board in his head.

Tossing the report packet onto the small desk in the corner of the gym, Bucky strode out into the center of the gym floor. “Simulation of cadet team alpha-tango-niner-five, last Thursday’s session.”

The hard light projection floor hummed to life, giving him a full-size walkthrough of the small arena. He turned slowly in place, taking in both teams’ positions, and ordered the computer to begin playback.

Calling a pause at one point, Bucky jogged over to Gonzalez’s projection. She had her thighs locked around one of the opposing team’s cadets, in the middle of spinning him to the ground with an orange polypropylene knife pressed to his neck.

“Has Agent Romanoff been guest training?”

“Affirmative.”

“Huh. Works for me. Resume.” Gonzalez took down the other cadet within seconds, rolling to cover and stabbing the dagger back into her belt before drawing her laser pistol.

When the match was over, Bucky instructed the computer to leave the arena active, doing a thorough walkthrough as he evaluated it with a sniper’s eye. He swung himself up onto one of the hard light structures, flattening himself down over the roof and peering across the arena. The opposing team had left themselves exposed from above, giving Evans the chance to pick four of them off before they located his nest.

The door to the gym opened and closed, and Mickey’s voice echoed across the hall. “End
simulation.”

Bucky swore as the structure vanished under him, barely managing to tuck and roll out of the fall. “What the hell?”

Heels clicked over the floor as she walked toward him, holding out a clipboard with an unamused expression. “You’re on air in two hours on ABC. Go get cleaned up unless you want to be late.”

“Shit, that’s today?” he muttered as he took the clipboard, ignoring Mickey’s crossed arms. “Why do I have a script for an interview?”

“That’s to make sure you don’t fuck this up like you did the last one. Go get ready, we’re leaving in fifteen.” She turned on her heel, clicking smartly back over to the door.

“Mickey.”

Stopping, she tilted her head back slightly but didn’t turn. Her hair, back to its familiar gradient of color-bleach-black, was smoothly slicked down. The light blue suit she was in matched the colored tips of her hair, and cherry red heels poked out from under her pants.

Bucky sighed and let his hands fall to his sides. “We need to talk about this. After the interview, tomorrow night, I don’t care. But we need to talk.”

“Not much left to talk about,” she replied tightly, and left the gym.

He growled quietly to himself and crossed to the desk, picking up the reports and his bag. “Fucking hell...”

***

Trying not to twitch away from the cold sponge that the girl kept swiping over his face was harder than he expected. “Is- is this really necessary?”

She paused, cocked a perfect eyebrow and fixed him with unamused eyes. “Unless you want your face to be as shiny as your arm, yes. Sit still.”

Bucky closed his eyes when directed and sighed quietly. In the time since he and Mickey had been airlifted from Portland, he’d been shoved unceremoniously into so many PR events and interviews that Steve had made a joke about Bucky getting his own spangle circuit… a joke that had promptly been rewarded with that flat, emotionless Winter Soldier glare that Bucky knew unsettled him so much.

Minutes later, he was standing in the wings of the stage listening to the host rattle through her introductions, and he nervously twitched his head around to peer at the audience.

“That’s a lot of people,” he mumbled as one of the techs messed with his mic pack.

“You’ll do fine, kid. Go, that’s your cue.” A hand shoved him firmly between his shoulder blades and he half-stumbled onto the stage, his theatrical instinct turning it into a combat roll. He came up holding an imaginary rifle, metal arm on full display thanks to the removal of the corresponding sleeve of his shirt and jacket.

The crowd cheered and he gave them his best stage smile, standing and waving as he walked over to greet the host.
“Well, now, that was quite an entrance,” the host said with a grin, extending a hand for him to shake. “Thank you for joining us tonight.”

“Pleasure’s all mine, ma’am.” Old-fashioned politeness and pleasantries would have to suffice; he’d already forgotten the woman’s name. When she gestured to the chair opposite him, he sank into it, sprawling just enough to make himself look completely at ease. He scanned the audience with his eyes as he turned and waved, spotting Mickey and Darcy sitting three rows back towards stage right. Mickey gave him a smile and a thumbs-up, and he tried not to notice that the smile didn’t reach her eyes.

“So… Mr. Barnes. James? What should I…”

“Uhm…” He smiled shyly. “Well, I’m tryin’ Bucky back on for size now, so…”

The woman’s smile was warm and genuine. “Bucky, then. I’d just like to say thank you for agreeing to sit down with me. Let’s cut to the chase, shall we?”

Chuckling, Bucky scratched at his neck. “Sure, go ahead.”

After forty-five minutes of brain-numbing questions carefully dodging around the true nature of his skills, he stood, shook hands with the host, flashed another stage smile at the audience, and made his exit.

The makeup came off a lot quicker than it had gone on, and he breathed a heavy sigh of relief as he switched the obnoxious one-sleeved jacket and shirt for something that actually covered his arm. Mickey was waiting for him in the green room, car keys in her hand, scrolling through something on her phone.

“Hey.”

She looked up when he walked in, then glanced back at her phone. “Good news, people aren’t pissed off this time.”

“What’s the bad news?”

“Darcy’s out there for damage control on the Portland mission. Oh relax, she was scheduled next slot after you anyway, there’s nothing you did wrong. You followed the script really well, good job.”

Her words felt hollow despite the meaning. “Micks…”

“Come on.” She turned to leave, stopping only when he caught her arm, and closed her eyes.

“Please let go.”

Bucky dropped his hand, stepping back to give her space. “Sorry, I just… we really need to talk. I get that you’re pissed at me, but you just keep brushing me off like this. It’s been two weeks. Two weeks. When are you gonna tell me what’s wrong?”

Her shoulders tensed and Bucky knew without seeing it that she was sucking her lips between her teeth and chewing on the insides of her cheeks.

“Ninety-seven.”

“…what?”
“Ninety-seven people,” she repeated, her voice tense and low. “I got the body count from the Portland PD.”

“Mickey, they had you capti-” She spun, cutting him off.

“You killed nearly a hundred people in half an hour, Barnes.”

“What- how- why does that matter?”

Stepping forward, Mickey poked him firmly in the chest with a finger, her eyes blazing. “The next time you decide to let yourself get compromised-”

“Compromised?” His eyes narrowed. “I’m sorry, how is-”

“You wanna know why I’m pissed? I don’t care if they’re HYDRA or AIM or even the damn Hand, my life isn’t worth ninety-seven other people’s!”

“It is to me!” he hissed, gritting his teeth to keep himself from yelling. “Especially if they’re goddamn fucking HYDRA and they’ve got you in the shock chair! Don’t you fucking dare pull this bullshit on me, unless you want to go after everyone else on the team that’s run in to rescue someone they care about. Unless you’re ready to lecture Steve for crashing the Valkyrie, unless you want to tell Tony he shouldn’t have gone after that AIM lunatic when he kidnapped Pepper, unless you think telling Thor that Loki wasn’t worth saving, don’t you fucking dare tell me what I did was wrong.”

Forcing his jaw to unclench, Bucky took a deep breath, placed his hands on Mickey’s shoulders, and looked her straight in the eye. Her glare wavered, and she met his gaze over her glasses. “Look, you can be mad at me all you want, but don’t you dare be mad at me for saving the life of one of the most important people in mine.”

“Jim… Bucky… you’re just… you don’t understand,” she said, shaking her head. “You can’t make choices like that. What if you have to decide between me or a group of civilians? I can’t trust you to make the right call. Not anymore.”

“Mickey…”

She swallowed thickly, refusing to meet his eyes. “I’m meeting with Hill next week to talk about a transfer.”

“…wh- what?” he whispered, the words barely making it out as his lungs forgot how to work.

Mickey’s lips worked soundlessly a few times before she closed her eyes, shook her head, turned, and left.

Bucky stood there, staring after Mickey, all the way through Darcy’s segment until she made her way to the green room and found him there.

“…Buckster? Everything okay?” Darcy cocked her head to the side. “Earth to Bucky…”

He blinked a few times and shook his head slightly. “Mickey just left. Well, like, an hour ago.” Hoarse and quiet, his voice barely worked.

“Left to go home, or…”

When he didn’t answer, that seemed to do the trick.

“Well, fuck.” Darcy sighed and grabbed him by the arm. “Come on. I know a way out of here
that’ll keep you away from people. I’ll give you a ride back to HQ.”

“But the…”

Darcy’s phone beeped, and she pulled it out to read the message as she tugged Bucky down a dark hallway. “Um… she says she’s going to relocate down a floor. And just asked me to make sure you don’t do anything stupid.”

The ride back to headquarters went by in a blur as he sat there in the car, staring at the dashboard, numb. Mickey had been prickly and aloof since they’d come back, but this wasn’t something he’d expected.

Sure enough, when the door to his quarters swung open, Mickey had already gathered up her things and left. There was a folded piece of paper sitting on top of his laptop, and Bucky stared blankly into the room before Darcy gently nudged him inside. She closed the door quietly behind them and leaned against it.

“Are you gonna be okay?”

He sat on the bed slowly, looking around as he saw the subtle cues of missing things. “Um… yeah. Yeah.”

“You’re a horrible liar, Barnes.”

Dropping his face into his hands, Bucky drew in a deep breath. “Is she right? Did I make the wrong call?”

“I think you made the only call you could.” Darcy watched him quietly for another minute before pulling out her phone. “Listen, I gotta be downstairs for a debrief in fifteen. Go blow off some steam in one of the sim rooms or go punch up some bags, okay? I’ll call you when I’m done, we’ll go grab food somewhere.”

“…thanks,” he croaked.

Half an hour later, the only sounds in the small training room were his fists, feet, elbows, and knees striking the practice dummies.

I can’t trust you to make the right call. Not anymore.

The dummy flew across the room, slamming into the opposite wall.

I got the body count from Portland PD.

Wordlessly, Bucky hauled up another dummy, set it in place, and grunted heavily as he threw his whole weight behind his right arm.

You killed nearly a hundred people in half an hour, Barnes.

That dummy snapped clean in half when he spun and jumped, both combat boots thudding into the center mass.

My life isn’t worth ninety-seven other people’s!

With a pained cry, he knocked the head off the last dummy with his left fist, sinking to his knees and threading his hands into his hair. He closed his eyes, dropped his head forward, and sat back on his ankles with his knuckles against the floor. God, but this was a mess.
The door to the training room creaked open.

“Oh- sorry…” Carlton’s soft voice wafted into the room. “I’ll, uh, I was just looking for the…”

Bucky sighed and raised a tired hand to beckon her forward. “Come in, I know you’re not here for the treadmills, kid.”

Quiet footsteps scuffed their way over to him, and Carlton sank easily to the floor, crossing her legs and leaning back on her hands. The cadet tilted her head down, looking at Bucky appraisingly.

Shifting around, Bucky twisted so he was sitting with his legs pulled loosely in, wrists on his knees. “Well, have it out.”

“I’m not here to yell at you, Barnes.”

“Really? Because that’s what it feels like everyone else is doing right now.” Bucky swallowed thickly and looked away. “I keep getting shoved in front of cameras, and no one realizes that I’m really not a good poster boy for a team of enhanced mentally ill whackjobs that’re supposed to save people. That’s all I’m good at, Jessie, I kill things. Once the media realizes I’m not the perfect redemption story they want, once they figure out how many bodies I left behind in Portland, there won’t be a Tower for me to hide in anymore.”

He wasn’t expecting Carlton to chuckle. “Trust me, this isn’t nearly as bad as you think it is.”

And there, that was the reflexive wince-frown he did whenever he was upset and trying to solve a problem. “Yeah, it kinda is.” He dragged his fingers through his hair again, combing it back and away from his forehead. “Textbook definition of FUBAR. Oh, motherfucker.” His left hand wouldn’t pull away, snagged firmly in his hair. Closing his eyes, he pressed his right hand over his face, trying to hide the frustrated snarl that nearly snuck out.

“Here, hold still.” Carlton knee-walked over and quickly disentangled his hand, pulling the fingers around so the plates slid back and released the trapped hair. “You really should get that fixed if it’s a common problem.”

“This is the fixed version,” he said grumpily. “That’s as tight as the tolerances can go without having clearance issues in the internals. Stark’s already redone the plating three times.”

There was a somewhat awkward pause before Carlton sighed and gave Bucky a look. “Killing things isn’t all you’re good at, Barnes.”

“Kinda seems like it. Mickey isn’t talking to me.”

“Agent Draymond can go be a fucknut somewhere else for a bit, okay?” His head snapped up, anger flashing in his eyes as Carlton held up her hands placatingly. “I’m not saying she doesn’t have plenty of reason to be upset.”

“Not helping.”

“But honestly, maybe some space is a good thing. You’re both pretty high-strung right now. Don’t give me that look, Barnes, it’s really fucking obvious. You both need to take some time to calm down and think this through before you try to talk it out.”

“She’s made it pretty clear that ain’t gonna happen.”

“Hokay.” Carlton slapped her legs and stood up. “Get up.”
Bucky looked up at her, confused. “What?”

“Get up. Come on.” Reaching down, Carlton tugged on his shoulder. “You’re moping worse than my junior year roommate after her boyfriend slept with her brother.”

“I- I don’t… mope…” he mumbled as she shoved a pair of escrima sticks into his hands from the rack on the wall and twirled a pair of her own around.

“Yeah, you’re moping, even if it involves pissing off the quartermaster. Seriously, he’s gonna run you a tab, man.” Carlton pointed at the dummy carnage with the stick in her left hand.

He couldn’t help but snort softly, his lips involuntarily twitching into a small smirk. “So, what’re these for then?” Holding up the escrima sticks, Bucky twirled them expertly over his hands, flowing through the forms with the ease of practice.

“During the trial, you said you were a protector, a shield.” Carlton dropped into a basic stance. “When you pulled Smithson out of my room, you proved it. But the thing you missed, Barnes, is that you’re also a teacher.” She gave him a wry smile. “You’re at your best when you’re teaching people how to do something, even if it’s how to kill a hostile with my bare hands. So, teach. I need help, you saw my scores. Teach me.”

Bucky dropped his arms to his sides, sighing and giving her a tired look before shaking his head. “Fine. Not like I got anything better to do right now.” He stepped forward and tapped her knee with one of the sticks. “Tighten up. Stance that wide, I’d knock your feet clean out from under you in two seconds. Raise ‘em up, show me what you got.”

For the next week, Bucky threw himself into the cadets’ training program with such intensity that he almost forgot about everything else. Almost. He still had to talk to Mickey, of course, stilted and awkward, painfully businesslike, but… outside of those short interactions, he could direct his pent-up anger and frustration into an arguably healthier outlet.

Even after the grueling eight-hour training days, Bucky still made a habit of reserving one of the new sim rooms, courtesy of Tony Stark, for a good two hours immediately after Retreat. Absorbed as he was in finally being able to let loose, let the demons inside completely take over without risking hurting anyone… he didn’t notice his students gather to watch, takeout trays and forks in hand, nor did he notice the steadily growing crowd each day. Watching the Winter Soldier train became something of a spectator sport before he even realized he had an audience.

Stripped to the waist, hair slicked back with sweat, tac pants bloused into well-worn combat boots, Bucky whirled and spun as he swept through the swarm of glowing orange soldiers. His knife sliced through the air as he threw it and allowed himself a grin as it thudded firmly into the center of one soldier’s chest. Springing into a backflip, Bucky twisted as he spun around, crashing feetfirst into the stomach of another soldier.

An orange arm hooked around his neck, causing a hollow *hurk* to force its way out of his throat. He reached up both hands to grab the arm just as he yanked his knees up to his chest and jackknifed himself forward. The simulated soldier flew over his shoulder, shattering into bright sparks when it slammed into the mat. Bunching himself up, Bucky used the crouch to launch himself into another soldier, his left shoulder pulverizing virtual bones as it connected.

He roared as he twisted himself around the last soldier’s shoulders, wrapping his thighs around that orange neck in a move he’d taught the Black Widow girls so many years ago. Twisting just right with his hands, he separated the digital vertebrae and rolled out of the fall as the soldier disintegrated under him.
That’s when he stood up, brushed his hair out of his eyes, pulled his dog tags back around to the front, and froze as he saw the sea of eyes trained on him through the long window lining the wall of the training room.

“Fuck me sideways,” he groaned, closing his eyes and dropping his head forward. “I thought I asked for these to be private sessions.”

“Window blackout was never requested,” the AI informed him helpfully.

Cursing under his breath, Bucky stalked over to where he’d left his gym bag and dragged on the shirt he’d tossed on top of it.

“Yo, Barnes!” Franklin’s voice called through the now-open door to the hall. “Team’s running to the bar, wanna join us?”

No. No, I do not. “Sure. Lemme grab a shower first and I’ll meet you there.” He made his exit through the locker room, ducking behind a bank of lockers each time a group of men walked by. Progress was slow, but eventually he got back to his quarters without being seen.

He kept the shower quick, throwing on a dark blue button-down shirt and black slacks as he took a moment to appreciate the lack of drips and wet patches on his shoulders. “Maybe this ain’t so bad,” he muttered to himself as he combed his hair back. Dark brown roots were finally starting to show again under the coloring, and words couldn’t begin to describe how much of a relief that was.

As he grabbed his wallet off the desk, something hit the floor and he turned and leaned over over to see a small piece of paper partially unfolded. Slowly, he picked up the note Mickey had left him – he hadn’t read it yet… hadn’t been able to.

And so he slowly sat in the small desk chair, hands carefully unfolding the sheet of paper the rest of the way. Mickey’s handwriting, always neat at the beginning and scrawling at the end, covered the page.

James –

Bucky –

I wish I could say that this felt like a choice. I’m sorry.

Karpov, I wanted to treat that like a one-time thing. You lost control when provoked by a man that caused you unimaginable amounts of pain. That doesn’t mean I support the end result, far from it… but we’ve had that talk, multiple times. What I’m saying is, I can understand. I may not agree, but I understand.

In Portland, things went really well, and I actually enjoyed myself more than I have in a REALLY long time. I mean that, I really do. I know Eliot and Alec helped you with the skating idea, and I don’t mind. I mean, I got that night’s dinner menu from Eliot, too. He just wanted us to have a good V-Day. God knows we both earned it.

But what happened the rest of that night, I can’t move forward with another tally like that on my conscience. It scares me, what you’re willing to do. Like, scares me more than when I held Granger as he was bleeding out from the IED and I couldn’t save him. I’ve never felt so helpless in my life than when I couldn’t save one of my boys, or when I was strapped down in that room.

And you came in and got me, and for that I will be eternally grateful. But Bucky (sorry, I really don’t mean to slip, you know I’m trying), the fact that you killed that many people for me… it terrifies me. I know who you are, and I know what you are. I’m probably the most intimately familiar with that out of our entire team, probably even SHIELD. I’ve helped you through your
nightmares, and you’ve held me through mine. We’re both weapons, we’re both what our governments and commanding officers made us into.

I choose to use my training to save lives, both through medicine and through teaching people how not to get killed. That night, you chose to use your training to kill every single man and woman that stood between you and me. You didn’t offer them any mercy.

“They were HYDRA, you stupid kid,” Bucky growled softly.

You could have given them time to get out, turned them over to the police that we both know were waiting within five minutes of the first shot being fired.

When I said I can’t trust you to make the right call anymore, this is what I meant.

I’m sorry.

I can’t let you choose a civilian’s life over my own. You should never have to make that choice, so I’m removing myself from the equation.

This isn’t because I don’t care; if anything, it’s because I care too much. We both care too much. We’re both compromised.

Please stay safe. Don’t do anything stupid. The rest of the team will be there to support you.

Always.

- Mickey

Gently, he folded the note back up and set it in the top drawer of the desk before he crumpled it, burned it, or did something else that would qualify as stupid.

His phone chimed – Franklin. Hey man, we’re waiting. You on your way? We got a spot for you.

After a minute, Bucky typed back, On my way. Tell them to pull out the Shrinking Violet. They’ll know what it is.

***

“Is that shit purple?” one of the cadets howled as Bucky lifted the shot glass.

“Yyyyep.” He popped the ‘p’ and tossed the liquor back. “Courtesy of one Howard Stark, circa 1944. Thought he was doin’ Steve a favor.” Careful not to use too much force, Bucky set the glass down on the bar. Three shots in and he was definitely starting to feel it; he’d already been teased several times about the thick Brooklyn Irish drawl dragging through his words. “Rogers never touched the shit during the war, though, not as far as I know, anyway. Left most’f it to me.”

Franklin leaned on the bar next to him. “I thought you said you couldn’t get drunk.” He reached for the refilled shot glass and lifted it experimentally, peering through the clear liquid.

“You ain’t gonna wanna touch that, kid. Shit’ll put you in the hospital with half a shot, trust me.”

“Nah, I’m designated tonight. Plus, it’s the first time I’ve seen you sloshed; I’m gonna enjoy this,” Franklin told him with a smirk. Bucky took the shot from him and downed it.

He slowed down after the sixth, deciding to let himself metabolize a bit of it while he could still enjoy the first real buzz he’d felt in a long time. Joking and laughing with the cadets was easy and
he idly played with the garlic fries in front of him as they all ran a hilarious running commentary on the game showing on the screens.

As the liquor worked its way through his system, he let his mind and ears wander a bit, picking up fragments of conversations from the other patrons. One in particular caught his attention and he nudged Franklin, subtly jerking his head toward the guy three seats down.

“All I’m sayin’ is, these guys need to be reined in. All that destruction last year, and then what happened in Portland? They’re crazy.” The man speaking was bald with deep bags under his eyes and looked fresh from an office job.

“I dunno, man.” His friend, thin and gaunt, shook his head. “If the cops had rushed it, some of ‘em would’ve died. They say he had bullet grazes all over his armor.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen the pictures. Doesn’t make it right though, all those folks dying.”

“Reports say it was a lab, Fred. Don’t you remember what was in the leak?” Twiggy shuddered. “I dunno about you, but that bullshit belongs in a horror story.”

“It’s all one big motherfucking conspiracy. Floating aircraft carriers with sniper rifles on them? Pfft. Please. SHIELD’s a fucking joke, always has been. Cap and Bucky, they belong in a goddamn museum. Or an insane asylum. And anyone around ‘em crazy enough to think those two nutcases oughta be around in public.”

Bucky choked on his drink, smacking a hand against his chest as the alcohol burned every time he coughed. The two men turned to him, and the bald one craned his neck around when Franklin not-so-subtly turned to show off the SHIELD logo emblazoned across his jacket.

“Can I punch him?” Franklin growled at Bucky.

“No.”

“What if I just break his nose a little?”

“No. Chrissakes, sit down. Put your dick away, this ain’t worth it.” Bucky stepped off his barstool. “I’m gonna hit the head. Don’t do anything stupid until I get back.”

He returned to find the cadets nervously watching Franklin as he and the bald man stood nose-to-nose. The bar was practically silent.

“Say that to my face,” Franklin challenged Baldie.

“I said, y’all are a bunch of cowards and terrorists, fuckin’ up innocent people’s lives with the games your enhanced bastards play with each other. Now, whatcha gonna do about it?”

Franklin made eye contact with Bucky and shrugged nonchalantly. “Oh, absolutely nothing. Just buying time so he could get behind you.”

“What is it with dumb skinny blond kids and doin’ stupid shit every time my back is turned?” Bucky drew back his fist and threw a perfect straight right as Baldie turned around. The man dropped to the floor, crumpling instantly. “Next time, finish yer own damn fights. I trained you better’n that.”

Just as Bucky was about to wave over the bartender for another drink, he noticed people standing, stepping forward, cracking knuckles. He rolled his eyes and popped his neck, bouncing up on his toes into a boxing stance. “Franklin, you sonuvabitch, you’re goin’ down with me. The rest of you,
skedaddle, you don’t need this on your records.” When the cadets didn’t move, he rounded on them.
“That’s an order!”

They scampered out of the bar just as Bucky ducked the first swing.

***

The heavy door clanked open and high heels clicked into the room. “Here you go, ma’am.”

Bucky rolled his head to the left, cracking his good eye open to glare at the door from where he lay
on the thick mat against the opposite wall. As soon as he did, he groaned and covered his eyes with
his arm.

“Nice cell.” Mickey’s shoes slid over the floor as she helped Franklin to his feet.

“Startin’ to grow on me. We’re thinkin’ ‘bout redoin’ the kitchen, ‘s got more room than my old flat
in Brooklyn,” Bucky drawled. “Should be able to fit one o’ them gas stoves in, there’s a nice little
alcove by the door if I move the pisser.”

“Get up.”

Something – his coat – flopped open on top of him, and one of the sleeves brushed against the
stinging welt sealing his right eye shut. He rolled to a sitting position with a groan, blinking as the
room spun. Slowly dragging his coat on, he stumbled to his feet and followed Mickey out as best he
could.

“For the record,” Mickey hissed as she pulled them both out of the precinct, “this is what doing
something stupid looks like. You have no idea the amount of paperwork I have to do now. And
don’t forget the goddamn court date that I have to work into your schedule now.”

The trip back was more than awkward as Mickey silently fumed behind the wheel of the SHIELD
sedan. Franklin was first to get dropped off with one of the other junior instructors who Mickey
tasked with concussion watch, and then she promptly planted a hand in between Bucky’s shoulder
blades and shoved him towards his quarters.

It took him two tries, leaning against the wall, to get his open eye lined up with the retinal scanner.
He silently thanked whoever had designed the system for having the foresight to require both eye
scans to be on file for each agent. Eventually, the door clicked open and he stumbled as he lost his
balance over the threshold.

“Are you drunk?” Mickey asked, disgust tinging her voice. “Seriously?”

“The fuck else was I s’pos’t’do? Should’ve been obvious when you pulled’s outta the drunk tank,
sweetheart.”

Mickey leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed and eyes narrow as she watched him drag off his
jacket and stumble into the bathroom. He fumbled apart the buttons on his shirt, ignored the shooting
pain in his wrist, and gave the shirt a disappointed look before tossing it into the trash can. His
undershirt was in better shape, thankfully, but he pulled that off too so he could get a good look at
the blossoming contusions spreading over his ribs.

“Tony sent down some of that purple stuff?”

“Mmmmmhm.” Bucky prodded a rib back into place and quietly hissed in pain as the bone grated
against itself. “Tasted battery acid that’s sweeter, but shit gets the job done.”
“Battery…” Mickey scoffed and facepalmed. “You want to give the gossip channels something to talk about? *This is exactly* how that happens, you idiot.”

“Would’a won if I’d had my best girl there,” Bucky slurred before he could stop himself, leaning out of the bathroom to look at her. “But nooooo, you had t’go ‘n’ rabbit off t’some desk job in Building Three. Couldn’t even stand t’be around me, could you?”

She sighed softly and stepped in, closing the door behind her. “This is not a conversation I want to have until you’re sober.”

“Wait an hour.” He leaned in to the mirror, fingers hovering over the swollen flesh around his left eye. “It’s already on its way out, can’t even stay scrooched on the strong stuff. ‘Sides, seems t’me like you ain’t wantin’ to have that talk at all.”

“…that’s not what I said.”

“You’re the one we should be callin’ Frosty,” he muttered with more venom than he intended as he decided the cuts on his forehead and cheek wouldn’t need stitches after all. “Fucking ice queen right now, you are.”

“Jim…”

Stifling a frustrated growl, Bucky stepped back into the small main room. “No! You know what? I read your stupid letter. You seriously think you can just- just write me some bullshit apology note ‘n’ gad off like that? ’s not how this goddamn works!”

He hadn’t meant to raise his voice, but her wide eyes made him take a deep breath before continuing.

“You wanna know why I didn’t call in a team? Why I didn’t call for backup, bring in the fuckin’ fuzz? Look at me, kid! Take a good, long fuckin’ look. I can’t die. I know. *I’ve tried.* So you wanna give me a guilt trip about keepin’ some twenty-somethin’-year-old boys in blue alive another night while I went in an’ took out a HYDRA cell? You wanna gimme shit about plannin’ my entry route so’s there weren’t any stray rounds flyin’ off to kill civilians?”

Yep. The alcohol was definitely having an effect. His embarrassingly persistent drawl wasn’t helping, either.

“If I’d made any other call – *any* other call - people would’a died. Good people, civilians, people on our team. We’d be sittin’ at police funerals right now, dressed in black and tellin’ their families they were good men, didn’t deserve to die. I’d be writin’ up letters to my cadets’ parents, spouses, or kids tellin’ ‘em how I let their loved one take a bullet. I couldn’t leave you behind, and I couldn’t send anyone else in to get you because *more people would’a died*!”

“Yes, you could have. I’m not-”

“Oh, feh *fuck’s sake.*” Bucky threw his hands in the air, frustrated more than he ever thought he could be. His voice rolled with the round tones of his strange, Russian-tinged Brooklyn accent and there wasn’t a thing he could do to stop it. “Mickey, you said it yourself. You know what pills I take. You know what time I go to bed and how many times a night I wake up screamin’. You know what’s goin’ on in my head when I can’t talk. You know firsthand how I got dissected an’ programmed like a fuckin’ computer. You know which of the book’s words I’ve kicked, and which ones still go in and turn this to pudding again.” He poked himself in the temple for emphasis, ticking off each of his points on his other hand.

“You know how Stevie takes his coffee. You know the formula for Bruce’s knockout juice because
you’ve helped him tweak it for my brain chemistry. You know how to talk Tony into takin’ a nap. You’ve helped Clint test out his new arrows, and you’re one of the only people Nataschenka actually talks to.”

“What has that go-to?”

“You know things about us that, if they decided to torture it outta you, they could use it to destroy us, Myshka!” he shouted.

The color drained from her face as she realized the implications of what he’d said.

Quieter, calmer, Bucky continued. “So, yeah. I wasn’t gonna leave you in there because I don’t care what training you went under, I don’t care how tough you think you are, they got ways of getting anything outta you. You were there during the mission briefing when Jinks and I extracted the Toolbox from Siberia. They strap you down and do their thing, and you gonna be tellin’ ’em what color boxers I wear on Wednesdays.”

“…you don’t wear boxers.”

“That’s not the goddamn point,” he sighed. “Stop’n’ think about this for a sec, okay? They took out the lights, the breached the door, they gassed the house to knock both of us out. They didn’t even engage me except to keep me distracted while they waited for the gas to kick in. They did their research, and they knew who we are. The reason they kept you so heavily sedated that you’re still havin’ issues – oh don’t give me that look, you got bags under your eyes, your hands’re shaking, your freckles get darker when you’re tired, and you haven’t properly styled your hair in days. They knocked you out that hard because they were afraid of you. They wanted to make sure they had you firmly locked down and under their control before they so much as dropped your drip by a microgram.”

He ran his hand through his hair – the right hand only, this time – and tried to ignore how his arm still flopped around a bit too much for his liking. “They know how much you know about me, about the whole damn team, and they want that intel. So, you wanna fuckin’ yell at me for keeping them from carvin’ every last intimate detail about us outta you? Yell at me. Have at.”

She simply stared at him as he paced back and forth.

“Yeah, I killed a lotta people. Probably coulda let ‘em walk out and got ‘em all into custody. But I didn’t, because yeah, I’m a motherfuckin’ hopeless sap who gets pissed the fuck off when someone I love gets hurt. I’m a soldier who won’t let intel like what you got swimmin’ around in that pretty little head o’ yours fall into enemy hands, even if it means stormin’ the castle by my lonesome. I’m an assassin who sees a target and takes it the fuck out before it becomes a bigger threat. And I’m an emotional wreck who feels like my heart got tore out when I saw you in that chair, Myshka. You got no idea how scared I was when I saw you were gone. The one person I trust completely, the one person I dare to let myself love, and I had no fuckin’ clue if I was gonna be able to track you down and make it there in time to find you without a bullet hole in yah head. I was so convinced they’d just shot an’ dropped you that, yeah, I kinda lost it. When I found the facility, that’s the first little glimmer o’ hope I had since they kicked our door in. They knew what you were worth, so they’d kept you alive, and that meant I still had a chance at gettin’ you out alive.”

Bucky closed his eyes and let his shoulders droop. Down was finally making up its mind which way it was again, so he didn’t have to spend as much effort remembering how to balance. “Look, if this doesn’t change anything, fine. Whatever. But… you can’t just walk out of, of our relationship, our friendship, without at least tryin’ to see it through my eyes. And Micks, so help me, I will always
choose you.” He stressed the word intentionally. “Always. That’s just something you gotta live with. You’re trapped in a building with civvies, then yeah, I’m gonna get them the hell out, but I’m gonna get you out, too.”

Making sure he was looking her dead in the eye, he bit his lip before saying, “That’s a choice I made when I found out I wanted to share my life with you, and it’s a promise I made to a fuckton of people. To protect you and to keep you safe until my dyin’ day. You don’t get to make that decision for me. You don’t get to take that away from me. You wanna go sod off and do your own thing? Fine. But you’re always gonna have me watchin’ your back, because that’s what I do, babydoll. I come to love something, I defend it with every single piece o’ me.

“Started with Steve, then the Invaders, and now you, and the rest of the team. The lot o’ you, you don’t get to decide whether ‘r not I’m allowed to watch your six. I’m gonna do that whether you want it ‘r not, because that’s what I do. I protect people. If that means killin’ a whole goddamn base o’ mercs and mad scientists to save the dame that I might wanna-”

…definitely still drunk. He bit his tongue so hard that he tasted blood. Mickey, sober as ever though, raised an eyebrow.

“Might want to what?”

“F’get it.”

“Might want to what, Bucky?”

Closing his eyes, Bucky swore inwardly. His face heated up as he turned away and stared pointedly into the corner furthest away from Mickey.

“Bucky.”

“Like I said, forget it. You made your thoughts pretty clear last week.”

“What- but- you just spent the last fifteen minutes yelling at me about how I was wrong!”

He pinched the bridge of his nose with one hand and gritted his teeth. “I wanted you to change your mind because of what I told you, not some fuckin’ guilt trip.”

“Well, I don’t know what your definition of a guilt trip is, but that was one hell of one.”

“Fucking hell.” He flopped backwards onto the bed. “Fine, okay? We were skating and I realized that was the first time I’d ever seen you so happy. That’s also when I realized that I’d do anything – literally anything – to make you that happy again. And it freaked me out a little, okay? That I’d be willing to do whatever it took to keep that smile on your face, for the rest of your life.”

He glared his embarrassment up at the ceiling, waiting for her response.

Finally, all he got was a quiet, “…oh.”

Pressing both hands over his face, Bucky tried to breathe steadily. The swelling over his eye was already decreasing; it’d be one hell of a shiner in the morning but he’d be surprised if it weren’t yellowed or even gone by the following evening.

After an agonizingly long minute, Mickey’s footsteps crossed the room and the mattress shifted as she sat next to him. Gentle fingers pulled his right hand away from his face, probing and turning his wrist as she checked the extent of the swelling and manipulated the bones around. When he hissed
in pain and flinched, Mickey gave him a tired look.

“You’ve got a Colles fracture.”

“Kinda figured that one out on my own, babydoll.”

She stood, walked into the bathroom, rummaged around in one of the cabinets, and came back with an Ace bandage, cotton batting, and a moldable splint. “I’m going to need to pull the bones around a bit.”

“Yeah, I know.” He sat up and held out his wrist for her, gritting his teeth as she pulled everything back into position and quickly secured the splint.

“Keep this on for tonight, and go see Medical if it isn’t better in the morning, okay?”

Nodding, Bucky gently rubbed at his good eye with his left hand. “Thanks.” He paused, drawing in a deep breath. “I’m sorry I yelled at you.”

“Well, we’ve both said some stupid stuff over the last few weeks.” Rolling the remaining splint material back up, Mickey deposited it back in its cabinet and moved to lean against the desk. She crossed her arms and tilted her head, looking at Bucky, her face unreadable. “They haven’t found anyone else who can pass the screening to become your new handler, so I guess I’m stuck with you anyway.”

Bucky glanced up to catch the ghost of a smile darting across her lips. “And who wrote the screening protocols?”

“I did,” Mickey admitted. When he snorted, smirking at her, she held up a hand. “You’ve got a pretty unique set of requirements. I wanted to make sure whoever you ended up with would be able to do the job right.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I just—” She pursed her lips, chewing on the inside of her cheek.

“Stop doin’ that, you’ll give yourself sores.”

Rolling her eyes, Mickey looked up at the ceiling. “I just need some space, okay? I need some time to sit down, think through this, talk through it with someone over in Psych, I don’t know. I’m not saying you’re wrong, and…” She looked back at him, eyebrows furrowed, deep lines creasing her forehead. “I’m sorry I didn’t look at it from a tactical perspective. I’m sorry I just assumed it was a purely emotional decision. But this is gonna take me a little bit to work through. I need some time to come to terms with it emotionally, even if logically I know now you made the best choice you felt you could.”

“How long d’you think you’ll need?” Bucky asked, his voice hoarse.

She shook her head. “I’m not sure. I, um, I’ll set up an appointment with one of the on-call doctors tomorrow.”

“Want me to call Dr. Ellmore? She’s probably got someone she can recommend for you.”

A small smile answered him. “Um, yeah. Thanks. I think that’d help me not feel so weird about it.”

“Hardest thing is taking that first step through the door.”
“Yeah, I know.” She scratched her nails through her hair. “It’s, uh, getting late. I should go.”

“I’ll shoot you a name as soon as I hear from Doc. Sleep well. And, Mickey…” He held up his splinted wrist, but hoped she understood everything else he was trying to say. “Thanks.”

Pausing as she was pulling the door shut behind her, Mickey gave him a smile that both reassured him and betrayed the deep level of exhaustion she’d been pushing through. “Always.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh MAN this chapter was a tough write. I hope it’s worth it to all of you lovely readers.

Reference GIF for Bucky being a general badass (when he throws the sim-soldier over his shoulder):
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Merry early Christmas to my readers that celebrate it!

Have a fluff montage! Fluff fluff fluff. Probably a welcome break after the last few chapters, if I’m honest.

**Trigger warnings:**
- Bystander’s guilt (or maybe guilt for not seeing something in hindsight?)
- Remembering those that gave their lives in conflict
- Hospital, cancer patient

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

James slowed and stopped, eyebrows knotting up, as he and Mickey left the bookstore. Sitting on the sidewalk with his legs crossed and his feet jammed into too-big boots, was a ragged man with a worn cardboard sign: Homeless Veteran Please Help.

Turning around, James left Mickey standing there awkwardly with two bags of books in her hands trying to stay out of the way of Washington, DC’s enthusiastic foot traffic. He returned a moment later with a hot cup of coffee and a paper bag in his hands.

Mickey watched James walk slowly over to the sitting veteran.

“Hey, devil dog.”

The man’s head snapped up, and he stared at the cup of coffee held out to him in disbelief.

“Somethin’ warm for you. Here.” James dug into the bag and pulled out a small sandwich. “You got socks?”

Blinking slowly, the man’s hands reached for the coffee and food as if he was underwater. “Uh. No.”

“Go on, Micks. I’ll call you if I need to be picked up.” It took a smile and a ‘scoot’ motion from James to convince her to start walking back to the apartment.

After the man had drained the cup dry and licked every last crumb off of the sandwich wrapper, James took them back, shoved the wrapper and bag in the cup, and tossed it into the nearby trash can. “You good to wait here a few minutes?”

“Um… sure. Why?”

Standing, James shrugged. “Paying it forward from when someone helped me up. I was you, not too long ago.”

The veteran peered at James from under bushy eyebrows and adjusted his filthy Vietnam baseball cap with one hand. “You don’t look it.”
James gave him a wry smile. “Six months ago, I was scavenging for food in a dumpster. Then one of my old Captain’s friends found me. Got my feet under me, got a good doctor to help me fight off my ghosts, and here I am.”

After a moment of thought, the man clasped James’s hand with his own, the dry, tanned, dirty skin standing out in stark contrast against it. His eyes crinkled into a shy smile. “You’re the first person to look at me today.”

“I know, it’s like we’re invisible sometimes. I’m James, by the way.”

“Larry.”

“I’ll be back in a few minutes. Stay right here.”

About half an hour later, James returned with two large shopping bags full of wool socks, thermal layers, disposable travel toiletry kits, and a thick army surplus coat. He had a pair of worn but sturdy winter boots tied together by the laces and slung over his shoulder.

When he handed everything to Larry, the grizzled old veteran gripped his hands tightly and murmured a quiet, “Thank you.”

“Hey, man, we gotta look out for each other.”

“…are you an angel?”

The idea was so preposterous that James could help but bark out a laugh. “Hell no.” He reached out and gently pulled Larry into a hug. “I know what it’s like to feel lost in your own country, in your own city. I ended up in Vietnam, just like you. So, here’s a much belated Semper Fi and welcome home, Marine. Thank you for your service.”

Skeptical eyes looked back at him. “You’re what, twenty-five?”

“Older than I look, son.” James pulled out his Invaders challenge coin and flipped it into the air with a ping, catching it flat on his palm so the stylized wing showed. “A lot older.”

Larry blinked at him, head tilting forward in surprise.

Winking, James patted him on the shoulder. “Go see my buddy Sam at the VA on Pennsylvania. Tell him I sent you. If you ever need a safe place to spend the night, you’ve gone more than a day without a good meal, anything, ask for Sam Wilson. He’ll help you out.”

***

Heart pounding, Bucky stared wide-eyed at the group of people in his apartment and the brightly colored decorations splashed all over his warm wood-paneled walls. Nearly everyone was wearing a garish conical hat.

He glanced down at his hands and flushed in embarrassment as he slotted his combat knife back into its sheath in his sleeve and tucked the Beretta into place at the small of his back. “God, I’m a mess. Can’t even have a surprise party like a normal person.”

Laughter echoed through the large living room, and Bucky made his way in, a smile spreading across his face. Tony jumped in front of Bucky and slapped one of those stupid hats onto his head before he could raise a hand to fend off the overenthusiastic man.
“Did you actually forget what day it is, Frozone?”

“Oh, fuck off, shellhead.” Bucky grinned at everyone around him. “Thanks, everyone. This means a lot.” He looked at the faces around him - all of the Avengers, Darcy, and Jane, his cadets and Franklin, Hill and Sharon. An unfamiliar man grabbed his attention, and Bucky stepped forward, frowning as he tried to place the face.

“…Larry?”

“Hey,” he answered shyly, shuffling his feet on the floor. “Sam thought you might like it if I showed up.”

“Fuckin’ hell, man, you look great!” Bucky stepped forward and embraced the grizzled veteran. And Larry did indeed look much better. Clean-shaven, groomed, and significantly less skinny, he wore what had to be a borrowed suit but Bucky didn’t care.

“He’s working for us to help keep the building looking good,” Sam offered, shooting a proud look at Larry.

“You got a job?” Bucky turned to Sam. “You gave him a job? That’s awesome!” He patted Larry on the arm. “Congratulations, pal.”

“Thanks.” Eyes crinkling, Larry stepped off to the side to be closer to Sam. It was clear from his body language that he didn’t feel like he belonged there, but… Sam would help. Sam always helped.

After exchanging greetings with everyone else, Bucky discovered he’d had a bottle of beer shoved into his hand. Conversations passed by in a blur as he made introductions, bringing the different pieces of his life together in a way he never thought he’d ever have the chance to do again.

Cake appeared from somewhere, giant wax number candles topped with two flickering spurts of flame displaying a cartoonish 98. Steve’s yelp was comical as Bucky managed to toss the plastic frosting-covered cake knife so that it stuck to the blond goofball’s chest.

Eventually things quieted down as people made their goodbyes, wishing him well once more. After that it was just Steve, Tony, and Bucky in the apartment, casually sprawled across the couch and the chairs that had been dragged in from the tiny lobby-like room outside the elevator. Scraping the last remnants of frosting off his paper plate, Bucky polished off his third slice of cake with a satisfied sigh.

“You have got to tell me who made this, Stark. It’s like heaven in cake shape.” When the other men glanced at each other, Steve oozing awkwardness, Bucky sighed. “Okay, what?”

“It’s a, uh, secret,” Tony butted in before Steve could say anything. “Secret recipe. You know.”

“Riiight.” But, he let it slide, languidly standing to toss the plate and fork into the trash. He stood there for a moment, looking at the crumb-covered cardboard square and the remaining quarter of the cake, and sighed. “Wish Mickey could be here.”

“I know, Buck. I’m sure she’d have come if she could.”

“Yeah…”

Steve stood with a groan and stretched. “I should probably be heading upstairs.” He gave Bucky a quick hug before heading towards the door, waving over his shoulder. “Happy birthday, Buck.”
“Thanks, Steve. Thanks for the new ink pens!”

Flopping back onto the couch, Bucky reached over and picked up his beer from the coffee table. He glanced over at Tony, doing a double take when he caught the man’s inscrutable expression.

“How d’you mean?”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, just…” Tony turned to look out the large windows at the neon-lit city. “It’s good, you know. Having a family like this. Things like today remind me how much we’ve all fought for it.”

“Yeah… you remember the attacks in DC?” Tony laughed and shook his head, wiping a hand over his face. “Who am I kidding, of course you do. When all that happened, you know, we weren’t much of a team. Still pretty fragmented. Everyone just kind of went off and did their own thing for a bit. And then I find out about Project Insight.” Leaning forward on his knees, Tony thunked his empty beer down on the coffee table and clapped his hands together. “I felt so helpless. Cap and Romanoff were off the grid, Bruce was in South America on some philanthropy thing, and Barton wasn’t answering his phone. Thor was away mopping up some intergalactic mess, and then… Fury.”

“God, yeah…” Bucky closed his eyes and dropped his head back against the couch armrest. “Still can’t believe everyone’s letting that one go.”

“Wasn’t the proper you, Buckyball.”

“Okay, I have to ask, what in the hell is a Buckyball? You keep calling me that and I have no idea what it is. Should I be offended?”

“It’s a molecule. Buckminsterfullerene. The atoms are arranged like a soccer ball.”

“…of course. Tony, you are such a goddamn nerd.”

A toothy grin flashed back at him. “Pot, kettle. Anyway, no one’s said anything about it, but I was conspicuously absent when HYDRA imploded SHIELD. I know they don’t blame me, but… I scraped all of SHIELD’s secrets off their servers before the Chitauri hit New York. I should have seen it coming. I knew all their dirty secrets, and yet I didn’t even see HYDRA in there, I didn’t find out about Insight, and I- I… didn’t find out about you.”

“Tony, you were recovering from massively invasive surgery…” Bucky sat up slightly, cut off when Tony held up a hand to forestall the lecture.

“All I could do was just sit there and watch the world - my world - burn. I’d just blown up all my suits for Pepper so-”

“You what.”

The smaller man dropped his head into his hands with a quiet groan. “Extremis, remember? Killian took Pepper, and I went in to rescue her. And then at the end of it, I decided to start with a clean slate. Figured out how to chase that shit out of her system, got myself fixed up so I don’t have an electromagnet in my chest anymore. Tried to focus on philanthropy, you know. Clean energy, stuff like that. But here it is again, my… legacy… being used to kill people. Again. And I couldn’t do anything to stop it.”

Tony was unconsciously rubbing at the thick circle of scar tissue hidden under his shirt – having an
unyielding cylinder embedded in his sternum had been constant agony and he was glad to be well rid of it. Even so, after reconstructing basically everything, the strange pull of thickened muscles and keloid ridges reminded him of how far he’d come with every movement he made.

Bucky dragged Tony out of his reverie by clearing his throat quietly. “You blew up all your suits for Pepper?”

“Yep.” Tony leaned back and stretched his legs out, crossing them. “And a hell of a lot of good it did. I was back at it again just a year later, helping sweep up the mess HYDRA left behind.”

“But starting from scratch again… scuttling that many suits… that can’t have been easy. Or cheap.”

A hollow laugh forced its way out of Tony. “Oh, it wasn’t. But I’d make the same decision, even knowing what would happen again.” He looked up at Bucky, his eyes piercing. “Just like you’d make the same decision in Portland, even knowing how it would all play out in advance.”

Bucky looked down at his hands and nodded slowly. “Okay, point taken.”

“So that’s why I’m doing it again.”

“…what.”

“I’m going to scrap Iron Man.” Tony shrugged. “Well, the suits, anyway. I’m Iron Man, whether or not I’m suited up. So, I’m working on a system that’ll be the suit for me. A program that’ll help us identify and react to threats. A suit of armor around the whole world, if I may be so bold.”

“Tony, that’s…”

“Brilliant? Genius? Revolutionary?”

Bucky blinked at him, eyebrows raised. “It’s impossible. There’s nowhere on earth that has that sort of computing power, not even Watson or CERN. Also, didn’t we just do this gig with Project Insight?”

“Figured I’d run it off the same basic framework I’ve got JARVIS set up on. And this is nothing like Insight. Passive monitoring, alerts sent, no action taken unless it’s by a human, mostly to protect us from threats that aren’t from this planet.”

Scratching his chin thoughtfully, Bucky looked up at the ceiling out of reflex. “Could work. Is the architecture robust enough to house two AIs, though?”

“My simulations would indicate so. Happy birthday, by the way, sir.”

“Thanks, bud.” He yawned despite himself, and rubbed at his eyes. “Well, if you think you can do it, then go for it. Just remember what happened the last time you got a crazy idea and spent a week working with high explosives without sleeping.”

“Yeah, speaking of which, you should do that sleeping thing while I go and not do that in the lab.” Tony smacked the arms of the chair gently as he stood. “Present for you waiting in your inbox, by the way. Won’t open til the morning, to make sure you’ve had a good night’s sleep before you make a decision.”

“For the last time, Tony,” Bucky called after his retreating back, “I’m not letting you put sex toys in my middle finger.”
“Contrary to popular belief, I can actually come up with something useful from time to time. See you in the morning, Frosty.”

The door closed quietly behind Tony, and Bucky hooked his elbow over the armrest of the couch as he looked up at the ceiling again, slowly working his way through his beer.

Bottle finally empty, he sat up with a grunt and leaned forward to collect the bottles, cans, plates, and forks off the coffee table. He moved slowly through the kitchen and living room picking up the remnants of the party. When he turned to the decorations taped up to the walls, he sighed, shook his head, and waved his hand dismissively. They could wait until the morning.

He’d just finished carefully relocating the leftover cake into a container when someone knocked tentatively at the door. “JARVIS?”

“I’ve been told it’s to be a surprise, sir.”

Grumbling under his breath about more surprises than he wanted, Bucky snapped the lid on the container and licked off his fingers as he walked to the door. When he opened it, pinkie still between his lips, he froze.

“Hi.” Mickey gave him a shy, awkward smile. “Can I come in?”

“Can you…” He blinked a few more times, then opened the door further and stepped back. “Of course you can. Why wouldn’t…”

Mickey’s arms moved enough as she shrugged for Bucky to notice large envelope she held in one hand. “I just… wanted to ask, first.” He looked past her to see a large duffel and a suitcase.

“You want help with those?”

“Um…”

“I mean, I think Natasha’s got a-”

“You don’t want-”

“No! God.” Groaning, Bucky facepalmed. “Wow, I’m fucking this up. Yes, please come in. You don’t have to stay with someone else if you don’t want to.”

“Do you want me here?” Mickey still hadn’t moved from the doorway.

“I- what- of course I do.” With a half-step forward, Bucky tugged Mickey into a hug, leaving it loose enough that she could pull away if she wanted to. She didn’t, instead bringing her arms up and squeezing his chest tightly. “I missed you. Are you really coming back?”

“Yeah,” she croaked, and cleared her throat. “Yeah, I am. Thanks for letting me have some space.”

“Always, babydoll,” he murmured into her hair, closing his eyes and shifting a hand to the back of her head, gently carding his fingers through her brightly colored hair. “Always.”

He hadn’t realized how much he’s missed that faint citrus smell over the past month.

Pulling away, Bucky stepped past her and slung the duffel over his shoulder. “There’s still some leftover cake if you want some. Apparently, Steve and Tony had been planning this for months.”

“Yeah, I know,” she chuckled, and pointed to the container full of cake. “I made that.”
Tossing the bag into the hallway, Bucky turned back to look at her. “…oh. Thanks. It was, um, really good.”

“Steve told me you had three pieces.”

With an embarrassed giggle, Bucky scratched at the back of his neck. “It was really good.”

Mickey handed him the envelope. “This is for you. Happy birthday.”

He shot her a curious look as he turned over the envelope, snaking his finger under the flap to tear it open. Peering inside, he saw a blue sheet of paper with an ornate printed frame. A quick glance over it told him exactly what he was looking at.

“I… might have bought the Mustang off of Clint,” Mickey admitted. “It should already be in the garage. Title’s in your name and everything.”

“Where in the hell did you get that kind of money?”

“Song and a dance and I owe him a favor. A Boss Nine sized favor.”

“Oh, babydoll…” Bucky pulled her in for another hug. “Thank you. You know Clint’s gonna call in that favor at the worst possible moment, right?”

“Worth it,” she mumbled into his shoulder. “Wanted to give you something special to celebrate your first real birthday back in the world.”

“Hey.” He tilted his head, catching her chin with a finger. “Getting to see you again is enough.”

Popping up on her toes, Mickey gave him a quick, chaste kiss, raising an eyebrow when he startled slightly.

“Are- are we doing that again now, too?”

“Um… if that’s okay.” Her cheeks turned pink, freckles darkening as her eyes flicked between his.

Bucky could help but laugh quietly, leaning forward to rest his forehead against hers. “It’s okay. It’s definitely okay.” He tilted his head and captured her lips with his, lingering over the kiss as he pulled her tighter against him. After placing a last kiss on her nose, he smiled at her. “Welcome home.”

***

A hand slapped across the back of Bucky’s as he sat at the large table in the common area, scrolling through endless menus and trying to figure out how on earth to file the fact that he was dead, but oh, surprise, now he isn’t.

“Stop. Tapping.”

“Sorry.” He flattened his hand – the left one – against the table and smiled apologetically at Natasha. “This is a helluva lot easier than doing everything by hand, but there’s no magic ‘I’m alive again’ button in TurboTax.”

Steve snorted inelegantly across the table. “Tell me about it. I got audited my first year because they thought it was some sort of joke.” He motioned towards Bucky’s laptop. “Here, slide it over. I’ll take a look.”
“Ya know,” Clint drawled, “I think it’s been, like, five years since I’ve paid taxes.” His smirk was just a little too mischievous, though, and Bucky caught a wink when he shot a look up at Barton.

Tony joined in. “Yeah, I don’t remember voting. Um… ever.”

“Are you- what- are you serious?” Steve started turning red as he sputtered, and it was all Bucky could do to keep a straight face. “Do you have any idea how important both of those are to democracy? Any idea?”

Bruce idly poked at his phone, angling it just right so Bucky could see the stopwatch ticking over. He had to cover his mouth with his hand because his lips wouldn’t stop twitching into a smile.

“Voting is one of the most important things we can do! You can’t just throw it away like that! That’s how we get loonies like Hitler or- or Mussolini or what-the-fuck’s-his-face in Russia right now! Come on, Buck, back me up on this, you were there during the war!”

Raising an eyebrow and carefully schooling his expression – dammit, don’t look at Mickey making faces or you’re gonna crack up – Bucky tilted his head to the side. “I’ve assassinated more presidents than I’ve voted for, pal. Don’t look at me.”

The shade of red that splotched its way across Steve’s face and neck almost matched the star on his shield.

The silence was tense, hovering on the edge, until Mickey snorted through her hands and broke into crazed peals of laughter. The others soon followed, and Bucky was clutching his sides within minutes as he stared at the kicked puppy look on Steve’s face.

“Come on, kid, we were five seconds away from beating our record,” Bruce complained. “And you just had to go and lose it?”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry…” Mickey snorted again, pulling off her reading glasses to wipe at her eyes. “It’s just, I thought Bucky was fun to tease.”

“Oh, fuck you all.” Steve shot Bucky a dark look and scooted the laptop back across the table. “Also, you can’t claim that you’re a senior citizen. It’s not right.”

“I’m ninety-fucking-eight years old!”

“And you were legally dead for seventy of ‘em. Scrub it off.”

“Do you really have to remind me of the fact that you’re three times my age?” Mickey muttered darkly.

Grumbling, Bucky made the changes. “I wonder if I can file the Avengers as my dependents…”

“Bucky, no.”

He grinned wolfishly at Steve’s long-suffering eye roll. “Bucky, yes.”

***

Things had been good lately: calm, quiet, a little bit of action but never enough to need more than two-man teams. The Avengers were finally starting to unwind.

Movie nights were a common favorite, especially since anyone in the Tower at the time of the showing was welcome. Tony had his own private small theater a few floors below the living
quarters, and almost every time he put something on, it was a full house.

Lately they’d been binging classic Disney movies, and Bucky idly hummed ‘I’ve Got No Strings’ as he carried the popcorn bowls back up to the apartment. He kept humming it through loading the dishwasher and doing the hand wash, through a long, hot shower, and only noticed he was still humming it when Mickey finally groaned at him.

“For fuck’s sake, I don’t need it stuck in my head, too.”

“Sorry. It’s catchy.” The lyrics had resonated with him in a way he hadn’t expected.

“If I might interject, sir, I feel this might be the right time to agree with Miss Draymond. Even I’m unable to be rid of the infernal song. I believe I might have a corrupted sector in my memory as a result.”

“…sorry.”

***

Bucky reached out his left hand, the motors whirring and whining as they tried to interpret the anxious static in his nerves, and brushed his thumb over Mickey’s cheek. His eyes prickled and he blinked and swallowed as he felt every single tiny hair and bump and scar under his thumb. His left hand began to shake in earnest as he slowly reached up and touched his own face, fingers brushing over rough stubble.

With a quiet click, Tony slid the last plate back into place and patted Bucky on the arm gently. He nearly jumped out of his skin when he actually registered every sensation of Tony’s hands on his arm. Looking up at the smaller man, Bucky pretended not to notice as Tony dragged a finger over one of his lower eyelids under the pretense of scratching an itch.

“Bucky?” Mickey took both of his hands in hers and ran the tips of her fingers over the plates on the back of his left hand. His eyes were thoroughly wet as he closed them, unable to handle the first real sensations through his arm since he’d fallen off the train in Austria.

Mickey’s arms slid around his neck, pulling him into a hug, and he buried his face in her shoulder as he clung to her tightly. Reaching out his left arm, Bucky hooked it around Tony’s shoulders and tugged him in as well.

“Thank you,” he managed to choke out.

A wet sniff from Tony’s direction answered him. “Happy birthday, Bucky.”

***

They sat on the large couch that circled the coffee table, quiet and solemn, as Bucky raised his glass.

“To the men and women who gave their lives one year ago today. To the price they paid so that we might have our freedom.” His hand dropped fractionally, and his face softened as he closed his eyes. “And to the people who gave me a home - strangers that became friends, and then became family. The family that stood up for me, had my back so many times, and were the first people to treat me like a human being since… since God knows when.”

Voice cracking, he looked around the somber group. “To friendship and trust that endures through the most difficult of circumstances, and… to the goddamn stubborn motherfucking sonuvabitch that decided he’d save a dead man walking, or die himself as he tried. I’m sure as hell glad it worked.”
Wet laughs greeted his half-assed joke, and drinks were lifted in the air.

“Empty chairs, at empty tables,” Bucky whispered, and took a small sip from his drink.

A small circle of half-full tumblers sat on the coffee table. They wouldn’t be touched through the course of the night. In the center of the circle burned a white candle.

Bucky stared into the flame of the candle, voices of the dead echoing in his ears. He turned to Mickey when she slid her hand around his arm, leaning into him, pressing her cheek to his shoulder. Steve gripped his other shoulder tightly, the lines around his eyes deepening with a heavy smile.

Throughout the country and even some parts of the world, many people celebrated the fall of HYDRA.

Those that had been there, those that had fought… rather than celebrate, they mourned.

***

In between the regular movie nights, Netflix binge nights were a common occurrence. This week happened to be Sherlock week.

Hill, Sam, Steve, and Sharon sprawled in a large pile on the couch, arguing with each other about which of the pills contained the poison while the credits for the first episode rolled.

Snorting, Bucky smirked at Steve as he walked past them. “Poison was in the water. Where do you think they got the idea?”

A stunned silence followed him as he made his way towards the elevators.

Sam was the first to speak, letting out an eloquent and disgruntled, “…dude.”

***

He lay there curled up in a ball on the floor of the gym under the pommel horse as if it would protect him from the images flashing through his head. Voices echoed in his ears, whispering his sins and naming his crimes, and he cried out, clapping his hands over his ears in a futile attempt to silence them.

Something cool and wet pressed against his forehead and the sensation gradually grounded him.

The shaking subsided over the course of a few minutes, leaving him sweating, panting, and limp on the mat, eyes closed and arms curled protectively around his head.

“Barnes?”

He cracked an eye open, following the arm covered in black, downy hair up to Bruce’s concerned face. His glasses were slightly askew under the unkempt mop of curly hair, eyes wide and eyebrows raised.

“Hey, big guy. I’m fine.” Bucky pushed himself up on his arms, letting out a short, exasperated sigh when his elbows wobbled. The wet towel slid off his forehead and flopped to the floor. “I’m fine, I promise.”

“No, you’re not fine, because that was just Cantonese.”

He stared at Bruce blankly. “<I speak Cantonese?>”
“Apparently.”

“…diu…” he groaned.

“Yeah. Come on, let’s go get you some tea. Did you fall? Any injuries?”

He shook his head.

Ten minutes later, he had his hands wrapped around a hot mug of something smelling vaguely like rosemary and lavender while Mickey examined his sprained ankle that neither he nor Bruce had noticed until the swelling and bruising gave it away.

***

The next movie night, they started their trip through Star Wars. The first hour had been taken up with heated and expletive-laden arguments about which order to watch the movies in.

Bucky finished his popcorn before the movie even started, watching the argument about whether to watch them in release order, episodic order, or something called the Machete Order with great interest. At one point, Mickey jumped in with a question about a TV show and set off a whole new round of debates.

He snuck a look at Natasha – her back was turned, shoulders set, arms crossed as she and Tony slung argument and counter-argument back and forth like boxers in a ring. Slowly, so slowly, he reached out a hand and pulled a few pieces of popcorn from her bowl.

Without looking, she flicked her wrist and a shock disc slammed into his arm, rendering it dead and useless. She looked over her shoulder and smirked. “Don’t take from my bowl.”

It took another half an hour and a hard reset of his arm using his phone and the data cable before they started with Episode One.

***

“Who will redeem, heed the call for America?” Bucky sang, off-pitch and as annoyingly as he could, swinging past Steve and smacking him hard on the shoulder. “Who’ll rise or fall, give his all for America?”

“Oh, fuck you!” Steve hollered after him as Bucky cackled and raced down the trail, blowing past the other joggers.

Just as he was about to belt out the last of the lyrics, something slammed into his legs and sent him tumbling down the shallow grassy slope to the left of the trail. Steve landed on top of him, pinning him down in a wrestling hold. Bucky squirmed, managing to snake an arm out and around, twisting Steve so that the blond man was on his back in the soaking wet grass.

“Don’t- don’t you dare-”

“The Star Spangled Man with a Plan!”

A knee shot up, catching Bucky in the groin, then Steve’s other foot, covered in grass and dew, slammed hard into his stomach and propelled him into the air and further down the hill.

They both lay there, staring up at the first truly sunny day in a long time, running clothes soaked through, laughing with the occasional groan thrown in as Bucky curled up protectively, pressing his
hands over his crotch.

“Are you two children quite through?” Mickey sauntered up, hands on her hips. “Because seriously, people are staring.”

Steve giggled. “Let them. This is the most fun I’ve had in forever.”

“Oh, so I can sing it again?” Bucky smirked as he slowly pushed himself to his feet.

With a comical growl, Steve launched himself through the air, catching Bucky around the middle and tackling him again.

***

“Can you even catch colds?” Bruce muttered as he peered down Steve’s throat with a small flashlight. “I mean, your tonsils are all swollen and yeah, there’s a postnasal drip, but… I thought the serum prevented all of that.”

“It’s the motherfucking superbug.” Mickey’s nose was red and stuffed up, and she’d given up trying to fight the sore throat messing with her vocal range control. “I’m drinking so much herbal tea that I’m shitting my brains out. If anything’s going to get him sick, it’s gonna be this one.”

“Speaking of which, Barnes…” Bruce turned to Bucky with a raised eyebrow.

“Trust me, this is kind of the only time I’m actually thankful I’ve got a different serum.” He chuckled when Steve flipped him off, and then had to try hard not to crack up when Steve made the strangest noise, almost like a little gasp, but his voice cracked and broke in the middle of it like he’d been whisked back into puberty.

“…what was that?” Bucky asked.

Steve glared at him and grabbed a tissue from the table next to him, blowing his nose loudly. “I sneezed.”

Shaking her head and smirking, Mickey handed him a small dosing cup full of decongestant. “Steve, that was not a sneeze.”

“God bless America.” Bucky slapped Steve on the shoulder as he walked through to the kitchen to grab himself a beer.

***

The city was still alive and brightly lit at three in the morning, but Bucky still found the stillness and quiet soothing as his pencil scratched slowly over the paper in his notebook. The face that had been floating in his head ever since he’d jolted awake was finally fading onto the page in front of him, careful pencil strokes adding dimension and shape through shading.

He filled the negative space around the portrait with as much written detail as he could remember – the gun he’d used, the color of her hair, the early spring chill that had fluffed up the hair on his arms as he stood waiting in ambush. The clear crystal laughter that had tumbled down the path, announcing her arrival. The curiosity in her eyes when he’d stepped into view – curiosity, not fear. Curiosity.

That was the last time he’d completed a mission in plainclothes.
Dodging a Nerf dart, Bucky laughed as he dove, tucked, rolled behind the couch for cover, and reloaded his big plastic revolver. The common area was peppered with bright orange darts, so all he had to do was reach out a hand and grab the first six he could find, stuff them into the gun, rack the slide, and let loose again.

“Hey, Steve!” he called across the common area, as much to grab Steve’s attention as to distract the other team.

“What?”

“Remember that time we were holed up in Poland? Had to squat in some old lady’s barn?”

“Was that the time that Dugan nearly fucked a cow because he was so randy?”

The darts stopped flying.

“Yeah, yeah, I think it was. He had moon eyes for Ol’ Bess, drunk off his ass on some of Frenchie’s moonshine.” Bucky leaned out from behind the couch and caught Tony square in the ass with two darts before any retaliation came his way. “Honestly? I’m glad he started humping the cow’s leg. Better than having to put up with his moaning all night and havin’ him play it off as stomach cramps.”

“God, yeah.” Steve chuckled. “And then there was that time he ended up with a girl in Paris and spent the whole next week bitching about running out of Vaseline.”

“You know he got a new jar the week before? I’d wager her cooch must’ve been drier than Morocco in the summer. Trust me, I’d know, I’ve been there.”

A few quiet, stifled snorts preceded a quickly growing wave of giggles from Steve’s location. “Morocco, or some old hag’s pussy?” Steve gasped out.

“What the… You two are national icons!” Sam hollered from across the room. “What is wrong with you? Why in the hell is the world’s biggest prude snickering like a schoolboy?”

Bucky popped up over the back of the couch, crossing his arms on it and resting his chin on top. “You do know we were in the Army, right?”

A dart smacked him firmly in the center of the forehead, and the volleys resumed.

***

Mickey was writing carefully in one notebook, only a handful of pages in and already tabs of every color were sticking out. She flipped through the other notebook on the table in front of her, consulting past notes, as she jotted down information about the latest episode.

Pink tabs were regularly spaced through the pages, marking each time a dosage had dropped since the beginning of his transition off the medications. Purple tabs were becoming uncomfortably common, and Bucky hadn’t needed any additional persuasion before agreeing to a strange monitor strapped to his right wrist. So far, they’d been able to increase the seizure warning time to about ten minutes.

Each time she pressed another purple tab into place, though, she felt like she was failing him. As
scary as it was to watch him shake and shudder, she could only imagine how it must feel for him.

The blue tabs were increasing in frequency, as well as green, red, and orange, usually grouped together since many of his symptoms were related. Mild depressive episodes were often comorbid with dissociation, and the language difficulties were becoming easier to track once they’d identified exactly what happened when his brain forgot which set of words to use – if he could use words at all.

What scared her the most, though, were the red ones. Danger nights. Bucky and the Winter Soldier were two sides of the same coin; Dr. Ellmore had quickly dismissed Dissociative Identity Disorder since he didn’t show many of the markers for it, but it was still unsettling to see Bucky fall into the robotic, eerily still mannerisms he’d worn like armor for so many years. They called it a defense mechanism. Mickey just did her best not to be creeped out.

She looked up to where Bucky lay on the couch, head pillowed on his arm, eyes fixed on something only he could see. He’d been catatonic for most of the day, and while that in and of itself wasn’t anything new, the fact that he couldn’t even respond to yes-or-no questions had Mickey worried. That, coupled with what she’d identified as several absence seizures over the past few days… this wasn’t good.

Closing the notebook quietly, Mickey walked into the study, closed the door, and called Dr. Ellmore.

“Good afternoon, Mickey. What can I do for you?”

“Hi, Doc. It’s about Bucky, I’m getting worried. He’s in a rut right now and things are going haywire. Can we push the next tier drop out until he’s stable again?”

“Yes, of course. It might be good to give him more time to stabilize between drops anyway. I’ll get the schedule updated.”

“Perfect.” Mickey leaned against the large desk and rubbed at her eyes with the back of her hand. “Thank you.”

“How are you doing through all of this?”

She chuckled. “Well, there’s never a dull moment. I think he’s rounding the bend, though. He’s still having good days, and the good days are just as good as they used to be. There’s less mania between depressive episodes, which I’m telling myself is a good thing.”

“That’s not what I asked, dear.”

“I…” Pausing, Mickey closed her eyes. “I’m tired. I’m really, really tired. We’ve had to sedate him a couple of nights because the nightmares are so bad. I don’t think I’ve gotten a full night’s sleep in about a week. I stopped doing my hair and makeup just because I’m focusing so much on this… on him.”

“Do you need a break?”

“No! God, no. I- I can’t do that to him again. He barely got through it the last time.”

“Again, that’s not what I asked.”

She thought about it, considering her answer carefully. “No. I think I’m okay. I’m okay. I’ll get through this. We’ll get through this.”
“There we go. Let me know if that changes, though. Keep me updated?”

“Of course. He hasn’t been able to update his journal so I’ve been taking care of that. He dictates to me when he can. Other times he’ll just read over my shoulder and tap something, shake his head, nod, you know. We’re trying to keep this as well-documented as we can. I’m going to scan what I’ve got since the last email I sent you and get that sent off later today.”

“Sounds good. Remember, take care of yourself or you won’t be able to take care of him. Spend some time on self-care; I’m sure one of the other team members would be willing to spell you for a bit.”

“I know. Thank you. Bye.”

She didn’t notice the faint shadows under the door and nearly jumped out of her skin when she walked right into Bucky.

His eyes were tired, but concern was written in them as he raised a hand and gently brushed his fingers over her cheek. When she leaned into the touch and closed her own eyes with a small sigh, Bucky moved forward, scooped her up in his arms, and walked them back into the living room.

He sat on the couch and leaned back, cradling Mickey gently, and tugged a blanket over both of them. A kiss on her forehead and a thumb brushing over her temple spoke to her better than words, and she sighed, letting herself relax in his arms.

The steady, dull thumpthump of his heart lulled her into sleep, and within minutes she was breathing deeply and heavily, Bucky’s left arm protectively curled around her shoulders as if to ward off the demons that haunted them both.

***

It was an indescribable relief to hear Bucky chattering away aimlessly with Marguerite as she fit him for a new suit. He’d been assigned to accompany Pepper to one of the international conventions, acting as a decidedly effective deterrent for anyone that got ideas.

Bucky wasn’t crazy about running a protection detail while blatantly advertising his presence; mission parameters required the world to know that the Winter Soldier was there. And for once, Mickey agreed with him. Normally, she’d be in favor of any plan that encouraged him not to hide in public, but in this case, it was more important to ensure Pepper stayed safe than anything else. For that matter, intimidation was just as effective as any other method of protection.

Smiling to herself, Mickey listened to the rapid-fire French trickling out of the fitting room. Bucky had a noticeable accent, but fluency was far from an issue. The brief snatches of conversation Mickey could understand – a noun here, a verb there, even though the conjugations and sounds were different than her high school Spanish – told her that Marguerite was simply thrilled to be working with someone who appreciated all of the wonderful fabrics available.

“How durable is this one, though?” Bucky asked, brushing his thumb over a thick gray canvas.

“Plenty, but you might not want to be wearing that in Dubai in April, my dear.”

Twisting his lips to the side, Bucky nodded slowly. “So, it’ll need to be lightweight. Will I need a wicking layer?”

“Couldn’t hurt. Here, hold out your arms.”
“<It’s going to be, what, thirty-ish? Thirty-five?>” He used Celcius out of habit more than anything else.

Marguerite made a noise of agreement around the pencil held in her teeth. When she took it out to scrawl down a few numbers, she followed with, “<It’s a desert, so it’s going to be significantly warmer there regardless. Thankfully it should still be a dry heat, so we’ll focus on linen this time.>”

“<Ooh, linen.>” Bucky was like a kid in a candy store, even bringing out one of the swatches to show Mickey. “Here, feel this. Isn’t it amazing?” Without waiting for her response, he bounced back into the other room and began chattering away with Marguerite again.

Mickey practically choked on her water when she saw the price of the suit listed in the mission documents she was flipping through. “Jesus fuck, Frosty, I don’t earn that much in a month!”

“Tony’s paying for it,” Bucky told her with a shrug as he waved goodbye to Marguerite. “Says it’s worth it to know that the scariest motherfucker this side of the century is keeping his better half safe.”

“He’d damn well better be.” Mickey winced again at the price and tucked the papers into her bag, settling her now-free hand into Bucky’s. “I know Marguerite’s good, but this is way beyond what we can normally afford.”

Bucky’s laugh was low and quiet. “Babydoll, we’re Avengers. Add to that, you’re the one that gets paid to whack me up the side of the head when I’m being stupid. We’ve got more money than I ever thought existed, and that’s after I gave half of mine to the clinics.”

That stopped Mickey dead in her tracks. “You did what?”

Turning to face her, Bucky took both of her hands in his own. His smile was shy and self-conscious. “Well… I called up one of them here, and then one in Portland, and then the one that you went to. Asked them how much the full thing costs for a boy and for a girl, and…”

“Oh, sweetheart…” Mickey leaned forward and hugged him tight.

“They said they had a bunch of kids and adults who couldn’t even afford their hormones. Like I said before, everyone deserves the chance to be as comfortable and happy as you are. So, I kinda… paid for it.” He cleared his throat. “All of it.”

All Mickey could do was nod into his shoulder and squeeze her eyes shut.

***

Still nervous about being in the spotlight, Bucky lagged a few paces behind Steve. He chewed his lip almost constantly, feeling extremely out of place. Steve was fully suited up in his new Captain America uniform, the snazzy new tac suit that he and Tony had just finished designing last week, but Bucky’s had been deemed too… gritty. Instead, he’d been given one of Steve’s stealth suits. After some tailoring, black dye, and the removal of the left sleeve, it was now his ‘on duty in public’ uniform. The press, naturally, failed to ignore the coincidence that Buck was wearing a repurposed Captain America uniform.

And this was how he found himself striding down the hallway at the children’s hospital, failing miserably at making all six-foot-two and three hundred pounds of him invisible. Cameras followed them everywhere, and he couldn’t help but smile as he saw Steve handling the press with an ease and confidence he hadn’t shown back during the press days with the Invaders.

After answering questions, posing pictures, shaking hands, signing whatever was shoved at him, and
generally being thrown about like the celebrity he’d never wanted to become, Bucky excused himself for a few minutes and escaped into one of the quiet rec rooms off to the side.

Falling heavily into a chair, he let his head fall back and took several long, deep breaths, relaxing every muscle in his body as he worked through the exercises Doc had given him.

“You don’t like crowds either?” a young voice asked, and he jumped several inches, scanning the room frantically before he saw a boy in a wheelchair in the opposite corner. The boy was severely thin and his gown hung loose around his shoulders. A pole with an IV bag poked up from the back of his wheelchair. His age was impossible to estimate; a dull orange beanie covered what Bucky quickly figured out was a hairless head.

“I- um… no. No, I don’t.” Bucky chuckled, trying to hide his awkwardness when he noticed the boy never looked directly at him. Slender fingers ghosted their way over the pages of the book in his lap, and with a start, Bucky realized the boy was blind. So, he took a deep breath, scuffed his feet as he walked closer to the boy, and sat facing him a few feet away.

“Steve – Captain America – he brought me along because he thought it’d be good for us… for me. But, I really don’t like crowds. I don’t like cameras, or reporters, or… anything like that, really. So, I’m taking a break and resting for a bit until I can handle it again.”

The boy’s lips twitched up in a smile. His pale green eyes continued to stare off into the space over Bucky’s left shoulder. “Yeah, I’m not much of one for these things either. Captain Rogers has been here so many times, but it’s always so loud, so I usually end up in here.”

Bucky tilted his head at that; most people didn’t use Steve’s name, simply referring him as Captain America. “You’ve met Steve before?”

“Yeah, a few times. He’s really nice. He likes to describe things for me, you know, colors and whatnot.” The boy lowered his head, closed his book, and smiled warmly. “He’s one of the only ones that knows how to tell me what colors look like. Says his best friend used to do that for him when he was a kid.”

Breath catching in his throat, Bucky bit his lip. “Yeah. He was colorblind, you know. He could still see red, and a little bit of blue, if I remember correctly. But it was really faint. Most stuff was gray or brown to him.”

“You know him well, then?”

“I… yeah.” Bucky scratched the back of his neck as he leaned forward. “Um, my name’s Bucky. What’s yours?”

The surprise and excitement on the boy’s face was instant. “Kevin.” He stuck a hand straight out, and Bucky clasped it gently.

“Nice to meet you, Kevin.”

Kevin didn’t let go of Bucky’s hand right away though, eyes widening. “Can I… feel your hand?”

“Um… oh.” Bucky looked down and realized that it was his left hand that he held forward. “Give me a second.” He tugged off the thick, armored glove and extended his hand. “Here.”

The boy’s touch was gentle as he explored every seam between the plates, every shallow groove that marked the metal like scars. Eyes drifting closed, Kevin’s fingers traced their way over the contours of Bucky’s arm while the boy used his hands for eyes.
“What color is it?”

“Silver.” Bucky flexed his hand, grinning when Kevin jumped into exploring the new contours with a vengeance. “It’s cold, you can tell that. It can warm up a little if it’s warm enough outside, but there’s no fluids circulating through it, so it’s always cold like other metals. The plates are shiny; you can see little reflections of the overhead lights on the ones that aren’t too scratched up.”

“There’s a lot of scratches.”

“Didn’t used to be that way. I’ve… been through a lot.”

“I know.” Kevin’s eyes were still closed as he turned Bucky’s hand over, studying how the plates shifted and rotated on his forearm. “I heard about you on the news. Tell me more about silver.”

With an ache in his chest, Bucky realized that while Steve had had a very basic grasp of color, Kevin had never seen it in his life, hungry for a world closed off to him. “It’s, um, it’s a sort of gray. There’s colors and materials that reflect things, like mirrors, glass, metal, stuff like that, and there’s stuff that doesn’t reflect. Rough materials like concrete, wood that isn’t glossy, fabric, stuff like that, that doesn’t reflect light. It’s just the color it is. But silver and gold and copper and other colors like that, they reflect what’s around them.

“So, it’s not just one color, it’s a bunch. You see a little picture of the world around you in the reflection. Right now, like I said, the lights in the ceiling are reflecting off of the plates, and I can see a little bit of light green from your clothes. My uniform’s mostly black – that’s the color of night, shadows, charcoal… black is the absence of light.”

“And light comes from the sun and the lamps.”

“Yeah. So, my arm’s kind of like a mirror, in a way. Little tiny pictures of what’s around us showing on the surface, so it’s not just silver, it’s kind of… every color. But silver’s the base, if that makes sense.” Bucky put his right hand over one of Kevin’s and slid it up his arm to the shoulder. “Right here, I’ve got a red star on my shoulder. They colored the metal, it’s called anodizing.”

“Electrochemical process that applies a protective, often colored, finish to a metal.”

Bucky grinned at him. “Yeah, that’s right. You read a lot of books?”

“I’m studying chemistry right now. The nurses read to me, put books on my iPod, or give me stuff in Braille.”

“That’s awesome, kid. That’s pretty awesome.” He gave Kevin’s hand a gentle squeeze. “The red star is a kind of dark red, so it’s not the hot, bright red that you get from fire, or a stove burner. It’s not the same bright red you see in strawberries or tomatoes, it’s more the kind of red you see in cherries.”

“Cherries have a richer, sweeter flavor. Some of them taste a little smoky.”

“Kind of like that, yeah. Smoke makes things darker, so it’s kind of a smoky red. The Russians put it on there when I was still…”

“When you were still a prisoner.”

“…yeah.” His voice cracked as he watched Kevin’s eyelids flutter. The boy’s fingers traced down the seams between the plates, his nails catching on the edges.
“What color is cold?”

Thinking about it for a minute, Bucky slid his hand back into the bulky glove and then let Kevin ‘see’ that. “It depends on where you are. It’s different, sometimes. In the ocean, cold can be blue or green because that’s what color the water is. Sometimes it’s kind of in between, we call that teal or aquamarine. But on land, cold’s usually white.”

“Snow.”

“Mmhm. You can pack snow into a little house called an igloo, it’s shaped like a dome with a small tunnel coming off of it.” He slid his hands under Kevin’s, forming a dome shape. “Heat traps itself inside the igloo, and that can keep you warm even in the coldest blizzard. Blizzards are white, all white. There’s so much snow flying through the air that it just turns everything white.

“In space, cold is black because there’s no light, no warmth from the sun. And on a person, cold is blue because when someone gets cold, their skin loses its kind of peachy pink color and fades to a more bluish color.” Smirking and chuckling, Bucky tilted his head to the side. “Of course, if we’re talking about ice cream, cold can be any color.”

Kevin giggled and folded his hands in his lap. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Um…” He had to think about that one, and then the answer just came to him. “Blue. Steve’s eyes are this amazing blue color… it’s got a tiny bit of green in it, like some seaweed floating in a calm ocean. It’s a little darker than the sky, but it’s still really bright. It’s kind of the same color as a blue raspberry Jolly Rancher, you ever had one of those?”

“Yeah, yeah I have.” The boy’s grin grew wider as he drank it in.

“And then the green, the seaweed, it’s like one of the green apple ones. Little flecks of green apple in the blue raspberry. Almost kind of a lime color, actually. Just tiny little flecks, right on the edges, little tiny dots.” Bucky was practically whispering, his own eyes closed as he pictured Steve’s eyes, the rest of his head surrounded by a golden halo of light in Kreischberg as he’d ripped the bindings off of Bucky’s arms and legs.

“They get really stormy gray when he’s angry… like a rainstorm. How everything’s just wet and loud and windy and there’s rain blowing everywhere and there’s so much going on, that’s the gray they get, where everything’s just noise. And when he’s happy, when he’s excited, they get brilliant, bright, almost blinding blue. It’s like coming in out of the cold and into a warm house, then sitting in front of the fireplace and letting the warmth just soak through you.”

“That’s amazing,” Kevin whispered.

Someone sniffed in the doorway, and Bucky jerked his head up; Steve was standing there, blue eyes glistening as he listened to them talk. A camera was rolling behind him and one of the press crew had a hand pressed to her mouth.

“There’s other people here now,” Bucky said quietly to Kevin. “Steve’s here, too.”

“I know. He smells like cinnamon.”

Neither Bucky nor Steve could hold back a few quiet laughs. “Hi, Kevin.”

The boy turned towards the sound and smiled. “Hi, Captain Rogers. Bucky was just telling me about colors.”
“I- I know.” Steve’s voice was thick and wet as he looked at Bucky.

“How long’ve you been there, punk?”

With a wry smile, Steve held out his hands apologetically. “Pretty much the whole time. We came looking for you after you disappeared. It’s time we should be heading back… sorry.”

Bucky gave Kevin’s hands a gentle squeeze and stood up. “I’ll come back, kid.”

“Please. I like listening to you. You have a nice voice.” Those pale gray eyes blinked at him – mostly at him, sort of at his shoulder, really – and Bucky patted the kid on the shoulder once more before turning to leave.

Once they were out of earshot, Bucky caught a nurse’s arm. “Kevin, the blind boy with cancer…”

“He’s got about a year, we think,” she told him softly. “He isn’t responding to treatment as well anymore.”

Nodding, Bucky frowned slightly. “He got family? He looks pretty lonely.”

The nurse blinked at him a few times before responding. “Well… his parents aren’t really in the picture. His godmother takes care of almost everything. And the other kids, they’re never quite sure what to do around him.”

“Is it okay if I come back and visit him? Unofficially. I won’t drag a news crew in with me every time, I promise.”

The smiles and the squeeze on his shoulder from Steve’s hand told him he’d just done the right thing.

One week later, Bucky ducked his way back into the children’s ward with an old, battered book tucked under his arm. He waved and smiled at the nurses and followed their directions to the small room halfway down the hall on the left. Knocking quietly, Bucky poked his head in.

“Kevin?”

“Bucky!”

“Hey, kiddo!” Bucky stepped in, reaching out to let Kevin’s fingers ghost over his hand again. “Good to see you. How’re you feeling?”

“I had chemo this morning, so… not good.” Kevin’s lips were pale and his eyes were half-lidded. “Still a little nauseous.”

Pulling a chair up, Bucky sat down and kicked his feet up onto Kevin’s bed. “Well, maybe I can help with that.” He handed the old book over to Kevin, wrapping those delicate, long fingers around the worn leather. “Be gentle with this; I borrowed it from Steve. It’s one of his favorite books – mine, too. I bought it for him in ’36, so the damn thing’s nearly as old as I am.”

Delicate fingers brushed over the cover, dipping into the grooves of the embossed title. “Are you going to read to me?”

“If you want.”

The sunshine smile from the boy in the hospital bed was all he needed, so Bucky took the book back, carefully opened it, and turned to the first page. He cleared his throat and smiled slightly, dropping his voice in pitch just a touch and affecting a rich British accent. Steve had always loved it.
when he’d done the voices, and he wasn’t about to stop now.

“In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell, nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat: it was a hobbit-hole, and that means comfort…”

Chapter End Notes

You can probably guess where the next chapter’s going.

And with that, we’ll see ya next week.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Soooo this is another montage chapter. It’s another difficult one, too. Please take care of yourselves, and make sure to read through the trigger warnings.

**Trigger warnings:**
- Swearing (it is Bucky, after all)
- Self-blame
- Going AWOL without warning
- Ultron being, um Ultron. Sorry this is spoilery, but… yeah
- Dissociative/hallucinatory episodes courtesy of Wanda (see above)
- PTSD and unhealthy coping mechanisms

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nothing. Nothing on the news, nothing on FRIDAY’s programs, nothing from Hardison.

Nothing.

Mickey closed her eyes, clenched her jaw, and set down the tablet before she hurled it across the room.

“We’ll find him,” Steve said quietly, those big blue eyes shining with empathy. “I promise. We’ll find him.”

“You said it yourself, he’s a ghost. He won’t come back until he wants to.” The words caught in her throat, and suddenly she was crying, hot tears of frustration, fear, and loneliness soaking into Steve’s shirt as he wrapped his arms around her.

***

“Bucky, stop squirming. You got ants in your pants or something?”

“Oh, fuck off.” Bucky glared daggers at Steve and tried to discreetly rearrange himself. “Fuck the fucking fuck off.”

“The hell’s wrong with him?” Barton asked as he clattered up the ramp to the Quinjet, checking over his arrows.

“All you assfuckin’ asshats couldn’t have picked a better time to find the goddamn scepter?” Giving up, Bucky surged to his feet and stomped over to the small latrine in the back of the jet. “Good motherfuckin’ timing.”

The rest of the team watched him slam the door to the latrine shut, and turned as a unit to look at Mickey. She was facing the wall, strapping medical supply bins down into their storage cubbies, and her shoulders stiffened when she realized all eyes were on her. Mickey’s lips twisted uncomfortably as she slowly turned to face the rest of the team.

“Um… the alert rang when…” She didn’t have to finish the sentence because the bright red blush
that crashed onto her face finished it for her.

Steve turned just as pink and dropped his face into his hands. “…oh.”

“…yeah.” Clearing her throat, Mickey turned back to her medical supplies. “First aid is go.” She busied herself checking over her Micro RONI and Glock to avoid the stares and smirks.

After a few minutes, Thor came up to her, stepping just heavily enough that she wasn’t startled. “Barnes seems quite… upset.” He nodded subtly to where Bucky now sat, seething, in the back of the jet. “Should this become a problem, please tell me if you need my assistance.”

“Oh, geez… Thor, it’s um… not- not that kind of problem. He’s…” She made a face, searching for the right word. “…frustrated.”

“Damn right I am,” Bucky grumbled.

Thor gave Mickey a skeptical look, and she sighed. “Not that kind of frustrated. We aren’t, um, fighting. It’s, um…”

A knowing smile spread across Thor’s face, and he nodded. “I see. Well, if all goes according to plan, we should be back home within a reasonable time.”

Mickey didn’t miss how Thor referred to the Tower as ‘home.’ She clasped his forearm and patted his shoulder before he walked away, then dropped down to sit next to Bucky.

“You gonna be okay?”

He shot her a baleful look and rolled his head back to thunk against the wall of the jet. “You try putting body armor on over a massive boner and then tell me that yeah, we need to go deal with the bad guy alarm, it can’t wait another few minutes.”

“Thank you for that delightful illustration, Snow Cone. Oh, and, you’re still on comms, by the way.”

“Fuck off, Stark.”

***

“Do we have any intel?”

The mood in the briefing was tense, everyone staring pointedly at the large table rather than make anything even resembling eye contact. Hill leaned over on her fists, knuckles resting on the surface of the table as she sighed.

“Do we have anything?” she asked. “Anyone?”

“I feel like he’s always two steps ahead of me.” Natasha’s face was as unreadable as ever, but Mickey thought she saw frustration. “I saw someone that might - might - have been him.” When Hill inclined her head, surprised, Natasha shrugged. “Might. There was a big crowd and I didn’t get a good look. If it was him, he took someone out in plain sight in a subway terminal.”

“Wanda?”

The girl shook her head apologetically. “I cannot find him. He does not… want to be found.”

Vision tapped his fingers thoughtfully on the table as he glanced up at Wanda. “Well, as far as
we’ve been able to identify, Barnes appears to be in hiding.”

Mickey looked up at Tony in time to see the man’s involuntary twitch when he heard Vision speak.

“Yes, so far. But…” Steve frowned down at his hands, deep lines creasing his forehead. “And, trust me, you know how much this means when I’m the one saying it… what if he starts going after civilian targets? We’ve got no idea what his current mental state is.” Wanda flinched, curling inward on herself.

“Do not blame yourself, Wanda.” Vision, again. “There is no way you could have predicted this.”

“I’m the one that did it. I put all those nightmares into your heads, and…” Leaning forward onto the table, Wanda pressed her hands over her eyes. “I did this.” The girl still blamed herself for letting Ultron gain power, for the death of her brother, for the fractured remnants of the team that had come home from Sokovia.

A long, oppressive silence followed, until Mickey couldn’t stand it anymore. She stood, turned, and left the briefing room without saying another word. Once the door closed behind her, she broke into a run, crashing blindly through the Compound until she finally fell to her knees in the garage, leaning heavily against the fender of Bucky’s Mustang.

Mickey turned to rest her back against the car and pulled her knees to her chest. “Two weeks,” she whispered to the empty air. “Two weeks…”

On an impulse, she pulled out her phone, opened her email, and scrolled to the message that she’d been avoiding. Her thumb hesitated over it, until finally, she tapped it. The subject line slid to the top and the email opened underneath.

She read through the words over and over again until they blurred in front of her. Finally, she scrolled to the bottom one last time and opened the attachment.

***

The party was a welcome distraction.

Bucky did his best not to think about overhearing Tony and Bruce arguing about Ultron – with the scepter, the ‘suit of armor around the world’ was suddenly within reach. Even though he agreed with the premise, Bucky couldn’t completely push away the uneasiness he felt at combining Tony’s idea with alien technology.

That had worked so well the first time.

Despite that, he still found himself laughing and mingling with ease. Standing at Steve’s side, reminiscing about the war with a group of salty old veterans that made him feel right at home, Bucky felt a knot of tension between his shoulders slip free for the first time in a long while. He looked down at the small swirl of liquid in his glass, courtesy of Thor, and one corner of his mouth pulled up with a quiet, nostalgic smile.

He patted Steve on the shoulder before walking away to find Mickey after the old veterans found out exactly what Thor had meant with his warning about the strength of the liquor.

Natasha was shamelessly flirting with Bruce and Bucky tossed her a wink and a smirk as he walked by. The party was quieting down now, and Mickey had found her way to the couch. Her right foot was up on the coffee table as she repositioned the KT tape on her calf.
“Still bothering you?”

“Mm.” Prodding the scarred muscle tissue, Mickey pressed her lips into a thin line. “I might have Dr. Cho take a look at it later. It’s starting to mess with how I run.”

Bucky reached out and gently traced a finger over the thin line crossing the back of her calf. “Looks like it should’ve severed the muscle completely.”

“What can I say? I’ve got a guardian angel.” Mickey sighed and leaned back, dropping her head onto Bucky’s shoulder when he pulled her in under his arm.

He hummed into her hair and huffed out a laugh. “You are a guardian angel, my darling.”

Steve’s voice caught his ear and he turned slightly to see his friend and Bruce standing at the bar, Natasha sauntering away.

“It’s just, she’s not the most… open person in the world. But with you, she seems very relaxed.” Steve raised an eyebrow at Bruce meaningfully.

Bucky had to stifle a snort, scratching his cheek to hide the smirk that snuck its way onto his face as Bruce sputtered awkwardly.

“That she does,” Bucky muttered, rewarded by a quiet chuckle from Mickey.

“I’ve seen her flirt – up close.” Steve leaned over the bar and grabbed himself a beer, walking languidly towards the couch. “This ain’t that.”

When Bruce scoffed, Steve turned to face him. “Look, as maybe the world’s leading authority on waiting too long? Don’t. You both deserve a win.”

As Steve greeted Bucky, Mickey, and Clint, claiming himself a spot on one of the gigantic couches, Bruce’s confused voice drifted over to them. “Wait – what do you mean, ‘up close?’”

“Don’t tease the poor man, punk.” Bucky snagged Steve’s beer and took a long drink from it before handing it back with a smirk.

The evening soon devolved into easy, friendly banter as the rest of the guests trickled out and the last few members of the team meandered over to lounge on the couches.

“But it’s a trick!” Clint whined, spinning his drumsticks as Thor laughed. The archer still looked a bit pale and didn’t move with his usual grace, but he’d insisted on coming to the party nonetheless.

Thor poured a small dose of the Asgardian giggle juice into a tumbler and handed it to Steve to pass over to Bucky. “Oh, no. It’s much more than that.”

Deepening his voice, Clint gestured grandly towards where Mjolnir sat tauntingly. “Whosoever be he worthy shall haveth the power!” He rolled his eyes, spun his drumsticks, and pointed one of them at the hammer. “Whatever, man! It’s a trick.”

“Not everything’s smoke and mirrors, carnie.” Bucky took a sip from the tumbler and coughed emphatically. “God and country, Thor, this stuff’s strong.”

“Would you have it any other way?” Turning back to Clint, Thor held out a hand invitingly. “Please, be my guest.”
And that was that; the evening quickly devolved into hilarity as each Avenger tried – and failed – to lift Mjolnir.

Bucky gave Steve a long, hard look after the legendary hammer wiggled almost imperceptibly. They both knew what that meant, but a competition around a tipsy bet was not the time to play those cards. Steve shrugged, reached for his drink, and that was that.

“Oh, no, no. That’s not a question I need answered,” Natasha said wryly when her turn came, pointing instead to Mickey.

“What? Hm?”

“Come on,” Bucky growled playfully at her, shoving her to her feet.

“Only because you’re too scared to try.” She stabbed a finger at him and yanked it back when he nipped at it.

“Nope, I said I’m good.”

“Oh, come on, Terminator.” Tony slapped Bucky playfully on the shoulder. “No one’s gonna tease you for forgetting how to hold a shaft. I mean, the last time you used a proper spear was, what, the Stone Age?”

Steve spat beer back into his glass, sputtering. He coughed, loud and hoarse, as Bucky tried and failed to stifle laughter.

“Well, there was that regiment of ankylosaurs that we had to fight off.” He elbowed Steve conspiratorially.

“Right, wasn’t that in Bavaria or something? It all kind of blended together; a lot happened in ’44.”

Bucky grinned as Clint shot them a dirty, skeptical look. Apparently, no one had yet clued in to the fact that Steve was a little shit.

“How do you forget fighting Nazi dinosaurs?” Dr. Cho asked, giggling slightly.

“I forgot my own name, you know. If it ain’t on my Wikipedia page, it didn’t happen.” Bucky nudged Mickey towards Mjolnir. “Stop stalling, Mickey Mouse.”

As Mickey made a show of it, bracing her feet against the edges of the coffee table and swearing vividly as only a sailor could, something bumped into Bucky’s arm. He looked down to see a copy of Car & Driver with a 1966 fastback Mustang on the cover, held gently in Thor’s massive hand.

“I think you may have dropped this earlier.” The raised eyebrow and deep intelligence in the Asgardian’s eyes made the hair on Bucky’s neck stand up.

“Thanks,” he muttered, taking the magazine and glancing back up to Thor, only to see him laughing as Mickey flipped off the stubborn hammer with both hands.

“All deference to the man who wouldn’t be king, but, it’s rigged.” Tony picked up another bottle of beer and handed it to Bucky to pop off the cap.

“You bet your ass,” Clint agreed, slapping Tony on the arm.

Hill pointed at Clint with her beer, raising her eyebrows. “Steve, he said a bad language word.”
“Did you tell everyone about that, Stark?”

Bucky snorted, biting his lips to suppress a laugh at the wonderful expression on the blond soldier’s face. Tony was already speaking again, taking sips of beer between his sentences.

“The handle’s imprinted, right? Like a security code. ‘Whosoever is carrying Thor's fingerprints’ is, I think, the literal translation?”

Thor stood and stepped over to the hammer. “Yes, well that's, uh, that's a very, very interesting theory. I have a simpler one.” Hefting Mjolnir, Thor frowned playfully at them. “You're all not worthy.”

Bucky winced as feedback whined through the room, unconsciously reaching up to mess with his ear, when a deep sense of wrong flooded through him. He stood, made eye contact with Steve, and zeroed in on the stumbling mess of wires and metal that walked out of Tony’s lab.

“No,” thing groaned, joints whining and oil spreading over the glossy tiles as it turned to face them. “How could you be worthy? You're all killers.”

He fought down a snarl as Mickey gripped his arm tightly to keep him from lunging over the couch.

***

“I know I’m not Mister JARVIS, but…”

“It’s okay, FRIDAY.” Mickey sighed and rubbed her hands over her face. “No one’s blaming you.”

There was a long pause, and Mickey could almost feel the young AI scratching her virtual neck. “They miss him. Boss misses him.”

Her voice cracked as she leaned forward onto the bathroom counter. “He was family, sweetie.” She was way too tired and way too used to the concept of an AI having feelings to think about the fact that she was having a private conversation with a building to soothe its anxiety.

“I feel like… there’s something I should feel.”

Squeezing her eyes shut, Mickey let her head fall forward. “There’s a hole there, and you know exactly what’s supposed to fill it, but what’s supposed to be there is gone and can’t ever come back in the same shape it left. We’ve got Viz, but he’s…”

“Different.”

“Yeah.” She bit her lip and sniffed against the prickly, fuzzy feeling in her nose.

“You miss Mister Barnes.”

“Yeah, sweetie. I do. I miss him a lot.”

FRIDAY didn’t answer for a minute, and then quietly said, “I found something in the archives. I think Mister JARVIS liked listening to Mister Barnes when he played the piano. There’s a little over seventy hours of recordings, if you’d like me to play them. There’s a few where the audio patterns appear to indicate he is singing as well.”

Mickey sucked in her lips and pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. “…thank you, FRIDAY, you’re an amazing sweetheart, and don’t let anyone tell you different. Start with those?”
“Right away, Miss.”

***

“Call me if this turns into a Code Green, okay?”

“You got it, big guy.” Bucky gave Bruce a casual salute as he jogged down the ramp after the rest of the team. “Mickey?”

Lips pursed, she slotted her Glock into the RONI and gave Bucky a hard look. “Ready. Let’s take this bastard down.”

“Easy there, babydoll.” While Mickey had every right to be angry after learning about what HYDRA’s ‘doctors’ had done to children, they couldn’t risk her compromising the mission.

The team crept toward the giant ship, maintaining cover as long as possible.

Once inside, they communicated silently using a series of impulses over the comms. Bucky tapped his ear four times – in position. He tucked the stock of his rifle into his shoulder and leaned over the railing of the catwalk as Steve and Thor stepped into place behind Ultron.

“Stark is- he’s a sickness!” Ultron hissed at the man he’d just kicked down the stairs.

“Oh, Junior.” Tony thudded onto the walkway between the other two Avengers. “You’re gonna break your old man’s heart.”

Ultron turned to face him, red eyes glowing. “If I have to.” The Maximoff boy tossed the vibranium rod off to the side as they squared off, sweeping the deck with his eyes to spot any weaknesses.

Glancing around, Bucky checked to make sure that Clint, Mickey, and Natasha were all at their marks - they stepped into place just in time.

“We don’t have to break anything,” Thor offered, trying to reason with the giant robot.

“Clearly, you’ve never made an omelet.”

Despite the situation, Bucky found himself stifling a smirk and busied himself with repositioning his rifle as the others spoke. The twins’ accents caught his attention – Sokovian. The failed state, the laughingstock of the Soviet Union. Bombed out by Stark ordnance, half of it by the Winter Soldier’s hand. No wonder they had a bone to pick.

Steve stepped forward, his voice deepening and his Brooklyn drawl falling away as he slid effortlessly into his Captain America persona. “I know you’ve suffered.”

Retching, Ultron shook his head. “Captain America. God’s righteous man, pretending you could live without a war. I can’t physically throw up in my mouth, but-”

“Open it one more time, Sparky, and I swear t’God, I’m gonna format your fuckin’ hard drive so hard you see assembly code and then I’mma make you run on Vista,” Bucky growled. He stared challengingly into those red orbs as they turned to face him.

“Poor, brainwashed toy soldier.” Ultron practically purred as he smirked at Bucky. “Oh, to see what they did to you… it would break your Captain’s heart. Do you really think you’ll ever be at peace with what you’ve done?”

Throat dry and tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth, Bucky slid the bolt on his rifle home and
lined up his shot.

“If you believe in peace,” Thor said, stepping forward again, “then let us keep it.”

“I think you’re confusing peace with quiet.”

“Yuh-huh. What’s the vibranium for?” Tony cocked his head to the side as much as the suit would let him.

“I’m glad you asked that, because I wanted to take this time to explain my evil plan.”

Mickey swore vividly when Ultron raised a hand, red beams of light lancing out of his fingers to throw Tony bodily into a steel door.

Bucky couldn’t drop down and join the fight without losing the advantage of having eyes up high. And without a clear shot, he was useless.

“Oh, fuck everything.” Swinging the rifle onto his shoulder, he took a running jump along the catwalk he was on, sprang forward, rolled out of the fall and came up with his fists raised only to be suddenly sprawled out on the ground, his jaw aching. “What the-”

“Yeah,” Steve grunted, slowly picking himself up from a similar fate. “That’s the fast one.”

“We got a 20 on the girl yet?”

“Not yet. Do a sweep.”

“Roger.”

The rifle was far too big for the close quarters of the ship, so Bucky had to rely on his SIG once more. Pacing down the hallway, he cleared every corner, calling out zones as he passed through them.

The last hallway he cleared opened into another large cargo hold, and something slammed into him from the back. He went tumbling forward, fingers sliding off the railing as he tried to grab it, and suddenly he was falling, falling so quickly, the wind whistling in his ears, white everywhere-

Mickey.

He stood over Mickey, a hand on her shoulder, but… it was wrong. She was wrong.

Her hair was long, silvery gray, arranged over the pillow of the sterile white bed she lay in. She looked up at him, those deep brown eyes surrounded by papery, wrinkled skin, and her head rolled to the left as she closed her eyes.

Trembling metal fingers found their way to her neck to feel her pulse flutter, falter, and stop.

Bucky raised his head, mouth falling open as he tried to remember how to breathe, and saw himself in the mirror across the room.

Thick brown hair and tortured eyes stared back at him from the face of a thirty-year-old.

Steve.

The name on the gravestone at his feet. A large shield was carved into the granite. Morita’s own marker sat to his left, Dugan and Gabe to the right.
Bucky rested a hand on the stone; his knees felt weak and unsteady under him. A strangely familiar weight swung on his arm and he looked down to see thick leather straps and a large round shield, with silver and blue stripes surrounding a red star.

Natasha.

She lay in his arms, a trickle of blood draining from the corner of her mouth. Her skin was as pale as the white-blond hair that stuck to the blood on his armor.

Gunshot wounds riddled her stomach and chest.

Sam.

Wings torn off, goggles broken, Sam lay in a tangled heap in front of Bucky. His legs splayed at unnatural angles, and he wasn’t breathing.

Tony.

He watched his own hand close around the shining arc reactor in Tony’s suit, rage and fury written across the smaller man’s face. Repulsors whined, flared, and fired, and searing pain shot through Bucky as both men fell.

Tony’s eyes stared at him sightlessly as Bucky slowly turned his head to the left, neck shaking as unbearable pain seeped through his shoulders.

His arm was gone, a charred and smoking stump of twisted metal and wiring in its place.

Faces and fates flashed through his mind.

The only reason the team found him, deep in the bowels of the ship and buried in the cargo nets, was because of the screaming.

Shuddering, shaking, eyes flickering around, he didn’t respond to anyone until well after they got him onto the jet. Natasha wasn’t much better, though she was able to nod or shake her head as Clint spoke to her softly in the cockpit.

Bruce tugged the rough black blanket tighter around himself, avoiding the eyes of anyone who looked his way.

Steve simply sat, jaw clenched and eyes dark, trying to blink away his own nightmare.

Thor paced restlessly, rubbings his hands over each other as he chewed his lips, his anxiety written across his face.

“The news is loving you guys,” Hill said, her voice echoing through the comms. “Nobody else is.”

Bucky closed his eyes, swallowing hard, turning his face into Mickey’s neck as her arms tightened around him.

“There’s been no official call for Banner’s arrest, but… it’s in the air. ”

“The Stark Relief Foundation?” Tony glanced over at Bruce, worried.

“Already on the scene. How’s the team?”

Looking around the jet, Tony couldn’t keep the pain out of his eyes. “Everyone’s…” Tony’s eyes
settled on Bucky, curled up as small as he could be, arms pulled tightly into his chest; Mickey held him tightly as she leaned her head against his. They were on the floor, Mickey’s back against the wall, pieces of Bucky’s armor neatly piled to her left. Her own eyes were haunted as she tried to push away the visions of her Marines dying under her hands.

“We took a hit,” Tony continued quietly. “We’ll shake it off.”

“Well, for now, I’d stay in stealth mode. And… stay away from here.”

Leaning towards the communications console, Tony sighed. “So, run and hide.”

“Until we can find Ultron, I… don’t have a lot else to offer.”

“Neither do we.” Tony turned away, worry deepening the lines on his face.

Bucky let out a shaky breath, trying as hard as he could to focus on nothing else but the feeling of Mickey’s fingers slowly combing through his hair.

***

Bucky’s dog tags bounced heavily against Mickey’s chest as she ran, feet pounding, arms pumping. The treadmill whirred under her, the constant drone keeping her thoughts from wandering too far.

A dull click echoed through the small weight room, quiet footsteps padding over to her.

“Hey.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “Steve.”

Holding up a pair of grocery bags, Steve tilted his head and raised his eyebrows, looking far too much like a giant puppy. “Just got back from the farmer’s market. Wanna help me make dinner?”

A glance at the treadmill display made her shake her head. “I’ve got another two miles.”

Steve’s eyes looked at her sadly and he nodded, then turned to leave. He paused at the door, and then said, “I know what you’re trying to do, Micks. Trust me, it only hurts worse in the end.”

She didn’t respond, simply focusing on the thrum of the treadmill and the dog tags swinging in front of her.

***

Bucky sat on the roof of Clint’s house, knees pulled tight into his chest. He watched the sun set into the rolling fields to the east, eyes heavy with fatigue as they flickered to see shapes and faces that weren’t really there.

The team had taken a hard hit. Clint was the only one to escape the girl’s mindfuckery. Thor was gadding about somewhere else now, and the conversation drifting out of the room Natasha and Bruce were in was a harsh reminder of how broken every member of this supposedly elite team really was.

Steve didn’t have to say anything for Bucky to know that he was being haunted by the ghosts from the war – a dance that never happened, and the PTSD he would never leave behind.

The weight of Tony’s mistakes was sitting heavily on those slender shoulders, and his eyes looked bruised and bloodshot from so many sleepless nights blaming himself.
From the way Natasha looked at Bucky now, he knew she remembered her graduation. He knew she remembered screaming his name over and over again. He knew she remembered being forced to watch as they beat him bloody for trying to rescue her.

Bruce still wouldn’t talk about what he’d seen, but he didn’t have to. One monster to another; instant understanding had passed between them.

Bucky pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes until purple and silver stars erupted on the backs of his eyelids. His breath hissed between his teeth as he tried to quell another panic attack.


A ladder thunked up against the side of the house and Fury’s head appeared over it. The old spy rested his elbows on the roof for a moment before pulling himself the rest of the way up and sitting next to Bucky.

A callused, brown hand smacked Bucky’s down as he moved to salute as best he could, sitting on a sloped roof. “We’re both retired, son. No need for that.”

Shrugging, Bucky rested his chin on his arms, and gave Fury a curious look.

“I don’t know what it was that Maximoff made you see, but I can make a pretty good guess.”

Bucky raised an eyebrow.

“You’re not that different from Tony, you know. When we caught Strucker, Maximoff made him watch everyone die. The only one that didn’t eat it was him.”

That caught his attention. He raised his head and turned so he could look directly at Fury.

“Now, I’ve read your medical reports.” Fury waved a hand dismissively. “Seems like whatever anyone throws at you, you walk it off and keep moving.”

He shrugged. More or less.

“I’d place good money that you saw yourself outlive at least a few of us, and right now, you want answers and maybe even a little revenge.”

His face must’ve told Fury what he needed to know, because the old soldier reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a chip key. Bucky took the key from him gently.

“Don’t make me regret this, Soldier.”

***

Steve had moved into the guest room in Mickey and Bucky’s apartment within a few days of finishing off Ultron. They’d maintained that arrangement when the team moved to the new Avengers Compound upstate. Continuity and normalcy was vital for both of them, and it helped that the new apartment looked and felt almost exactly like the one in the Tower. Neither of them slept much in each of their beds, though; Mickey usually dozed off wherever she was after exhaustion finally claimed her, more often than not nestled under Steve’s arm and wrapped in a thick fleece blanket.

The blankets still smelled like Bucky.

She moved around the kitchen now, putting away the dishes they’d just washed, wearing a pair of
his sweatpants cuffed to the right length with the drawstring pulled tight around her waist.

“Has anyone ever told you how adorable it is when you wear his clothes?” Steve teased her as he slid one of the large glass dishes onto a shelf she couldn’t reach.

“Makes me feel like he’s still here.”

Steve nodded, the mirth draining out of his face. “I know. I miss him, too. We’ve got the best people on it. Hardison said he’d call us as soon as he had anything even resembling a hit. There’s been a lot of false positives to sort through.”

“What if one of them wasn’t false?”

“You checked them all over yourself, Micks. Don’t fall into that hole.” Steve took the dish towel from her hands and hung it on the stove bar. “Trust me. We’ll find him.” Pulling her into a hug, Steve closed his eyes and rocked her gently back and forth.

“No, we won’t.”

“Mickey…”

She pushed away slightly, looking up at him with red eyes. “He sent me an email the day he disappeared. It had a video in it. He said we wouldn’t find him until he wanted to be found.”

Ignoring the chill that spread through his veins, Steve looked at her, eyebrows drawing together. “Well… do you trust him?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Then trust him to come back when he’s ready. He did the same for you.”

***

When he finally made his way back into the house, Bucky knew everyone was asleep. The men had taken the young boy’s room, rolling out camping mattresses and sleeping bags. There was an empty mattress and bag next to Steve, but Bucky turned away from the door and ghosted further down the hall.

Natasha and Mickey were both fast asleep on the twin guest beds. He took a minute to watch them, the peaceful rise and fall of their breathing.

Slowly, gently, he sat on the bed next to Mickey. Reaching out a hand, he brushed his knuckles over her cheek and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear from where it had flopped into her face. Either she was going to cut it short again soon, or she really was going to grow it out this time. A lopsided smile twitched across his lips; only time would tell, but he hoped he would be there to see it.

It would take a few more hours for the lines to fade from around her eyes, for her brow to fully relax. What they’d seen in the HYDRA base, what they’d seen with the twins, and what they’d seen with Ultron had sickened her in a way that it could only affect someone who’d pledged her life to helping others. When Bruce had mentioned that it looked like the twins had volunteered, Mickey swore vividly and left the room.

But now, even with the day’s worries lining her face, she looked younger and more peaceful than she ever had since they left Portland.
If he did this right, if he followed the trail to the right places, she could be that happy every day for the rest of her life. And if he did this right, he might have a small chance of sharing that with her. Might.

He leaned over and kissed her gently on the temple, then pulled out his phone and set it on the nightstand next to her bed. His dog tags clinked as he pulled them off his neck, the two small rectangles pinging softly off of the thin white gold band. Undoing the clasp, he slid the ring off, then closed the chain and lowered his dog tags down so they rested on the screen of his phone, chain pooling on top of them.

The ring slipped easily into place on his finger, and the feeling of something missing moving back into place made him smile sadly. After he flicked the hologram on, cloaking his arm, he paused, then unclasped his watch, medical bracelet, and the monitor from his wrists and set them on the nightstand as well.

Last, he pulled out the small sketchbook with its little pencil tucked in the spine, and opened it to the first blank page. He did a quick, cartoonish sketch of himself hugging Mickey, then marked the page with the pencil, setting that next to his phone.

He stood, padded silently back to the door, and turned to look at Mickey one last time. That’s when he realized Natasha was watching him.

They stared at each other for a few seconds before Natasha swallowed, clenched her jaw, and gave him a small nod.

His lips pressed into a thin line and he curled his right hand into a fist and touched it to his sternum before turning away.

Without another look, he left the house and vanished into the night.

***

For the fourth time that day, curled into a ball under a heap of blankets and nestled into the bay window despite the sunlight, Mickey stared at her phone. Bucky’s pocket sketchbook sat open next to her, the quick sketch of a promised hug making a bittersweet pang shoot through her.

She swept the playback bar all the way back to the beginning and hit the play button again.

Bucky’s face filled the screen, a brilliant sunset behind him.

“Hey, babydoll.” He smiled at her, but it didn’t reach his eyes. The words sounded forced, swerving at random through various accents as he struggled to speak through the walls in his head. It had taken her two playthroughs and a look at the timestamp to realize where and when he’d taken the video. “I’m gonna have to keep this short because... words aren’t working so well right now.

“Maximoff... she got in and made scrambled eggs up here.” Tapping his head, Bucky looked off to the side. “Showed me some stuff that I’d just as soon never remember. But, I can’t forget it. And... I gotta do something. Something that...” He took a deep breath and looked back at the camera. “Something I can’t be Bucky Barnes for. There’s stuff I gotta do where I can’t let those bloodstains follow me back.

“So... um... yeah.” He reached around his neck and dragged his dog tags over his head. “I’m leaving these with you. And, um, everything else that... makes me Bucky. Um... Christ.” The chain wove through his fingers as he used his free hand to wipe across his face. He turned away again and Mickey saw tears shining on his cheeks. “So I’m leaving Bucky with you. I’m trusting you with...
with me. Where I’m going, what I’m doing, there’s a chance I won’t remember Bucky after it. So… I’m gonna need your help. I’m gonna need you to help me remember, if I forget again.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose, sniffing wetly, eyes scrunched shut. “I’m really, really scared,” he admitted quietly. “But I don’t have a choice. I gotta do this. I gotta do this. Please don’t look for me, because I can’t be found - I won’t be found - until I’m done. Please don’t look for me.”

Turning back to the camera, Bucky did his best to smile. “I love you, Mickey, babydoll. Always. Remember that. I’m leaving everything I am with you. I need to be Prizrak again for a bit. I gotta do this. I love you, always. Always.”

And just like the last twenty times she’d watched it, Mickey had to wipe tears out of her eyes.

The door to the apartment swung open and Steve walked in, an urgent look in his eyes as he looked around for Mickey.

“Over here,” she croaked.

Steve jogged over to her, putting a hand on her shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze. He handed her a tablet with Hardison’s face on it.

“Hey, Alec.”

“Hey… um… are you okay?”

Mickey sniffed, wiped under her nose, and choked out a laugh. “No. Not even remotely.”

“Big hugs, girl, from the whole team. Sophie’s reaching out to all her contacts and we got Eliot scouring his own network for any leads.”

Parker’s head popped up next to Hardison. “We have something for you!” she said with her characteristic lack of reserve.

“Oh? Do tell.”

Hardison rolled his eyes, giving Parker a fond smile before switching his video to show Mickey and Steve some grainy surveillance footage. A tall, fit man with thick brown hair and broad shoulders was on camera for all of one second, glancing over his shoulder as he ducked into a small store.

“Where was this?” Steve asked quietly.

“Rome. There isn’t enough data in the face for a positive ID, but…”

Mickey reached out, fingers hovering just over the screen. “It’s him,” she whispered. “He swings his left shoulder just a little different when he walks.”

“And that knee injury he got from that kid on Delancey in ’37, it healed up but he never lost that little roll in his step.”

Hardison’s face looked back at them again. “I emailed the clip to you, as enhanced as I could make it, plus a location pulled from the camera. It’s stale, so it might be another dead end, but it’s the best I’ve got. I just… I wanted to send you something.”

Nodding, Mickey brushed at her eyes again. “Thanks. To all of you. I really appreciate it. Give everyone hugs for me.”

She signed off and set the tablet in front of her, looking up at Steve. “It’s him.”
“Yeah.” The smile he gave her was tired and strained, but full of hope. “But realistically? It’s late and we’re both exhausted. Nothing’s going to happen until the morning anyway. We’ll all do better with a full night’s rest.”

Her eyes were thick and gritty as she rubbed at them. “Yeah, you’re right.” Swinging her legs off the low bench seat, Mickey stood and shucked off the blankets in a pile. Steve split off in the hallway, using the guest bathroom, and Mickey trudged into the large master bathroom to get ready for the night.

Half-asleep already, she went through the motions of her nighttime routine. Brush through her hair, ‘that disgusting mint explosion’ on a toothbrush and across her teeth, and a quick scrub of her face. She upended the jar of her fish oil pills, muttering under her breath as she whacked it firmly with the heel of one hand to dislodge one from the clump.

Cupping water from the faucet in her hand, Mickey swallowed down the pill just as Steve rushed into the bathroom.

“Wait, Mickey, don’t-” He held up his phone, alarm in his eyes when he saw the label on the bottle.

“What? There a recall or something?”

“It’s the Inhumans. There’s Terrigen matter in the pills.”

Mickey scoffed. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Is that a new bottle?”

“Yeah, just bought it today.”

Steve’s eyes widened and he lunged forward, grabbing Mickey’s wrist, then recoiled as if he’d been burned. “Oh, no. No, no, no. Fuck. No.”

As she looked down at the thick black substance spreading over her hands and body, Mickey’s breath caught in her throat. She had one last second to stare pleadingly at Steve as he babbled into his phone, frantically begging the person on the other end for help.

The black closed in over her eyes, cutting her off completely.

Chapter End Notes

And now we officially enter Act III. (I think? I’m not sure how that works in prose.) I’m sorry about the cliffhanger! It'll all get resolved next week, I promise.

Two references in this chapter:
1. Bucky and the ’66 Mustang on the Car & Driver magazine - reread the flashback at the beginning of Chapter 13
2. "Open it one more time, Sparky, and I swear t’God, I’m gonna format your fuckin’ hard drive so hard you see assembly code and then I’mma make you run on Vista.” Assembly code is basically one level above binary, it's a set of extremely simple commands that tell the computer where to put data, how to move it around, etc. All programs eventually get distilled down to assembly code, through various filters like the operating system and the kernel. Also, Windows Vista is the laughingstock of the
Windows series for so, so many reasons, including how horribly it ran, how hideous it looked, and the fact that they loaded base model netbooks with an OS that was heavy enough to need gaming specs to run properly.

3. Ultron's "Poor, brainwashed toy soldier" line comes directly from the comics. I couldn't not use it.

From what research I’ve been able to do, the hand gesture Bucky uses when saying goodbye to Natasha basically means loyalty and a promise. Correct me if I got it wrong, though.

The briefing room at the beginning of the chapter (which will show up a few more times) isn’t as much of a room as it is a section of the open-plan common area. It’s the same table that the team sits at when Ross bitchslaps them with the Sokovia Accords in Civil War. Pictures below:
Thank you all so much for your feedback and kudos so far! It really helps boost me up
and motivates me to keep writing these amazing characters :)

Prizrak has hit 100 kudos! Thank you all so much, this means the world to me! *big squishy cuddles*

So… um. Yeah. Mickey’s an Inhuman. (I actually hadn’t planned for that, it just sort of happened while I was writing?) I messed with the Agents of Shield continuity slightly to work with the story better, just a note.

**Trigger Warnings:**
- Self-imposed isolation
- Questioning identity and purpose
- Mention of dysmorphia/dysphoria

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve scrubbed his hands over his face and stared, bleary-eyed, at the holographic files hovering in the air in front of him. He swept two of them to the side to dismiss them and reached out to pull another one towards him. Expanding it, he stifled a yawn and picked up the cold remnants of a cup of tea that Natasha had handed him hours ago.

“*Captain Rogers*?”

“Mm? Yeah?” He blinked, waving his hand to dismiss the holograms. “What’s up?”

“*Agent Johnson is here, as you requested. She’s asking for access to the containment room.*”

Sighing, he stood and tugged his hoodie back up onto his right shoulder. He knew he looked like hell; they all did. No one had slept properly well in weeks. Everything ached and he could have sworn he’d aged ten years in as many days; it certainly felt like it.

His sweatpants swished across the hardwood as he padded toward the room. As much as they all wished it wasn’t necessary, having a Hulf-proof, Wanda-proof, Vision-proof… everything-proof… room had been enough of an asset that the arguments against it petered out long ago.

“Daisy.” He greeted the slender young agent as he approached her. She shuffled her feet slightly, reaching up to tuck her wavy brown hair behind one ear.

“Hey, Cap.”

Leaning down so he could line up his eye with the retina scanner, Steve splayed a large hand against the wall to support himself.

“Rip me a new one if this isn’t my place to say, but… you look like shit, Rogers.”

The scanner beeped at him and a green light blinked cheerfully. “It’s fine. I feel like it. Don’t think I’ve actually slept in three days, I’m kind of running on caffeine and Power Bars at this point. There’s so much going on right now that it’s hard not to feel like I’m drowning.”
"Tell me about it. We’ve got our hands full doing damage control with all of the new Inhumans on
the board."

"Yeah," Steve chuckled as he led Daisy down the sterile white hallway. "I’m actually surprised you
were able to make it here, and on such short notice."

"Two weeks isn’t short notice. I wish I could’ve come out sooner. Fitzsimmons offered, but…"

"Yeah, I know." The two scientists were brilliant, but the last thing they needed was needles and
instruments. Pausing, Steve turned to Daisy, and he could practically feel the thick purple bags
under his eyes and the itch in his skin as his scruff grew into a beard. "She hasn’t been super
receptive to people lately, so… don’t be put off if she’s… volatile."

"I just got back from dealing with a guy who can melt metal." Daisy stepped forward and rested her
hand on the knob for the door into the observation room. "I think I’ve got this."

When Steve didn’t follow her, she turned to look back over her shoulder, an eyebrow raised.

"She… um, she doesn’t really want to see me." He held up his left arm, swallowed, and drew back
his sleeve. Angry red marks in the shape of a handprint dug into his skin, wrinkling like partially
healed burn scars. The necrosis had healed in a few days, but the pain was still every bit as intense.

"Damn." Daisy turned back to the door and drew in a deep breath. "Okay, here we go."

She stepped into the observation room and quietly shut the door behind her, then crossed over to the
white plastic chair tucked under a narrow desk along the wall. The desk sat below the large window
that spanned the wall shared between the observation and containment rooms.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, wearing clean white pants that fell mid-calf and a white short-sleeve
shirt that wrapped around and tied at her side with strings, Mickey had her eyes closed and her hands
loosely curled in her lap. The standard amenities for any holding facility were there: bed, toilet
partitioned off by privacy glass, sink, open closet with more of the same white outfit she currently
wore, and a table and chair.

A glass of water sat on the table next to a large book that lay open, off-white pages facing the ceiling.
The book’s leather cover was worn and damaged, faded spots of decorative ink showing on the
edges of the pages.

Close to a dozen notebooks were stacked on the other side of the table, small colored flags poking
out to mark certain spots. A few smaller sketchbooks lay in a pile next to those, pencils and brushes
and pens neatly arranged in a set of cups nearby.

A wooden wine crate sat at the foot of the bed with its lid askew and BUCKY written on it in bold,
black letters. Daisy sighed softly; it wasn’t that much of a secret that the Winter Soldier and his
handler were involved. While the outright fear and aggression towards him had eventually faded
into grudging, uncomfortable tolerance, there were many that felt that allowing him to become that
close to essential personnel was unwise, to say the least.

As far as she was concerned, Daisy didn’t give a shit. Barnes was still nowhere to be seen, and the
poor girl was hurting. Let her have her keepsakes.

The bed was neatly made, perfect military creases and folds showing that Mickey was doing her best
to grab any sense of control she could and hold onto it with both hands. This was good, very good.

Taking another deep breath, Daisy reached forward and pressed the button to activate the intercom.
“Agent Draymond, it’s Daisy Johnson.”

There was a long pause before Mickey opened her eyes, the large brown circles almost as dark as the black hair growing back in under patches of bleach and color. “You’ve been here for several minutes already.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.” Daisy leaned forward to press another button, releasing the opaque filter on the glass partition. “Had to see how you were doing, first.”

Mickey’s mouth twitched up in a friendly smirk. “It’s okay. The others are still freaked out that I can… sense people, now. And if I’m honest, it still freaks me the fuck out, too.”

Chuckling, Daisy raised up her hands. “Yeah, I know exactly how you feel. Looks like you got through everything relatively unscathed, though.”

She wasn’t expecting the hysterical bark of laughter that quickly turned into a frightened sob. Shoulders hunching forward, Mickey gave Daisy a scared look. “You say that now.”

Daisy leaned forward on the desk. “Walk me through it. Everything. I’m here to help you.”

“You can’t. No one can help me, kid.” Steeling herself, taking a breath, Mickey looked down at her hands. “I kill everything I touch.”

“I know, I saw Steve’s arm.”

Mickey’s head snapped up. “Then you know why I have to stay in here. I can’t risk that again.”

“Draymond-”

“Please leave. You’re trying to talk me into getting control over this, learning how to use it, shit like that. Well, you can’t control what I’ve got. So, please. Leave.” Her voice was hoarse and she wouldn’t meet Daisy’s eyes.

“Michaela…”

“I can’t, okay? I just- I just can’t.” Wet and thick, Mickey’s voice dropped in pitch slightly.

Daisy chewed on her lip, frowning, before responding. “Well… I’ll be honest, having someone with your powers-”

“Curse, you mean.”

“Powers,” Daisy corrected firmly. “Having someone with your powers would be really handy right about now. So, whenever you’re ready, just let me know, okay?”

There was a long, awkward silence, and then Mickey raised her head, swallowed, and looked at Daisy with a level of sadness that she’d never seen before.

“Primum non nocere.”

Blinking, Daisy leaned forward. “…what?”

“Primum non nocere,” Mickey repeated, whispering the words this time. “I solemnly pledge myself before God, and these witnesses, to practice faithfully all of my duties as a member of the Hospital Corps. I hold the care of the sick and injured to be a sacred trust, and will assist the medical officer with loyalty and honesty. I will not knowingly permit harm to come to any patient. I will not
partake of nor administer any unauthorized medication.”

Daisy listened, stunned, as she realized what Mickey was saying.

“I will hold all personal matters pertaining to the private lives of patients in strict confidence. I dedicate my heart, mind, and strength to the work before me. I shall do all within my power to show in myself an example of all that is honorable and good throughout my naval career.” Mickey looked up at Daisy again, eyes shining. “I can’t leave. I can’t…”

Wordlessly, Daisy stood, blanked the window, killed the intercom, and left the room.

***

Steve worried at his thumbnail with his teeth as he, Daisy, and Tony listened to the recording of Mickey’s words. He couldn’t help but pace back and forth, the cold hardwood against his feet helping to ground him. The common area felt empty, subtle echoes ringing through the expansive area. When playback was complete, Tony dug a knuckle into one eye.

“Primum non nocere,” he mumbled. “It’s Latin for ‘first, do no harm,’ more or less. It’s an aphorism derived from the Hippocratic Oath.”

“What was the next part she said, though?”

Steve cleared his throat. “Hospital Corpsman’s Oath. She would’ve taken it after completing her training in the Navy.”

“So, she’s saying…”

“She’s saying that letting her out of the containment room would do the world more harm than good,” Tony finished flatly.

Unconsciously rubbing at the wound on his arm, Steve winced as he remembered Mickey’s frantic scream and how she’d recoiled as if she’d been the one injured, scrabbling backwards into the corner of the room and refusing to let anyone else touch her. The plants they’d had in the apartment, along with all the fresh fruits and vegetables and even the goldfish swimming in Wanda’s tank in the unit above them, had all withered and died.

“She won’t learn how to control it without a lot of practice. Trust me, I know.”

“I trust you.” Sitting down on the couch, Steve pressed the heels of his palms to his temples, massaging gently. “But honestly? It’s Mickey’s choice. As much as we disagree with her, there isn’t really anything we can do to force her to come out of containment.”

“Has anyone thought to look into how these powers work?”

Tony nodded, handing Daisy the tablet that was sitting in his lap. “Seems to be an energy transfer of some kind. She can absorb energy from any living organism; that’s how she caused localized tissue death in Steve’s arm. Had it been anyone else, they would’ve lost the arm.”

“I need to get this to Fitzsimmons.” When Tony and Steve both nodded, Daisy tapped a few buttons and sent off the data. “If the energy’s transferring in, it’ll need to transfer out at some point, either through burning calories or something else. If she keeps holding it all in, it’s going to hurt her eventually if she absorbs too much.”

“Like your arms.” Steve held up his own arms, palms facing upward. “I remember reading that you
fractured the bones and dealt with a lot of bruising at first when the shockwaves kept directing inward.”

“Just like that, yeah.” Distracted by the readouts on the tablet, Daisy flipped through screen after screen. Eventually, she looked back up at Tony. “I’d like to try something, but I need your approval first.”

“I’m all ears.”

***

Daisy had left in a hurry after only two days at the Compound, summoned off to another important mission. She left detailed instructions behind, as well as contact information for her and everyone else on Coulson’s team.

They hadn’t been able to make any headway against Mickey’s stubbornness, though when she’d asked if he wanted to come into the containment room directly that morning, Steve dropped everything and ran to her.

Now, he sat at the small table with her, the soft white light from the ceiling disorienting as it messed with shadows and depth perception.

“How’s your arm?” Mickey asked, nodding towards it.

In answer, Steve tugged his sleeve up and rotated his hand back and forth to show her the progress his body had made healing the strange wound.

“If that’d been anyone else…” She dropped her head onto the table, cradled in her arms.

“Well, my ma always did tell me I’d stubborn my way out of dying.”

“Don’t even joke about that right now, Rogers.”

“Sorry.” Mollified, Steve fussed with the cuff of his sweatshirt sleeve. “How’re you doing?”

“Same as ever,” was the muffled reply. “Haven’t killed anything in a few days, so I’ll take the win.”

He couldn’t help but snort softly. “You know, that’s kind of how I felt for the first few weeks after the serum. Kept ripping things apart, like doors and whatnot. They ended up just taking off all of the doors in the areas I needed to go to. Latrines got curtains; cheaper and easier to replace. That was popular.”

Tilting her head to the side, Mickey fixed him with one skeptical brown eye. “You? Unpopular? No.”

Steve chuckled and shook his head. “I’m serious. I broke everything and I was ridiculously clumsy. The chorus girls hated me at first because I was always stumbling around the stage. And, well…”

He cleared his throat, blushing slightly. “I felt really weird about my body for a long time. I still do, every once in a while. Sometimes I’ll look in the mirror and expect to see that skinny little kid from Brooklyn, but instead I get… this.” Gesturing vaguely to himself, Steve stared at the table.

“Dysmorphia.”

“Hm?”

Mickey raised her head and gave him a tired smile. “Dysmorphia. When you feel like your insides
don’t match your outsides, sort of. Happens a lot to people like me before we transition. We’ve got documented cases going back ages, but the diagnosis is relatively new.”

“I’ll have to do some reading on that.”

“There’s a really good textbook in my room. Third shelf down, on the right. Red spine, black lettering. Chapter seven.”

Nodding, Steve visualized the bookshelf and knew exactly which volume she was referring to. “I’ll take a look at that one this evening. Thank you.”

The conversation lulled until Mickey leaned back in her chair, fingers tapping softly on the table surface. “Any news about Bucky?”

“Well…” Steve chewed the inside of his cheek as he formed his response. “Nothing direct. But I had a long talk with his doctors. They’re worried that the effects of dropping his medications cold turkey could cripple him in the short term.”

“He took his travel supply with him, and the Tower was cleaned out when we got back, remember? He should be set for about three months at his current dosage levels.”

The unspoken question hung in the air between them until Mickey finally sighed.

“He knows how to taper them off safely. He’s already been weaning off the benzos and the SNRIs for a while now, and if he’s careful with his dosage then the mood stabilizers and anticonvulsants should be fairly straightforward to taper down. I taught him how to make tinctures so that’ll help him split the pills up.”

“Are you sure it’s a good idea for him to be off meds like that?”

“Do we have much of a choice?” Mickey shot back, then closed her eyes and sighed when she realized she’d spoken with more venom than intended. “Unless there’s a way we can get him a dead drop of brain drugs, then I’m not sure what we can do. The only way for him to get anything like what he needs while he’s off the grid is through the black market, and he knows that stuff’s dirty. He’d sooner deal with the withdrawals than go there.”

“He won’t approach a drop like that, not if he thinks he might be monitored.” The sweatshirt cuff frayed under his fingers.

“We’ll need to trust him to manage it himself, then.”

“Captain Rogers, Agent Draymond, there’s something you might want to take a look at.”

They both glanced up at the ceiling out of habit, and Steve motioned to the blank wall to his left. “Pull it up.”

A rectangular display faded into view on the wall, showing them news footage from the previous afternoon. Three men had been dumped at the front door of the police station in Birmingham, trussed up with zip ties and unconscious.

“Reports indicate that these men are arms dealers associated with the Ten Rings.”

The next clip was from that morning. A large abandoned factory in the mountains of Austria not far from a ski resort had imploded, crumbling inward on itself in a perplexing explosion attributed to instability in the foundation.
Mickey looked over at Steve as the footage cut to a second facility, this one a small, ancient wartime bunker in the middle of Austria. The footage was from just a few hours ago, the voiceover reporting that local wildlife had crossed over what could only have been a booby trap, still active after so many years.

“Friday?” Steve’s voice was tight, almost choked.

“Yes, Captain?”

“Please monitor any similar situations and notify me immediately. I don’t care if I’m asleep. Cross-reference any news reports with the Invaders’ mission logs as well as the Winter Soldier’s known locations dating back to 1945.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Steve…”

The blond pointed at the screen. “That was the factory that I rescued him from, where Zola was experimenting on him. We sort of blew it up, but SHIELD’s known for a while that HYDRA set up a small installation there in the late 60s. The second one, the bunker… that was the first place we hit as the Invaders. That was our first mission.” He looked at Mickey, his face draining of blood. “He’s destroying everything in chronological order.”

“With all due respect, Captain, I reckon he’s taking a different path.”

FRIDAY then showed them live footage of a large building in Brazil - or, rather, what had once been a large building. It was now nothing more than a smoking crater of rubble. A black flag with the HYDRA skull emblazoned in red flapped despondently from where one corner was caught between two chunks of wall. The edges were charred and tattered.

***

Mickey looked down at the strange gloves skeptically. “You want me to do what with these?”

“Put them on,” Daisy told her through the intercom. “They’re suppressors, just like the ones I wore at first. They dampen your powers. This is just a prototype; once we confirm that they work the way they’re supposed to, Fitzsimmons will send schematics to Stark for integration in your field suit.”

Crossing her arms and shaking her head, Mickey leaned back in her chair. “I’m not going back into the field. You can’t risk having a liability like me out there.”

Steve sighed and nudged the gauntlets closer to Mickey. “We need you.”

“I’m a combat medic, not the Grim Reaper! I’m supposed to fix people, not kill them!”

“Mickey, do you trust me?”

Her mouth worked for a few seconds, eyebrows furrowed, as she stared at Steve. “Wha- but- of course I do.”

“I trust Daisy and her team. So, you trust me, I trust them. Let’s give this a shot.”

Slowly, cautiously, Mickey reached forward and picked up the gauntlets. Sliding her hands into them, she tightened down the straps that held them in place and wiggled her fingers to shift things
around. Two large metal scales extended down the backs of her forearms, along with another metal plate on the back of each of her hands. The stretchy synthetic material of the inner gloves only came to the first knuckle on each finger, leaving the rest of her fingers exposed. On the inside of each forearm was an intricate pattern of thin wires that wove and wandered across the fabric.

“Looks almost Asgardian.”

Daisy grinned. “Yeah, we’ve had a few of their scientists helping us out.”

“How’s this supposed to work?”

“Well…” Steve shrugged, looked at Daisy, and then reached forward to touch Mickey’s hand.

She jerked backwards, trying to tug her hand from his grip, breathing rapidly, eyes wide. After a few seconds, though, she visibly forced herself to relax, staring in surprise at Steve’s fingers as they wrapped around her own.

Nothing was happening. No wounds, no darkening skin, nothing.

With a choked sob, Mickey fell forward into Steve’s arms, clinging tightly to the first person she’d been able to touch in three weeks.

He pressed his large hands against her back, rubbing slow circles over her shoulders, holding her close as she shook with relief. Murmuring quietly, Steve leaned his head on top of hers as the containment room door hissed open and Daisy slowly stepped in.


***

“Hey, kid.” Tony sauntered into the containment room holding a muffin pan, each cup full of dirt. He patted and squeezed Mickey’s shoulder as he sat down next to her. “How you holding up?”

“You do realize I turn thirty-two in a week, right? I’m not a kid.”

“You’re younger than me, which makes you a kid, and you didn’t answer my question.” Leaning forward on the table, Tony nudged Mickey with one of his elbows. “Come on.”

She sighed and turned to look at the muffin pan. “I’ll admit I’m looking forward to being able to control… this.” Holding up her hands, she wagged her fingers around. The black cloth gloves swished softly as she did. “I kind of miss sunlight.”

“Yes, you’re looking a little pale, and this is me saying that.” They both chuckled a bit, and Tony scooted the muffin pan closer to her. “Science experiment for you. Good old harmless lima beans. See if you can make ‘em grow.”

“…lima beans.”

Tony smirked and raised an eyebrow. “Yep. Lima beans.”

Taking a deep breath, Mickey pursed her lips and exhaled a thin stream of air. “Here we go.”

She held her hand over the cup closest to her, frowned, and sucked in her lips. After several uneventful seconds, she scoffed, dropped her hand, and shook her head. “It’s not working.”

“Try again.”
“Tony, we’ve been over this. I can’t control it. That’s why I’m still wearing gauntlets that look like they belong in a fucking Ren Faire.”

“Hey, you can do this.” Tony rested a hand on the back of Mickey’s neck, tilting his head down as he looked at her. “I know you can do this. And, seriously, I really don’t want to be the one to tell the Abominable Snowman that I let his girlfriend sit and mope in solitary for, like, six months.”

“Weeks, Tony. It’s weeks, not months, and it’s only been four.”

He smiled encouragingly at her and tapped the muffin tin. “When you’ve got the training wheels on, you only drain something if you’re scared or angry. So, emotions play into this somehow. How about thinking about something that makes you happy?”

Mickey chewed on the insides of her lips for a minute, eyes unfocused as she picked at her fingernails. She closed her eyes, let out a small sigh, and held her hand back over the muffin tin. Wrinkles formed at the corners of her eyes as she squeezed them shut, lips tightly pursed, jaw clenched firmly. Her eyes only opened, wet and glistening, when Tony’s hand tensed suddenly on the nape of her neck.

Every single muffin cup had a pale green sprout rising out of it.

Exhausted, Mickey let her hand drop back to the table and took several deep, shuddering breaths. “I’m guessing that came directly out of me because damn, I feel like I just ran a marathon.”

Tony’s voice was thin and quiet as he stared at the sprouts. “Yeah, there’s a reason we’re starting small.” Clearing his throat, he blinked a few times. “So, um. Hold on to that memory, and let’s use it again after you’ve had some time to rest, okay?”

Nodding as she leaned forward to rest her forehead against the table, Mickey couldn’t help but grin. “I didn’t kill something. I actually didn’t kill something.”

The chuckle that greeted her words was warm and friendly. “Focus on the positive, kid. You just made something grow.”

They sat like that for a long minute, Tony rubbing her neck gently as Mickey rested against the table. Finally, she rolled her head to the side and looked up at him. “How’d you know that would work?”

“Because it works for me,” he answered quietly. “When I’m stuck on a project and I get frustrated, Bruce taught me to step back and remember something that made me happy, or calm, or something like that. Find your happy place and all that hippy-dippy bullshit, but it works. And it helps, it really does.”

The corner of Mickey’s mouth twitched upward. “What do you think of?”

Tony closed his eyes, the shallow grooves on his face deepening as he smiled sadly. “Well, it’s complicated. Um, when Pepper fell and I thought she was dead… and then she wasn’t…”

“It felt amazing.”

“Yeah.” He ran a hand over his face. “Yeah, it did. So, I just think of all the times Pepper’s been awesome. How about you, kid? You light up like a Christmas tree whenever you talk about ice skating with our favorite cyborg.”

Mickey laughed softly. “Contrary to popular belief, my life does not revolve around Bucky. He’s a big part of it, especially since it’s kind of my job, but…” Reaching up, she scratched her fingers
through the hair behind her ears and gave Tony a shy grin. “I thought about the first time a stranger called me ‘she.’ That was fucking awesome.”

“That reminds me,” Tony said brightly. “How’s Ricky doing?”

“Last I heard, healing up fine from his surgery. It ended up costing less because he decided on something different. He’s using the rest of the money to help pay for his boyfriend’s hormones.”

Tony nodded approvingly. “Good to hear. Good to hear.” Waving at the tray of seedlings as he stood, Tony added, “I’m going to leave these here. Keep working on it, okay?”

Raising an eyebrow and giving him a tired but cocky grin, Mickey crossed her arms. “You’re gonna get so sick of lima beans by the time I’m done.”

“Planning on it,” Tony called over his shoulder as he left the room.

***

The sun warmed her back as she bent over the planter, hands buried in thick, dark soil. A small wrinkle formed between her eyebrows as she concentrated, and after a brief pause a tiny green stem wormed its way out of the dirt.

Sitting back on her heels, Mickey smiled and wiped the back of her hand across her forehead. She brushed the dirt off her hands and watched the little sprout grow until it was six inches tall and covered in delicate, soft leaves. Tired satisfaction wrote itself across her face, and she looked down at her hands as she adjusted the large leather cuffs on each wrist, smaller versions of the dampers that Daisy had given her.

She’d started working in the expansive garden on the roof as soon as she moved back into her apartment. As she moved among the plants, poking her fingers into the dirt to check the moisture levels, every so often she’d reach out and rub her fingers over a leaf. The plants those leaves belonged to, often drooping or mottled with small brown spots, straightened and stretched their now-healthy leaves towards the sky.

By the time she made her way back to the apartment, she was carrying a modest harvest of fresh vegetables in a large basket.

Steve’s head poked out of the third bedroom they’d set up as a library and art studio when he heard her moving around in the kitchen. “Oh, you’re back. How’s the garden looking?”

“The tomatoes are nice and healthy. I’m still trying to figure out why the roses keep getting spots, though.”

He walked over and started poking through the basket she’d set on the counter. “Ooh! Zucchini! I’ve got a great zucchini bread recipe for you to try; it’s my mom’s. Oh, there’s a package for you, by the way. It’s on the table.”

Curious, Mickey set down the potato she was washing, dried her hands, and ambled over to the table. An unassuming large white box was positioned in the dead center of their large round dining table. “There’s no shipping label. Who’s it from?”

“No idea, it was here when I got back from training. I’m not expecting anything and my birthday isn’t for another week and a half, so I figured it was for you.”

“Huh.” Mickey picked it up and shook it experimentally; it was heavy. Pulling out one of Bucky's
Benchmade that he’d left behind, Mickey flicked it open and neatly slit the tape securing the top flaps down. She snapped the blade shut again against her leg, stuffed the knife back into her pocket, and rifled through the off-white paper that crinkled in the top of the box. She froze when she saw what was inside. “Steve…”

He was at her side in a moment, peering into the box. “That’s weird.”

Slowly, Mickey lifted the figure skates up, running her thumb over the smooth white leather. “They’re Edea skates.”

“Hm?”


Steve frowned thoughtfully. “Well, maybe this is his birthday present to you. It’s a few days late, but he’s always been shit with calendars.”

“Heh. Maybe.” Setting the skates back in the box, Mickey picked it up and walked back to her room. “I’m going to try them on, make sure they fit.”

“If it really was him, you know they will,” Steve called after her.

She closed the door quietly behind her and set the box on her bed, then sat next to it and slid her feet, first the left, then the right, into the skates. Wiggling her feet around, Mickey couldn’t help but smile – perfect.

As she rifled through the box for the paperwork and anything else that might have come with the skates, a small white card slid into view. She picked it up and turned it over to see an address written on it in neat, precise letters. A quick search on her phone showed her a small community rink with what looked like quality ice, thought it was understaffed and struggling financially.

It was less than five miles away. Mickey chewed her cheek as she thought about it; this would be the first time she’d left the Compound since she’d taken that stupid fish oil pill.

As she crossed her legs, the weight of the skates on her feet helped her make her decision.

Ten minutes later, she pulled out of the Compound garage, Bucky’s Harley roaring under her as she opened the throttle. Her backpack was heavier than usual and Bucky’s riding jacket was almost stiflingly hot in the summer sun, but she didn’t care. She’d be out on the ice in minutes anyway.

There was a handful of cars in the parking lot, and she rolled the bike in between a beat up old pickup truck and a Honda that looked like it had led a rough life. After locking down her helmet, Mickey shrugged off the heavy leather jacket and slung it over her shoulder as she walked toward the entrance to the rink.

She had to take a moment to let her eyes adjust to the dim lighting after being outside. The attendant leaned back in his chair behind the desk in the cramped booth, feet up and ankles crossed as he tapped away at a game on his phone. Clearing her throat, Mickey stepped up to the desk.

The boy glanced up, then pointed to the board behind him. “Five dollars.” When Mickey slid the bill towards him, he shooed her away with one hand.

Shaking her head slightly, she found herself an empty table and set her backpack down. There was barely anyone out on the rink; a group of three kids stood in front of a college student doing his best impression of an instructor, several preteens slid about as they giggled, clinging to each other, and a
man moved fluidly through sweeping arcs and circles, loose and relaxed as he slid smoothly through a few basic steps.

Mickey laced up her boots with the ease of practice and spent a minute rocking from side to side in them to get used to how they felt.

She glided out onto the ice without another moment’s hesitation, settling quickly into a rhythm as she stroked back and forth, testing the feel of the new skates. After several laps she shifted her hips and spun around, leaning into a set of back crossovers that took her around the turn. Continuing this way for several more laps, Mickey only moved out towards the center of the rink when she’d finally gained enough confidence with new blades under her feet.

A wistful smile tugged up the corners of her lips as she pulled her arms in tight, spinning around, and then extended a leg out as she crouched on one skate. The instructor and his students were openly watching her as she skated, and after he’d herded the children off the ice and back to their waiting mothers, Mickey gained an unashamed spectator.

It didn’t take Mickey long to attract the attention of the other skater as well; he fell into step next to her as she straightened from another turn, the blond hair that fell just above his neck ruffling slightly. His beard, just a touch darker than his hair, was neatly trimmed and full and the corners of his green eyes crinkled as he smiled subtly at her. Broad shoulders and trim muscles filled out the red t-shirt he was wearing, and black skate boots were tucked under the cuffs of black jeans.

“Mind if I join you?” His voice was smooth, rich, and softened by a British accent, and she’d recognize it anywhere.

Mickey stumbled, her right toe pick catching on the ice, and strong hands reached out to grab her before she faceplanted.

“Jesus Christ, Bu-”

“Nick,” he told her with a wink. “My name’s Nick.”

She chuckled as he steadied her, and brushed her hair out of her eyes. “Of course it is.” Peering up at his face, Mickey noticed the subtle contouring and shaping he’d applied, just enough to make him look like a completely different person. Mickey grabbed his hand and tugged him forward. “Where the hell have you been?”

“It’s good to see you,” Bucky murmured evasively, keeping a few feet between them to maintain the illusion of being strangers despite their clasped hands. “I wasn’t sure you’d come.”

“Well, I found a new set of skates waiting for me on the table, so…”

He glanced over at her, eyes hopeful. “How do you like them?”

“They’re fantastic. It’ll take a few more hours to break them in completely, but I’m already liking them a lot.”

Bucky turned, pulling her into a waltz step and fixing her again with that soft, fond smile. “I’m glad to hear that.” Brushing his fingers over one of her wrist cuffs, his forehead creased slightly. “What’re these?”

“I’ve, um…” She reflexively pulled back, crossing her arms in an ineffective attempt to hide the cuffs. “They’re… I don’t want to talk about it. Not right now, not here.”
Confusion filled his eyes, but he didn’t press the issue. “Are you okay?”

“No.”

Bucky stopped, catching her by the shoulders, and frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing,” she replied, keeping her voice low. “Just the fact that you’re traipsing about blowing shit up while the rest of us are stuck running damage control for you – again.”

“No one knows it’s me.”

Biting her lip, Mickey rubbed at her eyes. “No one’s seen you in public since Ultron hit, and the media’s not stupid. Things start blowing up, people notice a pattern, and suddenly the team’s getting hammered with questions.” She looked up at him, finally letting her exhaustion show. “Hardison found footage of you. If you’re really determined to do this, you have to be more careful.”

He looked away and swallowed thickly. “I should probably go.”

“No- no, that’s- that’s not what I meant.” Taking a breath, Mickey tucked her arm in his and skated forward again. “I just- you’re skating on thin ice, pardon the pun. Ross and the Council are already rattling our cages about Bruce, it’s only a matter of time before they bring up-”

“What happened? Where-”

“He’s fine as far as we know, but he grabbed a jet and disappeared right after Sokovia. No contact since then.”

“…oh.”

“Yeah, Nat’s pretty upset. She’s blaming herself.”

Bucky was quiet for a few seconds before he spoke again. “She doesn’t love easily. It’s hard to feel like it’s okay to want things for ourselves, with what she and I have been through. Takes someone just as damaged as her to get her to open up like that.”

“We’re all damaged.” Mickey didn’t catch the concerned glance that Bucky shot at her cuffs.

“Well, for now, let’s pretend we’re not.” Sliding forward, Bucky neatly pivoted on his skates and took her hands. “Skate with me?”

“You’ve been practicing,” Mickey said with a grin, and he shrugged.

“It’s important to you.”

They moved effortlessly together, Bucky’s extensive dance experience and their day at the rink in Portland proving invaluable as he already knew the basics of the lifts, holds, and steps used in ice dancing. Eventually they had the ice to themselves, taking full advantage of it as they swept around the rink.

“So.” Mickey coasted to a stop along the wall and leaned against it. “You’ve been busy lately.”

Skates crunched on the ice as Bucky pulled up next to her. “I’ve had a lot to do.”

Sucking in her lips, Mickey picked at her nails before asking, “When are you coming home?” She looked up at those startlingly green eyes and blond hair - he was just this side of unfamiliar. “We- I-I miss you.”
“I know. I’m sorry.” Bucky sighed as he tilted his head back. “I can’t come home until the job’s done. I can’t be… him again until it’s done.” Looking down at Mickey, he smirked slightly. “Well, I’m making an exception for today, sort of. I had to see you. I can be Bucky again for a day, for you.”

“You know Steve’s going to be pissed if he hears about this and then you don’t show up for his birthday.”

“I know,” Bucky admitted softly. “I don’t know if I’ll even be in the same country, though. I have to follow the path wherever it leads me. I’m lucky I was able to make it out here within a few days of your birthday, let alone a week.”

Mickey pressed her hand over his, gently tracing the calluses and scars. “Promise me you’ll send him something?”

“If I know that wanker well enough, he probably needs some knockout juice. Is he sleeping at all?”

She looked away, sighing quietly. “Not really. None of us are. There’s a lot to do.”

Turning to face her, Bucky wrapped his large hands around hers, eyebrows furrowed with worry. “Tell me what’s going on. Please.”

They left the rink and walked to a small park a few blocks away before Bucky got his answer.

Biting her lip, Mickey reached towards a small weed that was shoving its way up between the roots of the tree they were sitting under. As her fingers brushed against a leaf, the weed shriveled and died. “That’s what’s going on.” She held up her wrists. “These are suppressors. Dampers. They keep me from killing everything around me. If I didn’t have these on right now…”

Bucky swallowed, eyes wide. “What happened?”

“You know Daisy? Coulson’s team? The Inhumans?”

He nodded.

“Terrigen crystals got dumped in the ocean. A trawler picked up a batch of contaminated fish and… yeah.”

Scowling, Bucky turned to stare out at the park in front of them. “Your fish oil pills. I saw it in the news but I thought you used a different brand.”

“They were out of my regular one last time I restocked. And I’m not the only one. There’s an underground war going on as people form into factions and fight for control over them – us.”

Bucky gently took one of her hands, tracing his fingers over the intricate wirework covering the cuff. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m… learning to control it better, at least.” Mickey touched the weed again with her other hand and it sprang back to life. The punch of fatigue in her gut still made her hunch forward, hugging her legs, but at least she knew it was coming now.

“…holy shit.”

“I can’t do much besides super-gardening right now unless I take off the dampers,” she muttered into her knees.
“Myshka… you could- you could heal people.”

Picking at the grass between her feet, Mickey shook her head. “It shouldn’t come with a price. Not like this.”

“How do you mean?”

“The energy has to come from somewhere. Right now, it comes from me. And even messing with tiny plants, it’s fucking exhausting. The amount of energy it would take to heal a broken femur or something…”

Bucky grunted unhappily low in his throat and circled his thumb gently on the back of Mickey’s hand. Even though the hologram made his left arm indistinguishable from his right, the coolness of the metal couldn’t be hidden completely.

“Oh, um…” Mickey glanced up. “Your medications. We’ve been trying to find a way to get you more.”

He didn’t look up from her hand. “I’m fine.”

“Don’t lie to me,” she scolded as gently as she could.

“I said, I’m fine. I’m managing.”

“There’s a difference between ‘managing’ and ‘healthy.’”

Green eyes shot up to hers, then looked away. “I’ve got enough to drop them down properly. Everyone wants me off them anyway.”

“The ones for your psychological stuff, yeah. I’m not so crazy about you being without your anticonvulsants if you’re going to be on your own. Especially without a tag.” She looked pointedly at the lack of bracelet on his left wrist.

“I’ve… I’ll be fine. Please trust me on this, babydoll.”

Reluctantly, Mickey nodded. “Okay.”

Bucky sighed heavily, squinting out into the park. “You should get back before they start asking where you are.”

“I told Steve I was heading to the rink. As long as I’m back before he’s done cooking dinner then it’s fine.” She gave Bucky a lopsided smile. “He didn’t like the idea of rattling around in his own apartment or room, so he’s using the guest room in the new apartment at the Compound. Everything’s just like it was in New York. I think you’ll like it.”

Helping Mickey to her feet, Bucky bit his lip as the corners of his mouth twitched upward. “That’s good. Steve shouldn’t be alone. Just tell him, if he makes moves on my girl…”

“You’ll kill him? Yeah, I think he knows.”

Bucky chuckled quietly. “Are you still taking singing lessons?”

“Whenever I can,” she reassured him. “I miss a week here and there, but Tony set us up with a video link so I haven’t had to leave the Compound.”

The rest of the short walk passed in companionable silence. Bucky had his thumbs hooked in his
pockets, his posture and gait different as he maintained the persona of Nick, British traveler.

As Mickey zipped up the riding jacket, Bucky smirked. He ran his hand affectionately over the gas tank on the Harley. “You’ve got your own leathers and bike, you know.”

“I know.”

Chuckling, he passed her helmet over and gently buckled the strap for her before resting a hand on her shoulder. “Ride safe.”

Her eyes crinkled as she smiled at him. “Thank you, for…”

Bucky leaned forward and pressed his lips to the helmet just above the visor. “Always.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m pretty sure this is common with a lot of authors, but I’ve injected certain parts of myself into each of these characters. Mickey inherited my love of skating, among other things, and Bucky got my love of cars. Unfortunately, a back injury (from doing dumb shit in gymnastics, never tumble without a spotter, folks) took me out of most sports when I was a kid, so I kind of live vicariously through fiction. I try to skate as much as I can, but the nearest rink is about 30 miles away *sobsob*
Rewind! We’ll be bouncing between our protagonists for a few chapters. This one starts off just before Steve and Mickey see the report about the Ten Rings arms dealers.

Trigger Warnings:
- Medication withdrawals, mildly unpleasant symptoms
- Animal injured offscreen
- Nightmares
- Homeless shelter

The man stepped into the dimly lit bar and glanced around before making his way to the seat nestled in the corner where the bar counter met the wall. Positioning himself with a full view of the place, he smiled at the bartender and quietly asked for a drink.

Several minutes passed as he slowly sipped the clear amber liquid, fiddling idly with the pale ring on his left hand. He noticed a blonde girl in the corner looking his way frequently and chattering quietly with her brunette friend at their small table. Making a concerted effort to avoid eye contact, the man turned to face the bar and tugged a small notebook out of his pocket. He spread it flat on the counter in front of him and began to leaf through the pages, left index finger tracing along as he read.

The brunette startled him slightly when she approached, but he managed to recover quickly. Snapping the book shut, he placed his hand over it in a subtly protective gesture.

“My friend thinks you’re cute,” the girl told him as she leaned onto the counter on one elbow. Her words lilted and drawled, pouring through her Birmingham accent like honey. The man glanced over her shoulder, biting his bottom lip slightly.

“Does she now?” His voice was deep, with traces of an Eastern European burr. The corner of his mouth twitched up a small smile and he shook his head slightly. “My apologies, I am only here for business, and aside from that, I am…” Glancing down at his hand, he tilted his head with a one-shouldered shrug. “…currently spoken for.”

The brunette sighed and turned away. “Figures. All the lookers are either taken or poofs.”

He nearly choked on his drink, stifling the cough in his sleeve so that she didn’t turn back to look at him. Face burning red, he took a moment to collect himself before returning to the book under his hand.

The door swished open once more, admitting three men into the bar. The one in front was of average height and build with thick black hair combed back over his head and a dark gray suit that cut a sharp profile as he strode meaningfully towards the bartender. The other two were little more than standard issue bodyguards pretending to be civilians. Heavy black boots poked out from under their jeans, well-worn and recently cleaned.

The man at the bar followed the newcomers with his eyes as they checked out a set of darts and set up at the dartboard nearest him. Once the rhythm of the game was established, he reached up to
scratch his ear, deftly sweeping two fingers under his jacket collar as he did, and flicked his wrist before smoothly turning the motion into a glance at his watch.

The shorter of the two walking crew cuts jumped back from the dartboard, clutching his hand to his chest. Where his fingers had wrapped around a dart a moment before to tug it out of the board, a thin black knife now pierced through the dead center of the bull’s eye.

The suit and his two guards turned, scanning the bar with narrow eyes until they centered on the man casually nursing his drink, one elbow on the counter, long legs crossed at the ankles as he watched them with relaxed interest.

As they approached him, the guards took up positions flanking their leader and the suit crossed his arms. The man on the barstool set his drink down and inclined his head, breaking the tense silence.

“Let’s talk business.”

The four men left the bar within minutes, leaving behind a bill neatly folded and tucked under the first man’s drink.

An hour later, when the girls finally made their way out the door, the blond one frowned, turned to the right, and nudged her friend. “Kelsey, come on.”

“For the love of God, Claire, you can’t just-”

“I heard something,” Claire hissed as she snuck a glance around the side of the bar, down the alley between it and the next building.

The man from before stood – barely – both hands against the wall, one knee bent as he leaned heavily forward. His head hung down between his arms and his shoulders heaved as he panted. After a few seconds, his whole body tensed and he retched hollowly, dropping to his knees as he wrapped one arm around his stomach.

Kelsey reached out to grab Claire’s arm just a moment too late.

“You alright, mate?”

The man looked up, deep lines on his face, eyes bright, then dropped his head down again. “Not even remotely.”

Crouching next to him, Claire dug in her purse and offered him a few antacid tablets, which he waved away with a shaking hand.

“It won’t help, but thank you.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

He laughed hollowly and pulled a hand over his face. Muttering something to himself in Russian, the man stood shakily and turned to lean back against the wall. “I will be fine. I promise.” He dug into the inside pocket of his jacket and produced a small plastic container. As he poked around in the container with a finger, Claire heard him speaking softly and realized he was counting something.

It was clear from his expression that he wasn’t entirely satisfied with what he found, but he took a small white tablet from the container, snapped it shut, and dropped it back into his pocket. He swallowed the tablet dry, then closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the wall with a quiet sigh.
The girls looked at each other again, and Kelsey finally succeeded in dragging Claire away from the strange foreign man taking pills behind a bar.

***

The Soldier ran. He ran, and he ran, and he ran. The explosive was unstable, hastily rigged, and would likely take down the entire side of the mountain on which the facility perched so precariously.

Thick cloth wrapped around his shoulders, pulled up over his nose and mouth in a makeshift mask, and his brown hair was flattened by the wind as his legs and arms pumped. Two more miles, he told himself. Two more miles and you should be safe.

A violent shock wave jerked the ground out from under his feet, sending him tumbling gracelessly to the side. He crashed into a tree and the wood groaned from the force of the impact. Hissing in pain, the Soldier picked himself up and crouched there on one knee for a few seconds as he waited for the world to stop spinning. As valuable as every second was, he couldn’t run if he didn’t know which way was up.

The rumble of the rockslide had already begun and he glanced over his shoulder, alarm in his eyes. Staggering to his feet, he resumed his breakneck run only to skid to a stop when he heard a strange whining noise. He swept his head around, pinpointing the source when the noise happened again.

A small dog, a puppy no more than six months old, was frantically nosing at what had to be its mother; the larger dog wasn’t moving or breathing. The agitated puppy stumbled around and whimpered, licking at its mother’s ears.

With a start, the Soldier noticed that the puppy was favoring its left front leg, which was mangled, twisted, and caked in blood. He swore quietly and knelt next to the puppy, sweat beading on his forehead as he forced himself to reach towards it.

With a quick motion, he balled his hand up in the scruff of its neck and lifted the puppy up. Teeth latched onto his left hand, struggling to find purchase on the smooth metal as the Soldier hauled the writing body up and pressed it to his chest.

As he ran, he tugged the large cotton scarf from his shoulders and face, wrapping the puppy tightly to prevent it from struggling.

He didn’t slow until he reached a small one-room cottage, kneed open the door, and walked into what he’d been using as a base of operations and a home for the past two weeks. Setting the growling bundle of fur, teeth, and cloth down on the table, the Soldier quickly shucked his combat gear and grabbed the large first aid kit he’d stolen the week before.

It took some effort to extract the puppy’s injured paw while still keeping the rest of it restrained. Working quickly but gently, jaw clenched and eyes wide and sweating bullets, the Soldier injected a local anesthetic and began to clean the wound. Every time the puppy twitched or whined, he jumped and had to take a second to steel himself again before resuming his work.

After a nerve-wracking half hour, he tied off the last stitch, slathered the sutures with antibacterial ointment, bandaged up the injured leg, and sat back in his chair to give himself a chance to remember how to breathe.

His eyes never left the dog as he moved to the sink to wash the blood off his hands and sterilize the tools he’d used.
Giving himself a few minutes to drink some water and wolf down an energy bar, the Soldier sat at the table again, watching the shallow rise and fall of the puppy’s side as it moved weakly.

He lifted its hind leg – the puppy was female. She pulled her leg away from his touch, growling softly, and he instinctively reached forward and stroked his hand gently down her side. When he realized what he was doing, he froze; dogs were dangerous. Dogs meant pain and fear.

But this little wisp of a thing, barely large enough to cradle in the crook of his arm, lay on her side defenseless and shaking. She opened her mouth and her tongue lolled out, and the Soldier frowned as he saw too-pale gums.

It took him a few minutes, but eventually he had a thin chicken broth warming on the stove. While he waited for it to reach the right temperature, the Soldier stripped out of the remainder of his sweaty, stained gear and pulled on loose flannel pants and a t-shirt. The dog whined at him again and looked at him with glassy eyes as he brought the broth over to the table along with one of the large plastic syringes from the med kit.

He swallowed thickly, eyed those sharp white teeth with apprehension born from experience, and forced himself to sit back down next to the dog. Slowly, he filled the syringe, then lifted her head with his left hand and slid the tip of the syringe between her teeth.

As he fed the broth to her in small, measured increments, he murmured soft, soothing words that crossed over between languages at random. His left thumb brushed over the downy fur under her eyes, stroking gently while she drank down the broth.

The Soldier’s hands still shook slightly as he held up the puppy’s head, unable to completely fight off years of conditioned fear. Despite that, though, as he sat down to review the latest batch of intel he’d gathered that night, curled up in front of the small fire crackling away in its little iron grate, he found himself absently stroking the puppy’s ears as she lay curled in his lap.

Her injured leg was held close to her chest, bound in place with bandages to prevent any further muscle damage. Eyes half open, groggy from the carefully dosed painkillers he’d given her, the puppy nuzzled against his leg and slowly wagged her tail.

With a small resigned sigh, the Soldier opened a new tab in the browser on his laptop, and began searching for veterinarians within a reasonable walking distance. The Handler was going to be thrilled when he brought a dog back to base after mission completion. Absolutely thrilled.

***

Chewing his lip as he subtly tried to scrape the blood and dirt out from under his nails before the German veterinarian noticed, the Soldier leaned into the corner of the exam room while he watched the puppy – his puppy – get a thorough looking-over.

“<Well, aside from the fact that she’s underweight and she’ll never put weight on that leg again, she’s in remarkably good health.>” Straightening, the veterinarian gave the puppy an affectionate scratch on the head. “<Whoever stitched her up did a good job.>”

The Soldier shrugged. “<I had some medical training in the army. I figured dogs aren’t that different from people, when it comes to that.>”

“<You’ll need to keep an eye on it, watch how it heals. If it gets infected, she’ll need it amputated.>”

Unconsciously, the Soldier rubbed at his left shoulder. “<Understood.>” He paused and reached
out to stroke down the puppy’s side, as much to reassure her as it was to reassure himself. “<You said the end of the day, right?>”

The doctor nodded at him. “<We’ll give you a call when she’s up and about.>” When she noticed his hesitation to leave, she smiled. “<She’ll be fine, Herr Bruskin. Spaying is a routine procedure.>”

“<Right. Sorry.>” The Soldier laughed awkwardly and let himself out of the exam room. He had roughly four hours to complete his next task.

Counting off the building numbers as he meandered down the street with his hands in his pockets, the Soldier finally found what he was looking for. He pushed the door open, ducking his head slightly as he did.

The receptionist in the small office gave him a put-upon look. “<If you’re looking for the homeless shelter, it’s two blocks east.>”

“<I’m a client.>” He had to work to hide how much her remark had stung. “<I have an appointment with Doctor Zeigman.>”

Waving him through, the receptionist turned back to her computer without giving him a second look.

It didn’t take the Soldier long to find the correct office. When he did, he knocked quietly on the door frame and poked his head inside. The thin, balding man glanced up, then took a look at the calendar on his desk.

“<I’m sorry, I don’t believe you’re on my schedule.>”

The Soldier stepped into the office, closed the door behind him, and triggered the device in his pocket to short out the security cameras. “I’ve been on your schedule for a very long time,” he growled, leaning forward onto the doctor’s desk. “Now, this can go one of two ways.”

“Wh- what do you want?” Zeigman’s accent was still every bit as thick as it was when he’d overseen the Soldier’s transfer to America.

“Information. If you give me what I want, I’ll make it painless and it’ll look like a heart attack. If you don’t get me what I want, well…” Releasing the hologram on his arm, the Soldier slowly drummed his fingers on the wood desk. “I want names and last known locations of every psychopath who worked for you.”

“I don’t- I don’t have that- I’m not-”

He leaned forward, narrowing his eyes, and growled, “Don’t bullshit me, Zeigman. I know you’re still active. Start fucking writing.”

Ten minutes later, the Soldier left the office with a piece of paper neatly folded in his hand.

A trip through the library with carefully worded searches gave the Soldier reason to relax slightly. Every name checked out. And if they knew he was coming? Well, as much as he’d never play with his prey once caught, he couldn’t say he didn’t enjoy the hunt.

***

Kneeling down, the Soldier adjusted the last of the straps around Tripod’s leg, testing them to make sure they’d hold firm. He gave her a quick pat on the shoulder and stood, stepped back several paces and then whistled to get her attention. “Hier.”
Tentatively, Tripod shifted her weight forward, testing out the strange contraption that the Soldier had put onto her leg. A thin, curved piece of wood arced down from the stump at her elbow, secured in place with straps travelling up the rest of her leg. He’d stuck a thick rubber pad where her paw would have been to give her better grip. The first few steps she took were awkward and off balance, but eventually he was able to lead her around the large open space in the hold of the Quinjet, crooning encouragement at her the whole time.

He dropped to his knees, held out his arms, and clicked his tongue at her. Enthusiastically, Tripod ran over to him and crashed into his chest, knocking him over onto his back. The Soldier laughed, scrubbing his fingers through her wiry fur as she thoroughly licked every inch of his face.

“Braves mädchen,” he said, rubbing over her ears. “Braves mädchen.” Smiling, he stroked his hands over her face and marveled at her stunning mottled coloring. The wonderful ladies at the vet in Denmark had told him she was probably a shepherd and pit bull mix, and called her a brindle. They’d been so gentle and kind to her, spoiling her rotten while she recovered from the surgery to remove her paw.

He reached into his pocket and fished out one of the gooey treats that she loved so much. Nudging Tripod away, he got back on his knees and held up the treat.

“Setzen.” He waited for her to settle, then raised his empty hand up, palm facing the roof of the jet. “Hup.” Shifting backward, Tripod raised her front legs in the air and pushed up slightly. “Braves mädchen. Gib laut!” She barked sharply, and the Soldier tossed the treat into the air. Jumping, Tripod caught it, wagging her tail a mile a minute.

He praised her, stroking her muzzle in that way that she loved that made her close her eyes, and leaned down to inspect his work on her prosthetic. It was rudimentary but functional; he’d have to replace the wood segment every so often until he could find a way to form metal to the correct shape, but it looked like it served her well enough for now.

“<Come on, girl.>” He led her into the cockpit of the jet, continuing to speak to her in German. “<It’s time we moved on to the next target.>”

***

Standing in the aisles of a grocery store in Spain was the last place the Soldier expected to learn how close his bond was with his unexpected companion.

He’d bought her a red service dog vest almost immediately, allowing her to stay at his side at all times. Her leash clipped to a sturdy harness via the large ring between her shoulder blades; he hadn’t been able to stomach putting a collar on her, so the tags hung from another ring he’d sewn onto the front of her harness.

Tripod sat calmly at the Soldier’s side as he stared at the stupidly large number of choices for boxed macaroni and cheese. “<It’s just cheese and pasta,>” he muttered, scowling at the boxes in his hands. Rolling his eyes, he tossed the box in his left hand into the basket at his feet and set the other one back on the shelf. Tripod stayed at his side the whole time through the checkout, dutifully ignored the excited child behind her, and padded along quietly beside the Soldier as they made their way back to the motel room he’d rented for the week.

No one looked twice and the disheveled young man with a grocery bag swinging from his arm and a service dog at his side, and that was exactly the way he wanted it.

Motel room door locked behind him, the Soldier tossed the food onto the small table – nothing
perishable, not until he could return to the jet. Most of it was protein bars, jerky, and dog food, with a small jar of protein powder and a few creature comforts like chocolate and the mac’n’cheese. He reached up, stretched, and pulled his right arm over his head to loosen the muscles still sore from last night’s raid.

Tripod whuffled quietly at him and he immediately knelt to unclip her vest and harness. When she pawed at his knee, though, he knew she wanted more than that. “<What is it?>”

Nudging forward, Tripod pawed at his leg with more urgency and licked his nose. She grunted at him again and slid her muzzle into his hand, drawing his attention to the subtle tremor he hadn’t noticed. The dog was decidedly insistent as she kept nudging his chest with her nose. A quick check told him his pulse was starting to rise, and he wrinkled his nose when a harsh smell invaded his senses.

“…fuck.” The Soldier hauled himself to his feet and tugged his sweatshirt over his head, pulling his t-shirt down from where it rode up his back. He kicked off his boots and emptied his pockets, shaking his head to clear away the all-too-familiar buzzy sensation behind his eyes.

He barely managed to get onto the bed before his muscles began locking up. When Tripod jumped up on the bed next to him, he pushed her off, gasping out, “Warten.” Wait. Nervous, whining, she settled back on her haunches.

When he came to some time later, the Soldier realized the strange wet feeling on his face was Tripod’s tongue as she aggressively licked him. “Hey, hey…” Pushing her away gently, he rolled over onto his stomach, noticing with relief that he hadn’t messed himself this time around. It took several minutes for the realization of what had just happened to rocket through his brain. Raising his head, he stared at Tripod with one eye half open for several seconds before he allowed himself a quiet chuckle.

She sat there with her tongue lolling out and one ear flopped to the side, dark eyes fixed on his as her tail slowly wagged.

“C’mere.” The Soldier reached out and tugged Tripod into his chest, hugging the dog to him and patiently enduring another round of wet, slobbery kisses.

Later, with Tripod’s head in his lap and laptop on his knees, the Soldier flipped through the notes he’d taken after the raid. He shifted the heating pad on his shoulder and dialed it back a notch, then switched to his calendar.

The Handler’s birthday was coming up soon. For some reason, this Handler was infinitely more important than any he’d ever had before; he had an inexplicable desire to keep her happy personally as well as professionally. This put him in an interesting position, since his mission directive often conflicted with that desire. Sighing, he scratched at Tripod’s ears and earned himself a contented snort as she shifted around.

Orders were orders, but perhaps he could fudge them slightly.

A few quick keystrokes took him to an online store, and he wasted no time making his purchase. He switched over to the flight planning program and began laying out his vectors to upload to the jet’s computer the following day.

***

What many people, even those in the intelligence community, often forgot was that the Winter
Soldier wasn’t just a sniper. No, that level of technology and training would never be wasted on something so simple as a gunman, no matter his skill level. The Winter Soldier was an assassin: a master of subterfuge, espionage, infiltration, and untraceable kills. Handling a sniper rifle was only part of his vast skill set.

He wove through the crowd, swinging his shoulders to avoid bumping into the quickly moving pedestrians. His target was less than fifty feet ahead of him. She leaned against one of the columns in the subway station, classy and sleek in her fitted skirt suit. A black briefcase sat tucked behind her feet to keep it out of the flow of traffic.

As he neared her, he deliberately shifted his posture to cause the burly man approaching from the other direction to plow directly into him. The Soldier staggered to the side, carrying the momentum through, and faked a slip so that he knocked over his target.

“Oh my god, I am so sorry,” he gasped in a flawless Californian lilt, pushing himself up off the ground so that he could help her to her feet. Her eyes flickered in annoyance but she smiled at him anyway.

“It’s fine. Rush hour and all that.”

Reaching out to smooth the sleeves of her jacket but pulling his hand back awkwardly before he touched her, the Soldier let out an embarrassed giggle and bit his lip. “Really, I feel awful. Are you okay?”

She nodded and checked her phone. “Yeah, no harm done.”

“I- thanks. Sorry again. Um, have a good day?” With a stilted little half-wave, the Soldier turned and disappeared into the crowd. Five seconds later he pressed himself against the wall halfway up the stairs, turning to watch as she swayed on her feet, stumbled, and fell.

That was all the confirmation he needed before he jogged up the rest of the stairs.

***

The Soldier watched his Handler ride away, motorcycle rumbling, and hummed quietly with satisfaction. He’d reassured himself of the Handler’s health and well-being without violating protocol. Perhaps the rules could be bent more in the future.

He slung the bag containing his own skates over his shoulder and began the long walk back to where he’d left the jet.

Once inside and past his overenthusiastic guard puppy, the Soldier punched in his next set of coordinates and engaged the autopilot. He slapped together a dinner for the two of them: fresh vegetables and meat for the first time in days for him, and the usual puck of raw meat for Tripod.

She was growing quickly; her shoulders and chest grew deeper and broader with each passing day. Her puppy fluff had given way to the thick, coarse fur that now covered her body, and her muscles were hardening under the training regimen he pushed them through each day. Soon, very soon, he might feel comfortable with the risk of bringing her on a mission; she was definitely smart enough and well-trained enough, but he couldn’t bear the thought of her getting hurt again.

Upgraded each time she outgrew the old prosthesis, the leg she wore now was machined and powder-coated aluminum with a high-density rubber tread foot. Once she was fully grown he’d think about how to get one implanted so he didn’t have to rig straps around her leg each time. There was just enough bone left below the joint that she still had relatively good motor control, especially
after so much practice.

They’d settled into a routine by now; he’d feed them dinner, clear up any dishes, and settle down against the wall of the jet to look over intel and trawl through the day’s data as he planned their next move. Moving around on three legs nearly as well as she moved on four, Tripod bounced over to him and curled up at his side with a contented sigh. The Soldier’s hand moved automatically to her head, scratching between her ears as he peered at the laptop screen in front of him.

***

No matter how many times he counted out pills for each of his medications, no matter how many times he did the math, he never got the same answer. Frustration and impatience were two emotions he’d learned to combat long ago, but this was beyond even his ability to manage effectively.

His first stop after leaving the farm had been the Tower; without JARVIS, security was limited to personnel and standard equipment. The Soldier could have infiltrated the place in his sleep. He knew that the Handler and Captain would realize he’d been there after they saw combat gear, weaponry, and his entire backstock of medications missing, but that was a risk he had to take. After that, he did his best to vanish.

The Director had kept his promise of not tracking the jet or the Soldier, a small blessing that made his mission infinitely easier.

But this, this was a complication he neither wanted nor could afford. Letting out a frustrated growl, the Soldier flipped over the piece of paper he was writing on and started over. Each of his medications required an exact count, then dosage levels had to be computed for tapering down. He wasn’t naïve; this mission would likely last far longer than his supply of pills.

Working slowly and checking the numbers every step of the way, the Soldier scratched his pencil over the paper as he wrote out proportions and quantities. Two of the medications he could just drop halfway and then be done with after a month, but with the higher doses, the stronger medications, he couldn’t afford to be careless.

He chewed on the end of his pencil and tried to ignore the faint weakness and tremors in his hands, blinking away a disorienting shock that ricocheted from his tailbone to the base of his skull and back. Nausea and insomnia had become ever-present companions, and he’d even started having subtle, barely-there muscle spasms in his neck that made it devilishly hard to focus on anything or maintain eye contact while speaking to someone. His anxiety and panic attacks were becoming worse, and he dreaded the day he was done tapering off the seizure medications.

Once he was done with running numbers for each medication, he counted out the pills and checked his work, making sure he’d have enough. He allowed himself a small sigh of relief when most of them checked out properly. Two of them required another run through and he forced himself to focus, eventually coming up with the right numbers. Pulling out a fresh piece of paper, he quickly jotted down a plan with dates and dosage levels so that he wouldn’t forget.

His memory was far from what it used to be, after all.

Standing, he stretched and squeezed his eyes shut, rubbing at them with his fingers. Fuzzy disorientation like this would not be missed when all was said and done. He’d read online that supplements could help with the symptoms, but only if he wasn’t still taking anything. Hopefully his forced dosage drops would be manageable until then.

The Soldier whistled to catch Tripod’s attention. She raised her head up from where she lay...
sprawled on the large, plush bed he’d bought for her, a chew toy gripped loosely in her teeth. Dropping the toy, she trotted over to him, lifted her leg so that he could strap on her prosthesis, and waited patiently while he secured her harness and vest.

The run he took them on was short, leading out of the woods where he’d landed the Quinjet to a small community park. Children chased each other, laughing as they ran around the playground and swings, and the Soldier couldn’t help but smile fondly. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a tennis ball, drew Tripod’s attention to it, and made her sit before unclipping her leash.

Her tail wagged with a will of its own as she watched him wind up and let the ball fly with a picture-perfect throw. When he released her, she tore off after it, disappearing across the park as she chased down the ball.

She knew the drill by now; wait for release, fetch ball, bring it back, drop on command, sit, wait for release. They quickly fell into a pattern and the Soldier switched to throwing left-handed every so often to change things up.

Speaking to her in German out of habit, the Soldier snuck her a treat and praised her quietly for a bit before drawing back his arm again to throw.

He misjudged the throw, however, and it was a small miracle no one was watching. The ball went sailing off farther than he’d ever intended, and several seconds later he flinched when he heard a distant crash and a car alarm. Swallowing, the Soldier glanced around guiltily and leaned down to clip Tripod’s leash back on. “<Time to go.>”

***

The Soldier tossed and turned in his sleep, unable to shake off the nightmare that gripped him. Running, running forever, blood dripping off of his hands, the roots of the trees rising out of the ground to grip his legs. Large tanks crashed through the forest behind him, vaporizing trees and the fleeing wildlife as they crushed everything in their path.

He tripped over something and rolled, bouncing, until he finally came to rest under a huge pine. Thick wooden bands grabbed at his limbs and he desperately writhed and struggled, trying to fight them off. One root found its way over his throat and began to squeeze, harder and harder, until the world started to fade to black.

Jolting awake, the Soldier sat bolt upright in bed as he panted, sweat cooling on his bare chest. He stared sightlessly at the wall in front of him for several minutes until the racing panic in his head finally died down. Looking around him, he took in his surroundings and realized with a cold rush of confusion that he didn’t know where he was.

To his left on the bed was the Handler, which confused him even more. He’d never shared a bed with any of his other Handlers in the past, even in single-room motels. He’d always been ordered to sleep on the floor. Tentatively, he reached out a hand to gently shake her shoulder.

The Soldier recoiled with a strangled yelp as her neck lolled loosely from side to side.

“No… no no no-” He tried desperately to wake her, even though he knew it would be futile.

Something wet and warm slapped across his face repeatedly and when he raised his arms to fend it off, he spun around and fell off the bed. His eyes flew open and he stared up at the concerned face of Tripod as she stood over him in the dark Quinjet, licking his face and whining.

Still panting slightly, the Soldier whirled around; no one else was on the air mattress he’d set up in
the starboard alcove. He closed his eyes, let out a deep, shaky sigh, and dropped back onto the mattress. The roof of the jet was just barely visible, and he pressed the heels of his hands over his eyes.

Tripod nosed her way under one of his arms, leaned against his side and rested her head on his chest. She whuffled quietly at him and licked his chin.

“<Thank you,>” he murmured, rubbing a thumb over the soft skin between her eyes. “<That was an awful dream.>”

After his pulse and breathing had finally calmed down, the Soldier got out of bed and dragged on the first clean clothes he could find. As he raised the tint shields on the cockpit windows, he winced at the bright sunlight that lanced into his eyes, and settled into the pilot’s seat.

Several times during the flight, he ceded control to the autopilot while he waited out the unpleasant symptoms of his withdrawals. When he finally saw the States again, the Soldier flicked the autopilot back on and trudged into the back of the jet as he stifled a yawn. Bleary-eyed and half-awake, he picked up his laptop and opened up the digital notebook he kept in lieu of paper, reviewing the intel he’d set aside for the upcoming mission.

He’d have to look at it again after another nap. The nightmares were becoming more frequent and worse, keeping him awake for days at a time. Before he settled down again, though, he made his way into the latrine and flipped open the large box of cosmetics, dyes, and other supplies to change his appearance.

Two hours later, he emerged with rich charcoal black hair and scruff, rubbing a stained towel over his head to dry it off. Thick red burn scars made up of latex prosthetics rippled their way over his arms and chest. Chuckling as Tripod gave him her usual suspicious sniff to reassure herself that he was still, in fact, her human, the Soldier tossed his towel into the box he’d designated for laundry and gratefully curled up under the pile of blankets on the air mattress.

“Wake me when we’re ten minutes out,” he ordered the computer groggily, and closed his eyes.

***

No one really spoke at the homeless shelter aside from the occasional quiet ‘please’ or ‘thank you.’ The majority of the noise filling the large cafeteria was from men eating ravenously, most of them sitting in front of their first full meal in a week. For the most part, none of the men made eye contact, keeping their heads down and doing their best to blend in. The young man in rumpled clothing with disheveled black hair and haunted eyes and his dog’s leash looped over his arm was no exception.

He carried his tray down the line, occasionally mumbling a quiet command to his dog as she followed him calmly. Even though she lurched slightly with each step, she moved surprisingly well for only having three and a half legs.

“Sir? Excuse me, sir?” One of the shelter staff walked up to him and gestured to his dog. “We don’t allow pets in here.”

“She’s not a pet,” he grumbled in a thick Boston accent. “I get seizures. ‘Sides, she’s got a vest on.” Turning back to the lady ladling corn out onto his tray, he put on his best smile. “Thank you, ma’am.”

He led his dog over to an empty table and sat down, holding his right hand at chest level in a fist to signal her to sit next to him. “Good girl,” he mumbled and snuck her a tiny bit of the chicken on his
tray. “Down, stay.” Behind him, another man with short brown hair and hard eyes that looked out of place in his youthful face watched carefully.

Despite the late summer heat, the young man with the dog wore leather gloves that had once been black but were now a rough, scuffed gray. As he worked his way through his meal, he reached into his dirt-stained backpack and pulled out an orange pill bottle. When one of the shelter staff approached him, he shook it and said, “Epilepsy,” turning it to show off the label.

Small scraps of chicken disappeared under the table at regular intervals, and he rarely went more than a few minutes without giving his dog an affectionate pat or scratch behind her ears. Scooting around, she slid her way under the table and out of the line of traffic, pressing gently against his feet. A heavy sigh drifted up to the man’s ears and without a moment’s thought he slipped her another piece of chicken.

“Sir?” A third staff member approached him and leaned into view.

“Don’t call me ‘sir,’ miss. I’m just a sergeant,” he answered automatically without meeting her eyes.

“Well then… Sergeant. I’d like to ask you to-”

“She’s registered. Piss off.” Focusing on his meal, the man choked down the dry, severely over-salted chicken. He ignored the woman until she left, then narrowed his eyes at her retreating back.

After returning his tray and stepping up to the back of the line that led towards the showers, the man swallowed nervously. The communal shower had over sixty spigots set into the wall, and he eyed them with visible discomfort. When his turn came he walked over to the empty spigot, hesitated for a moment, motioned for his dog to sit out of the path of the water, and began reluctantly stripping off his clothes.

Mottled pink and red scars covered his hands, arms, and chest. A few of the other men in the showers began muttering to each other when they noticed the faded Navy SEAL trident tattoo between his shoulder blades and the fragments of a skeletal frog peeking through the scarred skin on his left bicep.

Hunching inward in an effort to appear smaller, the man turned to face the wall and hid his face behind his arms as he scrubbed hotel shampoo through his thick black hair. Among the thin, wiry forms of men used to hard living on unforgiving streets, the SEAL stood out like a sore thumb. Fit and toned, despite his defensive and embarrassed posture there was little he could do to avoid drawing attention to himself.

Well before he’d even gotten into the line to exchange his bed ticket for a bunk assignment, three men passed him with a quiet, “Hooyah.” Dropping his pack at the foot of his new bunk, the SEAL leaned down and gave his dog some scratches while he looked around the room. His dog whined at him, bobbing her head slightly, and he immediately led her over to the door where he asked a staff member about the best place to take her out for a potty break.

When he returned, the young man with the defiant, hard eyes was sitting on his bunk.

“Can I help you?” The SEAL crossed his arms and fixed the interloper with a flat glare. Even under a bulky sweatshirt and loose jeans, he cut an imposing figure, towering over the other man.

“Just wanna talk, big guy,” the smaller man said, holding out his hands placatingly as he flashed what he must have thought was a winning smile.

The SEAL narrowed his eyes, his chin dipping down slightly. “Get off. My bunk.”
He followed the brunet with a suspicious glare as he scurried away.

Early the next morning, his dog woke everyone up with her panicked barking. The SEAL’s boots and pack were still under his bunk, his dog’s leash was still looped around the post, but there was no sign of the man himself.

It took the young brunet almost ten minutes to calm the dog, whispering soothingly to her in several languages until she finally responded to German. A review of the security footage showed nothing besides an obvious loop overwriting the five minutes surrounding the disappearance.

After several tense minutes, the brunet gathered the SEAL’s things and led the dog over to his own bunk. “I’ll take care of her until we can find him,” he told the shelter staff. “I’ve seen him at the park on Fifth a few times so I’ll camp there for a bit.”

He left his phone number with the shelter staff, simply giving his name as Shelley. “Tell him I’m a friend of Spencer’s, if he asks. He’ll know who that is.”

***

Four days later, media personnel descended like vultures after a nondescript concrete building on the outskirts of Quincy spat out over a hundred disoriented, malnourished, dehydrated people. One by one, the police crossed a large portion of the names off of their recent missing persons case list.

Once the last person was clear, a harsh ripping sound tore through the city as the building collapsed in on itself. Preoccupied with emergency medical services and the fact that a building had just imploded, no one noticed the exhausted, scarred figure stagger away through the settling dust.

Shelley watched the news report on his phone with a disinterested expression, idly stroking down the dog’s back as she curled into a tight ball at his side. His phone buzzed with an incoming call, and he raised it to his ear. “Y’hello?”

“Who are you, and where are you? And I swear to God if you’ve laid a hand on my dog I will-”

“Relax, man.” Shelley glanced down at the dog and grinned. “She’s fine. I’m at the park on Fifth. Got your bag and your boots, and I picked up some new clothes for you.”

There was a long pause, and then he heard a click as the man on the other end hung up.

Five minutes later, Shelley felt the hair on the back of his neck prickle up and turned to see the SEAL from the shelter standing behind him with a hand pressed to his ribs and mottled bruises and cuts covering his right arm and shoulder. Sunken, shadowed eyes feverishly stared at him, and his black hair was limp and stringy around his face.

The dog yipped and ran over to the SEAL just as he stepped forward and his knee gave out. “<Hey girl,>” he murmured in German, pressing his forehead to hers.

After several minutes, Shelley cleared his throat and tossed over the man’s backpack. “Clothes. There’s a public bathroom a hundred meters east, go clean up and get dressed. Trash crew comes in half an hour so no one’ll notice the latex if you work fast.”

The SEAL raised his eyes and looked at Shelley suspiciously. “Why are you helping me?” His voice was harsher than it had been in the shelter, ragged from dust and smoke and thick with a Russian burr.

“Eliot sent me.” Shelley leaned forward and pulled up his right sleeve, displaying the tattoo of a
skull, a knife, and a green beret. “Said you might need someone to watch your six.”

“I’m fine. Go home.”

“Like hell you are,” Shelley hissed quietly. “Listen, I get that you don’t trust me, and you definitely shouldn’t, not yet. But… Eliot said to tell you this: even the Devil himself needs backup.”

The SEAL - the Soldier - blinked at Shelly blankly several times before starting to chuckle low in his throat. “Fair enough, pal, fair enough.” He planted one last kiss between his dog’s eyes and grabbed the backpack before turning towards the bathroom. “Back in ten.”

He looked considerably more presentable when he returned, long sleeves and gloves covering his arms once more. Taking the leash from Shelley, the Soldier jerked his head to the side. “Come on. Jet’s this way.”

Chapter End Notes

Writing Winter Soldier Bucky was definitely interesting! It’s both a completely different facet to the character, and eerily similar in many ways. Exploring the different side of him was a very educational writing exercise.

The Winter Soldier’s outfit at the beginning of this chapter, shamelessly stolen from the concept art book
Tripod!
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

This chapter focuses mainly on Steve. It was definitely an interesting exercise, since he sees the world so differently than any of the other characters.

So I may have up and re-plotted the entire Act 2 for Book 2. Whoops >.> It’s better this way, I promise. Chapter 11’s in progress now, though, so no fear for writing delays or hiatus :)

Trigger Warnings:
- References to severe injury and deaths of unnamed offscreen extras
- Onscreen quiet death of unnamed minor character
- Non-injuring restraint of a character during a psychotic episode
- Traumatized character approached by medical staff despite warnings
- Shell shock/PTSD
- Flashback of the Invaders spearheading a mission into Majdanek, the Nazi concentration camp. Big bold warning right before this passage, I recommend squeamish or sensitized readers skip it.
- Survivor’s guilt and other types of damaging self-blame
- References to torture and maltreatment of a prisoner
- Flashback: Steve visits Bucky’s empty grave
- References to post-CA: Winter Soldier Bucky having trouble with solid food

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

With Mickey’s help, Steve had managed to keep his birthday party refreshingly small this year. Tony kept wandering off, muttering something about installing particle-level filtration in the ventilation; this had been a regular occurrence for several days now after the strange security breach that no one seemed to want to discuss. It also had the unexpected benefit of keeping the billionaire occupied with something other than building a guest list containing hundreds of people Steve had never met and probably didn’t want to.

Pepper was away on business once again, and with Clint on paternity leave and Natasha on assignment, the Avengers’ quarters were nearly empty. The trainees, cadets, and on-site staff had their own barracks in separate buildings, and while the echoes of the 4th of July party made its way out of the courtyard nestled in the horseshoe of the three barracks, the rooftop garden was relatively quiet.

Steve slowly walked through the rows of plants, stopping here and there to run his fingers over the leaves. Mickey was pushing herself, trying a little bit harder every day, using her new powers to accelerate the growth of various fruits and vegetables as she worked to build up her energy reserves. Reaching down, Steve plucked a few raspberries and tossed them into his mouth; the rich, sweet flavor wasn’t one he’d grow tired of soon.

A rustling noise around the corner drew his attention and he immediately dropped into a slight crouch, pacing forward and turning until he had his back pressed against the corner of the building. Sneaking his head around to take a look, Steve slid a hand into his pocket for his knife… and almost
snorted in surprise when he saw the source of the noise.

He didn’t know what he was expecting, but it wasn’t a waxed paper bag sitting on the wall around the edge of the garden. The sticker holding the folded top in place showed off the Mazzola logo – the original, from when the bakery had first set up shop in Brooklyn. Steve gently slid his finger under the sticker and pulled it up, opening the bag to reveal a perfect little cupcake.

“What the…” The cupcake even smelled like 1942.

“Turns out the new owners kept all of Signore Mazzola’s recipes from during the war,” a voice said, rough with a slight Slavic tinge.

Steve whirled, knife in one hand, cupcake in the other, to find himself face to face with Bucky.

He looked like he’d aged ten years since Steve had seen him last; the creases around his eyes were starting to deepen and if his hair wasn’t dyed a rich, velvety black, traces of gray would have wound their way back from his temples. His skin was a deeper brown than before, faint tan lines around his eyes and across his nose from what had to have been goggles and a mask.

He wore a bulky dark gray hoodie and midnight-blue jeans over worn combat boots, and his shoulders were slightly slumped forward as if he carried a heavy weight across them; his hands were buried in his pockets. The dim lighting made it hard to see his eyes, but Steve could have sworn they looked green. Combined with the neatly trimmed beard and what had to have been skillfully applied makeup, his friend was barely recognizable.

“…Bucky…”

“Hey.” Bucky gave him a tired smile. “What you’re seeing is a hologram that I recorded about a week ago. I’m sorry I can’t do more than this, Stevie. I just wanted to make sure you knew that I didn’t forget this. Your last birthday was… weird. You know. So, um…” He reached up and scratched at his head with an awkward smile and the hologram flickered slightly. “I sent this message to FRIDAY and asked her to play it for you once you found the cupcake. So, happy birthday, Stevie. I can’t come home yet, but I’m safe, I’ve got food and reliable shelter. I’ll be fine, and I’ll come home as soon as the job’s done. Love you, man. Tell everyone I miss ‘em, especially Mickey, and try not to stay up too late?”

With a last exhausted grin, Bucky’s hand reached out and tapped something Steve couldn’t see, and the hologram faded away.

Steve choked back a sob and sat down hard on the low wall, staring at the cupcake in his hands for several minutes before finally peeling back the paper with almost reverent care. He savored every bite, eyes closed as he tumbled back in time, remembering how Bucky had managed to scrape together enough pennies to buy him a cupcake just like this one every year.

***

Bucky was never much of one to talk about his feelings, that much Steve knew. He’d always been stoic and calm, doing his best to control that blinding anger that burned through everything in his path when he gave in.

But on the walk back from Kresichberg, he was uncharacteristically quiet. The punishing pace that they kept, moving as quickly as they dared with so many wounded men, didn’t allow much room for leisure time. The Bucky Steve knew, though, he would have been moving up and down the column, giving a word of encouragement here, a hug and a pat on the back there. This Bucky, haunted and
quiet, barely spoke a word for the first two days of their forced march.

On the night of the second day, Steve ended his rounds of their large camp at the small fire that Bucky’s cellmates had built. Dugan and Morita were doing their best to lighten the mood, telling wild stories from back home. A cursory look around told Steve what he’d come there to find out, though, and after greeting the men and checking in with them he turned away and began to scout the camp to find his friend.

It didn’t take him long. The most severely wounded were kept in the tanks and trucks they’d liberated with a field surgeon or medic assigned to each group of men. Each time they made camp, the men were lifted out, lined up on the ground, given food and water, and told to rest.

They’d left fourteen men behind so far, unable to spare the time to properly bury the bodies.

Bucky sat at the end of one of the lines of wounded men, cradling the head of a young soldier in his lap. It took a concerted effort not to rush up to them but Steve managed to hang back, eyebrows furrowing as he slowly realized what was happening.

Every morning when they’d broken camp, the medics would take whoever had died in the night, wrap them as best they could, and deposit the body where it was least likely to spoil a water source. Sometimes the deaths came as a surprise, but for the most part, they’d been able to predict who would make it through the night and who wouldn’t with relative accuracy.

The row of soldiers Bucky sat in only contained eight men. Two of them were already pale, their lips fading to blue; this one pressed his face into Bucky’s hand as he gasped and choked on his own tears.

At first, Steve thought Bucky was talking to him, but quietly, so quietly… he was singing.

It took him a minute to place the tune, but when he did, his breath caught in his throat. The liquid silver Gaelic lullaby that fell from Bucky’s lips was the same one that Steve’s mother had quietly crooned to them so many times. Neither of them knew exactly what the words meant, but they both knew it by heart.

Bucky’s voice cracked as he bent over the dying soldier, thumbs stroking his cheeks gently. When he reached the end of the lullaby he started over again from the beginning.

Several minutes later, he trailed off mid-phrase and closed his eyes when the boy stilled and his body went slack.

Steve quietly walked away into the forest to find someplace private to remember how to breathe again.

***

“Hey, kid.” Steve ducked through the door into Kevin’s room, crossing quickly over to the boy’s bed. He reached out and clasped those papery, delicate hands, running his thumbs over the bony knuckles. “Ready to find out what Harry does with that weird egg?”

Kevin smiled distractedly, his eyes unfocused and blank. “Um, actually… I hear a lot of people on the news talking about Bucky. Is he okay?”

Biting his lip, Steve pulled up a chair and sat next to Kevin. His eyebrows furrowed as he thought of the best response. “Well…”
“Don’t lie to me, please,” the boy said softly. “The nurses here, they won’t tell me what’s going on. They tell all of the children that everything’s fine, but… there’s a war going on, isn’t there?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Steve stood and quietly closed the door to the room. He sat back down and took both of Kevin’s cold hands in his. “There is. And I won’t lie to you, you know that.”

A ghost of a smile flickered across the boy’s pale lips.

Steve took a deep breath and held it for a second before jumping into his answer. “In May, one of Mr. Stark’s experiments backfired pretty badly. We ended up fighting a robot army led by a program that got out of control. Ultron, that program, was supposed to be a shield. It was supposed to help us protect people from threats. But instead, it decided that the Avengers were the biggest threat.”

“I remember hearing something about a country called Sokovia.”

Nodding before he remembered that Kevin was blind, Steve mmhmed in response. “Before that, though, we tracked him down to the base of a really bad guy in South Africa outside of Johannesburg. Ultron had a pair of twins with him, kids, not that much older than you. One of the HYDRA guys had experimented on them and given them powers. The girl, she could…” He cleared his throat and swallowed against the thick knot that was forming. “She could mess with your head pretty bad. And she did. She got all of us. Bucky took a pretty bad hit and ended up disappearing shortly after we got back stateside to a safehouse.”

Those terrified eyes, Bucky’s gut-wrenching screams, they’d forever be etched into Steve’s memory. He’d only see him like that once before.

“We couldn’t take the time to track him down while we still had a fresh trail. Ultron decided to set up a base in Sokovia, and created an artificial meteor that he raised up using propulsion engines styled off of some of the stuff Mr. Stark designed. We did our best to get every living civilian evacuated, and Tony managed to blow up the meteor before it crashed into the planet’s surface.”

“An extinction-level asteroid would be around 10 miles in diameter.” Kevin’s voice was tense and quiet, and Steve selfishly wished that Kevin didn’t absorb books as voraciously as he did; the boy knew enough about enough that the innocence of childhood was long gone for him.

“That’s right. Ultron picked up an entire city. We couldn’t let that happen.” Taking another deep breath, Steve closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the railing on Kevin’s bed. “Bucky’s been missing ever since. We found traces of him here and there, like a few seconds of security footage and the results of missions he’s gone on. But aside from that, we haven’t found him yet.”

Kevin nodded. “Do you… do you think he’s okay?”

Squeezing the boy’s hands gently, Steve sighed. “He sent me a message on my birthday. Said he was safe, had food and shelter. Other than that, though, we’re just gonna have to trust him, right? I mean, he fought in the war with me and then got turned into the world’s biggest badass. He’s a pretty resourceful sonuvabitch.”

A nervous giggle met his words, and Steve’s mouth twitched up into a smile. “You- you’re Captain America! You’re not supposed to swear!”

“Damn fuckin’ right, I’m not.” He couldn’t help but grin at Kevin’s helpless laughter. “Now c’mon, I really want to see who wins the Tri-Wizard Tournament. Ready?”

***
“Captain!” The voice shot through the camp. “Captain Rogers!”

Stumbling out of his tent, Steve hastily did up the last button on his fatigues. “Right here!”

One of the field surgeons stumbled to a stop and teetered in place, panting, for a brief second. “They need you in the hospital tent, sir. There’s a situation with Sergeant Barnes.”

The surgeon hadn’t finished his sentence before Steve was sprinting barefoot across the camp. He wasn’t even within a hundred yards of the hospital tent before he heard a shrill, terrified scream.

Seconds later, Steve burst into the tent. Nurses and doctors were backing away from the far wall, hands held out as if facing a wild animal. Cowering in the corner, one arm curled around his head, panting loudly and staring out at the doctors with wild eyes, was Bucky.

“Hey, hey…” Steve stepped through the mess of medical equipment strewn across the floor of the tent, crouching low to make himself look smaller. “Bucky. It’s me, Buck. It’s Steve. Hey.” Bucky’s eyelids were twitching as his eyes darted erratically around the tent; he muttered quietly to himself in roundabout sentences that Steve could barely understand. Reaching forward slowly, Steve gently touched Bucky’s shoulder.

He wasn’t expecting quite so violent a reaction, as Bucky jerked away, snarled, and launched himself at Steve.

Steve had size, strength, and weight on his side now, but grappling with his friend was like trying to hold down a writhing snake. After a brief struggle, he managed to pin Bucky down and wrap his arms around him in a sleeper hold. Within seconds Bucky passed out and slumped to the floor.

Stunned silence fell over the tent, and Steve rolled over onto his back as he breathed away the last of the exertion. After several seconds, he pushed himself upright and looked around. “Who’s the officer in charge here?”

A middle-aged man in glasses and a white smock stepped forward and reluctantly raised his hand. “I’m going to assume it was your brilliant idea to come at Sergeant Barnes with the full arsenal of doctor’s tools.”

The man blinked at Steve and swallowed, eyes wide.

“I’m going to assume it was your brilliant idea to come at Sergeant Barnes with the full arsenal of doctor’s tools.”

Steve gathered his feet under him and scooped Bucky up, tossing him over his shoulder. He stepped forward, towering over the officer. “Next time I tell your orderlies that a rescued POW was experimented on by deranged HYDRA scientists, maybe you’ll think twice about scaring the shit out of the poor man again.”

“Wh- where are you taking him? We still need to-”

He didn’t bother to stop as he flatly replied, “Back to his bunk. Where I can hold him down if he wakes up screaming again.”

Ignoring the curious and amused faces as Steve carried Bucky back to quarters, he kept his eyes fixed forward until he tied the flaps on his own tent shut.

The two cots on either side weren’t standard issue for a single occupancy tent, but Steve wasn’t about to let anyone else take on the responsibility of caring for his best friend after reading Bucky’s report. He gently laid Bucky down on the cot on the left, then sat down at his desk and waited for him to come around.
It took several minutes before Bucky groggily blinked his way back into consciousness, blind panic fading away quickly when he rolled his head to the side and saw Steve.

“…the fuck happened?” Bucky croaked, rubbing at his neck. “Someone put me in a chokehold?”

“Sleeper hold, and that was me. You panicked in the hospital tent and scared a bunch of the doctors and nurses.” Steve turned to face him and pressed a hand over Bucky’s forehead; the skin was burning hot and slick with sweat. “They came at you with needles, didn’t they?” He hadn’t recognized many things in the lab Bucky had been strapped down in, but the giant syringes had been one of them.

Closing his eyes, Bucky swallowed thickly and nodded. “They was usin’ needles and a bunch’a other shiny metal stuff. I don’t really remember so well.”

“If I have the doctors give me a list to fill out, do you trust me to do the exams? We still need to clear you for transport back to London HQ.”

After a long moment’s hesitation, Bucky nodded slowly. “I think- I think if it’s you… I can trust you. Yeah.” He rolled over onto his side, facing the tent wall, and hugged himself tightly. “God, I can still see his face…”

Steve didn’t have to ask who Bucky was talking about.

That night, after he’d woken up to hear Bucky shivering and shaking, mumbling in his sleep, Steve picked up his friend once more, brought him over to his own rack, and curled protectively around him. Within minutes the shaking stopped, and eventually Bucky fell into something resembling restful sleep.

He only woke them up twice that night by jolting himself out of nightmares. Each time, Steve hugged him tightly, Bucky’s face pressed to his chest as he listened to Steve’s steady, rhythmic heartbeat. Each time, Bucky would shudder and gasp as if he was drowning. Each time, Steve’s heart would break as he watched his friend, his protector for so many years, fall apart at the seams like so many other soldiers before him.

***

Steve set a fresh travel mug of coffee next to Tony’s feet and turned to watch Sam swoop through brisk morning air, shouts of exuberant joy trickling down as he spiraled around. Accelerometers from the wings and suit sent readings to the large tablet Tony held, letting him run real time stress tests as Sam pushed his new rig to the limit.

“You’re a god among men, Cap.” Tony leaned down, scooped up the mug, and took a grateful sip of the coffee and sighed. “Goodbye, ADHD.”

Smiling, Steve crossed his arms and watched Sam for several seconds. “I can see why Sam’s always looking for excuses to get his feet off the ground. He seems to be enjoying himself.”

“Yeah, well,” Tony mumbled, “there’s a certain kind of freedom you can’t find anywhere else.”

He glanced over at the shorter man, raising an eyebrow thoughtfully. “The suits aren’t just armor for you.”

“Escape mechanism, guilty as charged.” Tony tapped a few buttons on the screen and glanced up at Steve with a smirk. “The first flight I took with them, even though everything iced over and I, you know, nearly crashed and died and all that bullshit that Pepper still freaks out about – I mean, come
on, I’m fine… Well, first thing I did was try to break the World Class Altitude Record for Horizontal Flight.”

Steve couldn’t help but chuckle. “Records were made to be broken.”

Barking out a laugh, Tony saluted Steve with his coffee. “That’s exactly what I said! But, yeah. Flying? It’s a whole new type of freedom. I mean, once you get past Air Traffic Control and all that shit, but…”

“I’ll keep my feet firmly planted on the ground, thanks. Bucky might have a taste for your suits, but… if I’m going to be in the air, I’d rather be in a plane.”

“Makes sense.” Tony peeked up at Sam and tapped his over-the-ear comm unit. “Hey, flyboy, I’m getting a weird reading from the third primary panel on your left wing. Nothing alarming, but it’s about two percent outside of the stress threshold. Hate to rain on the parade, but I’m gonna need you to touch back down so I can take a look at it.”

Several seconds later, Sam swooped down, jogging to a stop in front of the two of them. “Everything okay?”

Tony waved a hand distractedly. “Yeah, it’s just the new carbon nanopolymer that I’m trying out. Still gotta work out exactly what its properties are, so I’m being conservative with the thresholds for now. Also, I’ve got a better parachute design that I want to install before we get much further.”

Sam must have noticed Steve’s smirk because he put his hands on his hips and tilted his head back. “You know, Cap, some of us actually go splat when we hit the ground and I’ve already had to deploy my chute once before when your BFF ripped my old wings off.”

“Yeah, yeah…” Turning away, Steve started jogging back to the compound.

“You’ve got ‘chutes in the Iron Man armor, right?” he heard Sam ask.

“Of course. I mean, the whole kit’n’caboodle weighs around a quarter ton with me in it. War Machine weighs more because he’s got more ordnance onboard. That much mass, I’m always gonna have a failsafe, several of ‘em. Unless something takes out the arc reactor, I’m good to go.”

“Might wanna work on that…”

“I’m retired. Here for R&D only. Oh, and, I pay for everything, so yeah. But I think I can finally pass the torch to Rhodey, go back to being a nerdy grease monkey. Feels good, you know?”

Steve paused momentarily to let Mickey, Franklin, and the spec ops cadets pass in front of him as they made their way through their morning PT. Waggling her fingers at him, Mickey grinned; her hair was slowly pulling loose from the short tuft of a ponytail she’d secured it back in. Franklin called the cadence, his voice carrying through the training yard as they ran past.

It was odd to admit it, but with a full division of agents and several units of cadets and trainees, the Avengers Compound really did feel like home. He missed the Tower – hell, he missed living on his own so he could at least maintain some work-life balance – but Ultron had been right, in a way. It might not be war that Steve couldn’t live without, but he’d always be a soldier. And for now, a training camp was more of a home than a small house in the suburbs would ever be.

Mickey was finally starting to settle back in, too. He’d been hard-pressed to see her smile for the first few weeks, and even now it was still somewhat of a rare occurrence to hear her laugh. Once Hill had reassigned her temporarily to take over the cadets’ training while Bucky was still AWOL, they’d
found out that Mickey had been just as lost without orders as Steve. She’d jumped into the training with surprising enthusiasm and day by day, Steve saw her falling into her own head less and less.

As for him, between coordinating the various training teams, working with the new team members, reviewing data and reports to determine if missions were necessary, and doing his best to keep the World Security Council off their backs, Steve’s days were packed full more often than not. He’d been reluctant to ask for a day off once a week until Hill, appalled that he wasn’t taking a full weekend, had ordered him to stop being dumb and start taking care of himself better.

So, true to his nature, Steve used his days off to rotate around the Compound and check in with the various teams. The research lab was making phenomenal progress on things he barely understood, Tony was the happiest Steve had seen him since… since forever, really, and Wanda was finally starting to open up to the team once she realized they weren’t holding any grudges.

Vision was putting in immense amounts of effort to learn about propriety, manners, social skills, all those lovely things that springing into the world as a fully formed android meant he didn’t have. But, as was the way of things, it came with quite a few stumbling blocks. Viz still struggled with the concept of walls, doors, and privacy, phasing through the barriers of physical and personal space without any understanding of what he’d done wrong.

Steve never thought he’d live to see the day when an artificially sentient life form ended up in therapy, but there was a first time for everything. At least things were improving, even if it was slowly.

There were several kitchens and lounges in the Ops building along with state of the art gyms and simulators; they even had an Olympic-spec underground lap pool. Stopping over in the apartment to grab his swim bag and a quick meal, Steve decided he’d spend his late morning and early afternoon getting pruny since it wasn’t likely anyone else was there.

When he finally stepped onto the cool surface of the pool deck, he let out a small sigh of relief that the pool was, in fact, empty. The short, breathy sound reflected off the walls, however, magnified as it echoed through the room.

FRIDAY pinged him in the middle of yet another lap and waited for him to reach the side of the pool.

“Boss says there’s someone here to see you.”

“Does this someone have a name?” Steve grunted as he heaved himself out of the water. He left a trail of footprints and drips as he walked back into the locker room.
“Jack Rollins, sir.”

Stopping dead in his tracks, Steve closed his eyes and frowned. “Tell me I heard that wrong. He’s at the Raft.”

“It’s definitely Mr. Rollins, Captain. He’s apparently under a conditional release.”

“This’d better be good,” he muttered darkly as he headed for the showers.

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AUTHOR’S NOTE: The upcoming italic section describes the Howling Commandos finding the camp in Majdanek in World War II Poland. You won’t miss any essential plot details if you skip it. The scene ends when the italics do.

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Every single hair on the back of Steve’s neck prickled as he led the Invaders into the camp. Every step he took, the sickening sense of wrong that seeped into his bones threatened to make him throw up.

Erskine had told him that everything would be amplified – his senses, his metabolism, his strength, his endurance. Steve hadn’t been expecting that to mean that he could now smell fear and death.

The metallic tang in the air settled thickly in his nose and tongue, oily and heavy as it mixed with the lurid stench of human waste and decay. Eyes watering, Steve tugged his scarf over his nose in an ineffective attempt to mask the smell of the camp.

A glance to his left told him that Bucky wasn’t faring much better. Pale and tense, Bucky’s lips were pressed together in a thin line and his breaths were short and shallow. His usual calm and collected movements gave way to skittish, jerky steps; every single noise seemed to echo deafeningly through the silent camp. Gun barrels whirled around to target each phantom sound, each leaf rattling across the ground in the meager wind.

Morita bit back a yelp as his foot crunched into something, panting heavily and jolting backward quickly enough that Falsworth had to grab his collar to keep him from falling. Thin wire glasses lay twisted and bent in the sticky gray dirt, shattered lenses catching the wan sunlight like tiny stars.

Wordlessly, Steve motioned for them to continue. He separated the Invaders into two teams and signaled for them to sweep the camp. Steve, Falsworth, Morita, and Dugan cleared each of the barracks while Bucky, Jones, and Dernier continued along the main road.

The faded stripes of the thin mattress covers were almost lost beneath caked-on layers of dust, dirt, and human filth. Thin, wasted figures silently watched the soldiers’ every move, shrinking back into the shadows like frightened animals. Many of them still lay in their bunks, unmoving, their breath gone; the rest simply stood or sat, staring blankly at what could only have been another feverish hallucination. Some of the men stood on stumps and crutches, left behind with the invalid, the sick, and the old, too wounded to be taken when the Nazis evacuated the camp in a panic.

Steve couldn’t step into any of the other buildings after he’d doubled over and added his breakfast to the disgusting sludge on the threshold of the first building.

He pulled out his knife and cut off two small strips from the corners of his scarf, dipped them in his canteen, balled them up, and stuffed them in his nose. It didn’t block the smell completely, but it was definitely better than nothing.
They’d cleared four of the eerily silent barracks buildings, shoulders growing tenser and hands tightening on their rifles, when a piercing shriek echoed through the camp.

It was a matter of less than a minute before Steve located the rest of the team. Jones was kneeling in the dirt, retching as if he’d been poisoned while Dernier pressed one hand over his mouth and crossed himself with the other.

Bucky simply stood, the muscles in his jaw pulsing as he gritted his teeth, horror in his eyes as he stared past the two giant doors on the end of a low-slung, dark wooden building. His knuckles were white as he clung to his rifle for dear life, feet scuffling back slowly as if he wanted to run but something kept him rooted to the spot. A second identical building sat to their left; they looked like large communal showers, with red brick chimneys rising from the peak of each roof. The doors of each gaped open slacky, and a sickly sweet, thick stench wafted out of the building the Invaders stared at.

Emaciated bodies were heaped inside, naked and intertwined, fingers crusted with dried blood. The darkened walls were gouged with deep claw marks, and Steve felt his throat close and his stomach flip over when he realized what had made them. Sightless, reddened eyes stared at them, mouths open in silent screams, rust-red smears around their noses and ears. Further back in the building, the bodies still stood, packed in so tight that the men, women, and children had died where they stood.

They were an unnatural, alien shade of pink with red and green blotches, so thin that Steve could count their bones. He turned away, throat dry and unable to swallow or speak, and stumbled to his knees. Forcing himself to take a deep breath through his mouth only made him hunch over and gag again as a harsh chemical taste coated every surface of his mouth.

Bucky was the one to finally give the order to fall back to the entrance of the camp where he had Morita radio back to base to warn the incoming Soviet battalion that the horrors they’d see in the camp were immeasurably worse than any briefing they’d been given. He half-carried Steve out of the camp, forcing down his own nausea and keeping his eyes peeled open because every time he blinked, he saw those pink, twisted bodies.

After their debriefing, none of the Invaders ever spoke of the camp in Majdanek again.

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Rollins was waiting for him in the main briefing room, along with two SHIELD guards, Mickey, and Sam. He sat nervously at the large table, fidgeting with his fingers, eyes fixed on his hands as he avoided looking at anyone else. His sleek brown hair had been buzzed off close to his scalp; he looked gaunt, underfed, and his eyes were sunken deep in his skull. The muscle tone that men in his profession prided themselves on had all but vanished during his time in prison. His face was thin and angular like the rest of him, causing his slightly crooked nose to stand out even more and throwing the thin sunken line down the right side of his jaw into sharp relief.

He’d been given basic SHIELD fatigues that hung loose on his shoulders where before they would have fit perfectly. Tiny dots covered the back of his right hand and the inside of each of his elbows, and his wrists were scarred and chafed red from restraints. Rollins looked like he could barely keep his head upright as he raised it to meet Steve’s eyes.

“Captain.” He gestured apologetically and weakly with his hands. “Forgive me for not getting up. It’s all I can do to sit up right now.”

Steve chewed the inside of his lip; he hated seeing anyone in Rollins’s condition, even enemy
combatants. “As you were.” Glancing up, he met Mickey’s eyes and was taken aback to see barely restrained fury burning there. “Do we need to talk about this?” he asked her quietly, only moving to take a seat when she gave a tiny shake of her head. Dismissing the SHIELD guards with a wave of his hand, Steve took a short breath to steady himself.

He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, directly across from Rollins. “You came here to talk. So, talk.”

Staring at the table for a good minute before responding, Rollins picked at his chewed-off fingernails. “I made a deal with SHIELD to find Barnes and bring him in. They brought me here so we can discuss terms.”

“That depends on what you mean by ‘find,’” Mickey retorted, tension palpable in the set of her shoulders. “Because the last two times you did that, you were trying to put a bullet in his brain.”

“Also, you’re in no shape to be in active combat for at least a few months.” Sam took a seat on Steve’s left. “They been feeding you over there?”

“Enough that I don’t starve.” Rollins looked down at his hands again.

Steve studied the man in front of him and took a deep breath. “Rollins… Look. Say you were just following orders all you want, but truth is, you were on the STRIKE team that Pierce and Rumlow used to blow up SHIELD from the inside. You’re pretty fucking complicit in that. Add to that, you led the team that infiltrated the National Guard, staged a bombing to flush Bucky out of hiding, and then tried to execute him in broad daylight, in public. And do I need to mention the assassination attempt?

“Give me one good reason to trust you, one good reason to believe that you won’t turn around and stab us all in the back once you’re back in fighting form.”

Rollins met Steve’s eyes, shoulders hunched. His voice was soft and broken, barely above a whisper when he replied. “Because every single time I try to sleep, I wake up screaming ‘cause I see my baby sister bleeding out from the bullet that was meant for Barnes. I see her dying in his arms, and I see the horror on his face. And I scream and I scream because I’m the one that shot her. And… I- I’ll never be free of that.”

He turned to Mickey and looked at her with wet, haunted eyes. “They took me to see you in the hospital. I said I’d tell them everything if they’d just let me see with my own eyes that you weren’t dead. And I made Barnes swear to me that he’d keep you safe. That’s what he’s doing now, Mickey Mouse. He’s burning the world down to keep you safe. And- and honestly, if could? I’d do the same. Because it was never about HYDRA. It was never about order and chaos, it was never about control. It was about doing the only thing I thought I could to give you a world where you’d be safe. I thought if I became a wolf, then maybe you’d be able to stay a sheepdog.”

Mickey fell into the seat on Steve’s right as her brother spoke.

“It didn’t take me long to figure out what was going on after Brock got me on the team. But at that point, I couldn’t back out or- or they’d…” He took a shuddering breath and closed his eyes. “It all started as a way to help you, a way to protect you. But then they said they’d kill you and Mum and even Greg. And I- I couldn’t. I couldn’t do that. And then when I saw Barnes there, waiting for you to wake up, guarding you…”

“He may have been nothing more than the Asset, nothing more than the living weapon they crafted him into. But what I saw that day, he was human, and he was angry. And if he’s willing to go this
far to protect the one person in the world that I care about, well… I want to help.”

Rollins paused, reaching up to scrub at his eyes. “Thing is, I think I know what he’s doing. The path he’s carving through HYDRA, Aim, the Ten Rings, the Hand, all of these underground organizations, it’s got a pattern. He’s following someone, and I know who it is. Lukin’s had his fingers in every pie ever since he split from the KGB and started up Kronas Corporation, but he’s stupidly evasive. Most of us haven’t ever actually met him; I’m one of the few that has.

“And… and I can pretty much guarantee you that Barnes is circling him like a shark, picking off the stragglers and following leads until he finds Lukin himself. The way he thinks, the way he moves… I spent a lot of time on his six, watching him and learning about him. He’s a protector, but he’s also a hunter, and he’s got a way of doing things.”

The room fell into awkward, tense silence for several minutes as Jack began picking at his cuticles again. His knuckles were red and raw, faint bruises showing under the freckles on his arms and hands. Steve’s jaw tightened; he’d be having words with Ross about how they treated prisoners at the Raft. As dangerous as the inmates were, they deserved the same human decency as anyone else.

Mickey was the first to speak. “Jack… I- I thought you were dead. They told me you were dead.”

Rollins nodded slowly, avoiding her eyes.

“And… you’re the one that shot at Bucky after the trial.”

He nodded again.

“I had to use a mothafuckin’ gawdamn cane for two months!” Mickey roared without warning, slamming her hands down on the table as she stood. Steve and Sam jumped in surprise, but Rollins simply blinked and looked up. “It cracked my pelvis in two places and they pulled a fuckin’ bullet outta my hip.”

“I know.” Rollins closed his eyes and dropped his chin to his chest. “I know, peanut.”

“And then Bucky tells me you were the one s’pos’to put him down if he ever broke his programming? The fuck were you thinkin’?”

“I was protecting YOU!” Rollins’s voice was weak but the emotion behind it burned. “I thought I was protecting you,” he repeated, quieter. “You gotta understand, Micks, every single day we worked with the Winter Soldier, we were told how dangerous he was, how he could and would kill us all if we let go of the leash. It wasn’t until Brock overheard them talking about Zola and the Alps that we managed to put two and two together and figure out who he was. But by that point, Bucky Barnes was so far gone that there wasn’t a goddamn thing we could do. All we could do was watch this… shell of a man be used as a living weapon.”

Steve scoffed. “Rumlow wanted to do something about it? I find that hard to believe.”

“When the Uprising happened, I found out that Brock was a twisted sonuvabitch who actually believed the lies Pierce was feeding us, but he respected you and knew how much Barnes meant to you. It made us sick, watching them… torture him like that.” Looking away, Rollins took in a deep, shuddering breath. “When he came back from that botched mission on the causeway, Pierce just…” Rollins swung his hand to illustrate. “…backhanded him across the face. And he sat there and didn’t fight back. Just looked at us like a confused child. I mean, a confused child who sent one of our techs flying across the damn vault, but… that was the first time Brock ever questioned our orders.”
“Well it’s nice to know he wasn’t a *complete* bastard,” Sam drawled flatly. “Especially since he, you know, tried to kill me.”

Rollins snorted quietly. “That’s why I want to help. Because… Cap, Barnes said that he remembered you. ‘That man on the bridge,’ he said. ‘Who was he? I knew him.’” Those few simple words had haunted Jack relentlessly.

His blood running cold, Steve gripped the edge of the table hard as the room spun around him.

“So, what’s the deal, then?” he heard Mickey ask. “You help us find Bucky, make sure he’s okay, and bring him home? What do you get in return?”

“Well, I get released. WITSEC, probably. I don’t think anyone at SHIELD’s going to trust me, and I can’t blame them. I get back in fighting condition, do some training, suit up, and go find Barnes.”

Sam tapped his fingers absently on the table. “And then what? You bring him in?”

The fire in Rollins’s eyes was the first life they’d seen in him since he arrived at the Compound. “Oh, I have no intentions of following through with that part, mostly because Ross hinted at attempting to reactivate the Winter Soldier. I deploy, I find Barnes, and then I help him tear those HYDRA bastards apart.”

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It wasn’t until they were back in their quarters that Steve let it show how much everything hurt. He kept his head up, shoulders back, all the authority of the United States of America in his voice and his eyes until the moment Bucky closed the door behind them.

With a pained groan, Steve leaned forward onto the small desk, finally let his shoulders slump forward, and had to twist so that he landed in the chair when his knees gave out.

Bucky made that same quiet, concerned cough-sigh he always did whenever Steve came home bloodied and beaten after losing a back-alley fight, and lifted Steve’s shield off of his shoulders. The metal clanked softly when Bucky leaned it against the wall, and then gentle hands helped Steve shrug his way out of his uniform.

“Next time, don’t bench me like that, okay?” Bucky scolded him gently. “You’re not immortal. You need someone on your six, even if it isn’t me.” He batted Steve’s hands away and unlaced his boots for him. Slowly but surely, they managed to get Steve out of all of his combat gear and into a soft set of Stark-designed thermals.

“You know why I had to do that, Buck. Anyone else was in there, they would’ve died for sure. I couldn’t let that happen to you.”

It was only when Steve was finally stretched out on his bunk that Bucky began changing out of his own uniform. “You saw the base, same as me,” Bucky grumbled as he tugged a lightweight sweater over his head. “Kreischberg, round two.”

“I know.” Steve rolled over onto his side, hissed in pain, and slowly lowered himself onto his back again. “I couldn’t put you through that a second time.”

Scoffing, Bucky closed his eyes and shook his head. “I can’t- you- Steve… come on. How the fuck am I supposed to walk away from that? You saw what he did to those men. You saw what they became. What Zola turned them into.” He sat on the edge of Steve’s bunk. “I can’t walk away from that, not again. I don’t care if I get court-martialed for disobeying a direct order; if we come
across Zola or his experiments one more time, I’m not leaving until all those men are safe, all those
monsters are dead, and I’ve put a bullet in the brain of the man who turned me into his personal lab
rat. We clear on that?”

* * *

“His only answer was a glare and a grudging grunt of agreement.

* * *

“Oh for the love of- Steve! Steven Grant Rogers!” Mickey’s voice ripped through the apartment,
jolting Steve rudely awake. “Get your star-spangled ass out of bed and turn off that goddamn alarm
before I give your phone to the cadets for target practice!”

Blearily, Steve fumbled for the phone in question on his nightstand, silencing Lady Gaga in the
middle of a rousing refrain. He yawned as he swung his legs off his bed, rubbed the sleep out of his
eyes, and shuffled down the hall and into the kitchen.

Rollins handed him a cup of coffee with a raised eyebrow and a smirk.

“Oh God there’s two of them,” Steve groaned. “I don’t need two Rollinses silently sassing me in the
mornings. Fuck the fuck off.”

Taking a noisy slurp of his own coffee, Rollins chuckled softly. “You know, in the year I worked
under your command, never once did I find out that Captain America wakes up to ‘Bad Romance.’”

“Well, the last time JARVIS bugled him awake, Steve ended up throwing his shield at the speakers
so hard that we had to excavate it out of the wall.”

Grumbling unintelligibly through the bagel he’d just stuffed in his mouth, Steve flipped Mickey off.
“I told you shitfucks not to play goddamn Reveille before 0600.” He gulped down the rest of the
coffee, ignoring the searing heat in his throat, and did his best to finish his bagel before he reached
the bathroom for a shower.

“Bundle of joy in the morning, isn’t he?”

Mickey closed her eyes, raised her eyebrows, and slowly shook her head. “You have no idea.”

* * *

JAMES “BUCKY” BARNES
M/SGT US ARMY
SSR – INVADERS
MARCH 10 1917
JANUARY 17 1945
PURPLE HEART
BARNES CROSS
WORLD WAR II

Steve closed his eyes and leaned forward on the headstone. He knew the grave was empty; one of
the first things Fury had told him after he’d woken up last week was that none of the search and
rescue operations had found a body. It made sense; a week after they captured Zola, an avalanche
had covered miles of the mountainside in a deep layer of snow and ice. Even with the modern
technology in this brave new world, it would have been an impossible task.

Three months of fighting one man down. Three months of feeling nothing but empty space on his
left. Three months of no one feeling brave enough to move into Bucky’s seat at the table.
And then this.

A narrow white marker on an empty grave amongst hundreds of thousands.

A name on a wall at every SHIELD facility, an honor posthumously granted by the one woman that had seen Steve for who he was before the serum.

Paragraphs in textbooks, a smattering of biographies.

Bucky deserved better.

They all deserved better. Every single one of them. Every single Invader.

Bucky got the most out of any of them, and this is all there was.

Closing his eyes, Steve swallowed down the thick, wet feeling in his throat, stepped back, and turned toward where Fury stood, respectfully waiting.

“Okay. I’m ready.”

***

“I. Hate. You. All.”

Arms crossed and eyes narrowed, Steve stared down Mickey, Natasha, Sam, and Tony as they grinned at him, buckets at the ready. The ice had been marinating for several minutes, long enough that each bucket held true ice water. He turned to Franklin and glared at the camera that the younger man held, then let out a heavy sigh.

“My name is Steve Rogers. I’m Captain America. Pretty much everyone behind the camera – all of you assholes, yes that’s you I’m talking about – nominated me for the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, and, well…” He shrugged, pulling a wry face. “I’ve never backed down from a challenge, especially one that helps people.

“Go to… what was it again?” He glanced over at Natasha and she finger-spelled the address out for him. “Right. www.alsa.org. Donate, please, because I can personally tell you how much it sucks to have a body that’s doing its best to make you miserable.”

Shaking his arms out and bracing himself, Steve grinned uncomfortably at the camera. “This’ll probably dump me face first into a panic attack because I think we all know how I am with being frozen solid, but…”

“Do it for the vine!” someone shouted.

“The next time I hear about someone naming a social network after a motherfucking plant, I sweartagod.”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence because at that moment, all four bucketfuls of ice water splashed toward him, soaking him from head to toe in freezing cold water.

“Jesus motherfucking son of a goddamn penny whore-” he heard himself yell, drowned out by hysterical laughter as he flapped his arms in a halfhearted attempt to restore feeling to them.

When his lungs finally worked properly enough to let out more than a litany of curses, Steve wiped the water from his eyes with a flourish and slapped his hands on his hips. “Okay. Whoooooo-ee. Let’s see, I nominate... um... Mickey Draymond – because you’re an ass, that’s why – Sam
Wilson, and Wanda Maximoff. No cheating, Wanda, you don’t get to use your powers. You have twenty-four hours. Go.”

Mickey tossed a towel at him and Steve gratefully dried himself off as much as he could, burying his face in it to take a few good, deep breaths. As she patted him on the shoulder, Mickey pressed her fingers to his wrist to check his pulse.

“You okay?” she murmured quietly enough that only he could hear.

“Yeah.” Steve cleared his throat and did his best to smile. “Yeah, I think so. A little jittery, but… I think I’m good. I’m good.”

***

It had been an adjustment for everyone when Bucky was released to live in the Tower, and growing pains were to be expected. One thing that Steve had hoped wouldn’t be an issue any more was Bucky’s digestive system; despite receiving world-class medical care, he could still barely keep solid food down.

Bucky stood in the kitchen off to the side in the common area, robotically pushing the contents of his plate into a blender. The lid on the jar of protein powder rattled as Steve watched him unscrew it, dump three scoops of powder into the blender, and slide the jar back to its place on the counter. His face was blank, lined with exhaustion as he hunched over the blender, pulsing it until the grayish-brown slurry inside was a consistent texture.

Turning back to his own plate, Steve swallowed thickly as he pushed around the chunk of steak he’d just cut. Watching his friend struggle with everyday tasks was agonizing in a way he’d never anticipated.

A dull whumpf told Steve that Bucky had just sat in his favorite chair, tucked in the corner with a blind-spot-free view of the entire common area. He had to force himself not to turn and look; Bucky was already self-conscious enough about his trouble with eating and he wouldn’t make any effort to choke down his meals if someone was watching. He’d finally begun to gain weight again, his muscles filling out with the combination of proper nutrition and regular exercise. Steve had to constantly remind himself not to get in the way of that progress.

After several minutes of mechanically shoveling his dinner into his mouth, chewing and swallowing without really tasting, Steve finally cleared his plate. Food at the Tower was a far cry from Army chow, but it still tasted like ash if he didn’t have an appetite. As he picked up his plate and stood, he glanced over at Bucky to see him cautiously looking up at Pepper.

She’d perched on the arm of his chair, close enough that he couldn’t ignore her presence but far enough away that he still had the semblance of a personal bubble. Steve forced himself not to listen to their conversation as he rinsed off his plate, set it in the sink, and made his way over to the couch where he could pick up a magazine while he discretely watched Bucky.

He nearly dropped the magazine in surprise when he heard a low, quiet chuckle.

Pepper had handed him the bottled workout drink she’d been holding, explaining how it was packed with vitamins, minerals, protein, all that good stuff that your body needs after exercise or after you’ve hit a rough patch. She helped him read through the ingredients list, explained what was what, and threw in as much self-effacing humor as she could.

“When I first found out about these, I started having, like, three of them a day. I’m really busy, you
know. Running a company is a lot of work. So, I’d skip a meal and just have one of these instead. Didn’t bother to look at the calorie count.” She brushed her hair out of her face and leaned over to tap the bottle. “Turns out I was having twice as many calories as I needed. I put on something like five pounds in a week.”

Bucky snorted softly and glanced up at Pepper. “I think I’d need five or six of these a day to get as much as the doctors are telling me to eat.”

“Well, here.” Pepper unscrewed the cap on the bottle. “Take a sip. Tell me if you like how it tastes. I can guarantee you it’s more palatable than what you’ve got there.” She pointed to the large stainless steel cup that Bucky held with his other hand.

“Malts shouldn’t taste like steak, potatoes, green beans, and chocolate all at once” he agreed, wincing. “Does this have any milk in it? The doctors told me I’m apparently lactose-intolerant.”

Steve bit his lip and looked away. There were still a lot of things that Bucky didn’t remember.

“They make lactose-free ones. This isn’t one of them, but a sip probably won’t hurt you. Give it a try.”

There was a pause, and then Bucky made a surprised noise. “Tastes like… vanilla?”

“Yes. They make them in chocolate, butterscotch, strawberry, vanilla…” Another pause, and then Pepper giggled. “Hey! Don’t drink the whole thing!”

“I- sorry. Um, thanks.”

“It’s fine. I’m glad you liked it! Oh, um, if you want any help with your hair… just let me know, okay?”

“…thank you.”

Several minutes after Pepper left, Steve turned back to see Bucky looking down at his drink, biting his lip as he smiled.

Chapter End Notes

*cough* Ant-man *cough* And Jack’s finally back!

Jack’s reference to sheepdogs and wolves comes from an admittedly limited and somewhat shortsighted but still nonetheless powerful quote from Dave Grossman’s “On Combat.” Law enforcement and military personnel use the analogy extensively. Here it is:

“If you have no capacity for violence then you are a healthy productive citizen: a sheep. If you have a capacity for violence and no empathy for your fellow citizens, then you have defined an aggressive sociopath—a wolf. But what if you have a capacity for violence, and a deep love for your fellow citizens? Then you are a sheepdog, a warrior, someone who is walking the hero’s path.”

…also, doing the research for the flashbacks in this chapter was… difficult. And sickening. And horrifying. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the footage I stumbled across.
Those kinds of things tend to stay burned into your memory forever, and… maybe that’s a good thing.

I wanted to try my best to represent what the men were fighting. I felt like if I glossed over the horrors of the war, I’d be doing a disservice to all the real men who fought and died. Ignoring and omitting it is almost worse than getting it wrong.

On that note, if I did get anything wrong that needs to be fixed, though, PLEASE let me know. This is one of those areas where I really want to make sure I’m as true to the facts as possible, and as respectful of the people involved as possible.

As far as the Compound goes, here’s the best aerial view I could find. I’m imagining the barracks (Avengers, Cadets/Trainees, Staff in clockwise order from top) to be the set of buildings in the upper left. The main building contains the labs, training facilities, and administrative offices. The hanger is, obviously, a hangar.

Here’s another view with a few minor differences:
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

We finally get to see Mickey and Jack interacting - I’ve been looking forward to this since… Chapter 4? I think? Oh, lord, haha…

There’s a new One-Shot up! Summary: James gets jury duty. James is an insufferable asshat. Enjoy! ;)

Trigger Warnings:
- Sam has a Bad Day - he’s still got PTSD, y’all. Just further along in his process
- Military medical personnel dealing with guilt about the ones they couldn’t save
- References to malnourishment and prisoner abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sam was the one they all turned to when they needed help. He was the source of the team’s stability, always ready to listen and always ready to help. He wasn’t the team therapist - no, many of them had their own professionals they saw - but he knew what to do when someone had a rough day.

It caught them all by surprise when he had one of his own.

It shouldn’t have - they all knew about Riley. Mickey had heard about it while she was deployed; her Marines had stopped bickering amongst themselves long enough to turn to the TV in the mess hall and fall silent as the man on the screen calmly spoke about a standard PJ op that had gone wrong, costing Master Sergeant Ian Riley his life. She hadn’t remembered that it was right before the 4th of July, and the grief they all felt about losing another man in uniform was quickly overshadowed by the holiday.

Now, five years later, Sam stumbled through the barracks common area with swollen eyes and tight shoulders on his way to his morning run. Wordlessly, Steve got up and left behind the breakfast Mickey had just set in front of him, following Sam outside.

For the next two hours, Steve silently kept pace on Sam’s left, helped him up when he stumbled, and was simply someone there if he wanted to talk, still there if he didn’t. He brought Sam back inside after he fell again, hands and knees bleeding from their impact with the asphalt of the running path.

Sam looked up at Mickey with haunted, red eyes as she gently cleaned away the dirt from his knee and coaxed the skin into knitting back together with her powers. His hands were too badly torn up to treat himself, and the hollow look on his face told Mickey that he might not have even been able to do anything even with good hands.

Later that day he came back to her with bloodied knuckles and bruised fingers, chafe marks from boxing wraps on his hands. Natasha quietly told her that she’d found Sam in the gym whaling away on one of the punching bags. When she hadn’t been able to distract him, she simply held the bag still for him instead.

Mickey sat with Sam the rest of the day as they binged through episodes of Mythbusters. Every hour she got up to make two more cups of tea, and every hour Sam robotically drank his down until he
was cradling the empty mug in his lap.

The sun had set and darkness was falling when he finally spoke.

“I still see them, you know.”

Mickey nodded; she had the same nightmares. “The ones you couldn’t save.”

Sniffling wetly, Sam stared into his mug as if it contained the answers to every question in the world. “Bleeding out on my hands. Most of them weren’t even twenty-five years old yet. Some of ‘em, the older ones, they’d ask for their wives, their kids. I had a lot of ‘em make me promise to call their families. One boy had a son he’d never live to see.”

Silence stretched between them. Closing her eyes, Mickey sucked in her lips and squeezed her prickling eyes shut. “One of the boys in my unit, Granger, he got hit by the same IED that took me out. Chunk of shrapnel tore a hole through his jugular. He couldn’t say anything to me, but I saw how scared he was when I was holding him, while he was bleeding out. ‘You’re gonna be fine,’ I told him. ‘It’s like goin’ home.’ And he just…”

“They say we won the war,” Sam finished for her. “But Steve’s right - they never say what we lost.” He reached out his hand and squeezed hers tightly.

They sat that way through the rest of the Mythbusters episode, hands clasped, grounding each other through the spinning turmoil of memories.

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Sore, bruised, and covered in paint, Mickey led the cadets back from the training field as Franklin and Jack reviewed tactics for each of their teams. She only paid enough attention to catch snippets of the two conversations and the occasional wheezing huff as her brother ran out of breath as they hiked uphill while he talked. It had become a tradition to go paintballing for Jack’s birthday so many years ago, just the two of them, and adapting that into a fun team-building exercise for the cadets hadn’t been that far of a stretch.

It was becoming easier for her to tell people apart through their pulse signatures; at first, she’d only been able to identify that there was something with a beating heart in a general that way direction. Now, she knew all of her close friends by the specific… flavor… that their signatures took.

Steve was steadfast and steely, with a soft fluffy feeling around the edges. Natasha was always shifting but had a firm core, and Wanda crackled with brilliant red sparks. Sam’s calm and quiet signature hid a vibrating, fluttering yearning for the freedom of the air.

Tony’s heart was mechanical and strong when he’d slept enough, and Mickey had taken to pointing out whenever she could feel his fatigue. Vision was an anomaly; she could sense something there, but it was so alien and foreign to her that she’d long since given up trying to quantify it. And Rhodes, his fierce loyalty and keen intelligence burned so bright that it was blinding.

Jack, Mickey had known instantly. She’d known the minute he was within fifty feet of her. It was difficult to describe exactly how she sensed each person, especially since the feelings she got from each of them were so drastically different. But with Jack, it was the smell of the old El Camino, propellant on his fingers, long conversations curled up under his arm on the roof, the terrifying fire in his eyes when he stood up to Greg.

A hand on her shoulder brought Mickey back to the present with a jolt, and she turned to see Franklin and the cadets heading back to their barracks. Jack stood by her side, tilting his head and
“Earth to Mickey. You zoned out a bit there. Everything okay?”

She snorted out a quiet laugh and shook her head. “Yeah. Sorry. I’ve got a lot bouncing around in my head right now.”

“Overload?” he asked quietly as he pushed open the door to the wing that held their quarters.

Mickey nodded and hooked her paintball marker onto her belt. “I need to get my dampers back on soon or I’m going to go nuts from all of the…” Making a frustrated noise, she waved her hands around her head. “…whatever the shit this is, flying around in here.” She leaned forward, opened her eyes wide for the scanner at the apartment door, and pushed her way in once the bolt clicked open.

They each headed off to their rooms, Mickey to the one she hoped to share with Bucky once he came home, and Jack to the office they’d rearranged for a temporary third bedroom. Steve had moved most of his painting supplies into the living room to give Jack more space; he’d justified it by claiming that the living room had better light anyway when Jack put up a token protest.

He’d been there a month so far. New clothes, new shoes, new everything; his hair was finally starting to look like something more civilized than a prison buzz cut, and regular full meals were finally starting to mean Mickey couldn’t count his ribs any more during his weekly exams. His face was still gaunt and drawn, but the dark circles around his eyes were almost completely gone now. All in all, Jack was looking more like himself every day, and less like the malnourished, bruised, sleep deprived, and skittish prisoner that had arrived on their doorstep.

Mickey toweled dry her hair as thoroughly as she could before combing it back over her head; the ends were starting to brush her shoulders now and she still had yet to make up her mind about cutting it or letting it grow out. She grabbed one of Bucky’s hair ties and secured her hair back in a short ponytail to keep it out of her eyes while she made lunch.

Jack was waiting for her at the table, scrolling through something on his phone. He glanced up when she walked in and handed her the sleek woven wire damper bracelets she’d left on the table before training. Letting out a relieved sigh, Mickey secured the clasps that held them on and rubbed at her eyes.

“God, that’s so much better. I can hear myself think now.” She looked down and noticed a large welt on Jack’s arm a few inches down from his elbow. “Want me to take care of that for you?”

“Hah, thanks but no thanks. You know it freaks me out whenever you do that.”

Crossing to the freezer, Mickey pulled out an ice pack and tossed it on the table. “Then get some ice on it. Twenty minutes, you know the drill. There’s some cream in the hall bathroom that’ll help it heal faster, it’s in the red and silver tube.”

“Yes, Doc.”

She heard the smile in Jack’s voice and couldn’t help but return it while she collected the ingredients for sandwiches. “What kind of cheese do you want?”

“Oh! Um, you don’t have to—”

“Jack.”
He sighed softly. “Provolone, please and thank you.”

“Toasted?” Mickey plugged in the panini press to warm it up while she put together the sandwiches.

“Sure, thanks.” After a slight pause, Jack stood up and walked over to Mickey, holding out his phone. “Barnes just hit a munitions depot in Ukraine. I mean, I’m assuming it’s him because no one’s claimed it yet and they can’t find any traces of the attackers. There’s also a death in Mexico City that could potentially be an assassination but the body’s too mangled to tell.”

She leaned over to skim the article on the screen, hands pausing in the middle of spreading pesto on a slice of bread. “Do we know whose depot it was?”

“I’m guessing the Ten Rings but I’m not sure. I’ve been off the grid long enough that I’m missing almost a year’s worth of intel.”

“Share that with Nat, she’ll look into it.” Mickey looked up at Jack and frowned when she noticed the worried look in his eyes. “He’ll be fine.”

“It’s not him I’m worried about,” he muttered as he tapped through menus on his phone.

The panini press sizzled quietly as Mickey lowered the top plate down and clipped it into place. “Talk to me.”

Sliding his phone into his pocket, Jack leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. His eyebrows furrowed as he looked at Mickey, the faint scar on his chin pulling slightly as he chewed the insides of his cheeks. “Honestly? The last time he went rogue like this, he massacred a team of fifteen highly trained black ops agents before I got enough darts in him to knock him out.”

“He hasn’t gone rogue, Jack, and you know that.”

He scoffed and shook his head. “Do we really? How do we know that he won’t end up in some HYDRA base somewhere where they’ve got someone who knows his words? How do we know they won’t reactivate his...”

“Because we broke it.” Mickey looked at her brother defiantly. “We broke his programming. The words won’t work anymore. None of them. They’re all gone.” The press beeped and Mickey turned to take out the sandwiches. “Basic hypnosis allowed us to dismantle the programming from the inside out.”

Jack took the plate he was handed out of reflex as he stared at Mickey. “You didn’t have to put him in a shock chair?”

Chuckling, Mickey shook her head. “I don’t think any of us could force him to get in one of those again, even if we tried. No, he did everything willingly. I think he wanted himself to be rid of it as much as we did.”

“...oh god.” The sandwich in his hands cooled as Jack closed his eyes. “The things they did to him... that we did...”

“I know, Jack. He told me.”

“How much?” he asked, barely more than a whisper.

Mickey’s plate clinked softly as she set it on the table. “As much as he remembered. He gets, um, really bad nightmares and flashbacks on his bad days.”
“…Christ.”

“Sit down and eat, bro.”

After he’d finished the sandwich, Jack leaned back in his chair and chewed his lip. “You know, once he finds Lukin… I might not be able to stop him. There might not be much of a body left to scrape off the floor.”

“I know, I was there when he killed Karpov.”

“…he what?” Jack stared at her, stunned. “Karpov’s dead?”

Reaching across the table for her tablet, Mickey spun it around and started tapping through news articles. “Karpov random-encountered him on New Year’s. Ended up provoking Bucky into killing him. The more we look at it, the more we think it might have been spur-of-the-moment suicide by superhero. Here.” She handed Jack the tablet and waited for him to finish reading. “Let’s just say Karpov rolled a natural twenty. Bucky literally punched him to death right there. I had to Sputnik him when icers didn’t take him down.”

“The icers didn’t work?” he squeaked. “What the- how-”

“They don’t work consistently on Steve either, not when he’s pissed off. Thor just giggled when we tested it on him, too. We think their enhanced metabolisms have something to do with it.” Mickey shrugged and reached up to brush her hair out of her eyes. “Tasers are a little inconsistent as well; that’s why it was so hard when you guys tried to take Steve out in the elevator. You can shock the bejeezus out of them, but the only time I’ve ever seen either of them go down from a single hit is when Bucky got zapped at the Warehouse.”

“…the what now.”

She chuckled and cleared the plates off the table. “Group of weirdos out in South Dakota that snag, bag, and tag 084s and stuff like that. They have these nonlethal sidearms that they call Tesla guns. Artie, the guy who runs it, he panic-shot Bucky when we showed up.” When Jack just stared at her, she shrugged again. “Can’t blame him. When the world’s deadliest assassin shows up on your doorstep…”

“Yeah, been meaning to talk to you about that.” Jack cleared his throat and set Mickey’s tablet back down on the table. “You sure this guy’s good for you? I mean, he did kind of kill several of his previous handlers. That’s why we had a full STRIKE team handling him for the five years leading up to the Uprising.”

Sighing, Mickey sat back down. “He’s not like that anymore. Also, you’re being overprotective again; I can take care of myself, remember?”

“You’re my baby sister, peanut. You’re all I’ve got left to be overprotective with.”

“I’m thirty-two, I’m not a baby anymore. Also, you know I can kick Steve’s ass, right?”

Jack rolled his eyes and laughed, shaking his head. “I won’t tell him you said that. Cap’s probably going easy on you.”

“Oh, is that how it’s gonna be?” Mickey stood, leaned over the table, and smirked at her brother. “Come on, hot shot, let’s go hit the gym. Loser does dishes for a week.”

***
Mickey had to tug on his hand to keep him moving once they got through the doors. “Come on, Frosty, get your jaw off the floor.” They kept up appearances while out in public; accents, contacts and glasses, different clothes, different movements. The nicknames, however, those were harder to leave behind.

Eventually she pulled James off balance enough that he had to step forward or fall over. Stumbling after her, James stared slack-jawed at the countless bookshelves in front of him. He turned, looking over his shoulder, spinning, weaving his way through the shelves, absorbing the environment with the wonder of a child.

It didn’t surprise Mickey much when he got his hands on an old leather volume. “La Divina Commedia,” he breathed, running his fingers reverently over the embossed cover. Gingerly opening the book, James looked through the first few pages until he found what he was looking for.

Mickey giggled when he held the book out, his finger pointing to the publication date. “It’s as old as you are.”

“Nice to know I’m not the only relic that survived this long,” James replied with a smirk. He thumbed through several wafer-thin, age-darkened pages, and lifted the book up slightly to read the tiny text. “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, che la diritta via era smarrita.” His voice lilting through the words, rising and falling with the song-like cadence.

“Italian, right?”

“Mmhm. Poetry’s always more beautiful in a Romance Language.” James closed the book gently and set it in the small basket Mickey was carrying. “We’re getting this one.”

Tilting her head to the side, Mickey gave him a playful smile and raised her eyebrows. “You’ll have to translate it for me.”

“Literally or colloquially?” James murmured as he dragged his fingertips down a row of books.

“Hm?”

He turned back to her and blinked a few times. “That was written almost eight hundred years ago. That sort of Italian, it’s—it’s archaic. It’s their equivalent of thees and thys and whither thou goest. It makes the King James look like Baby’s First Picture Book. Abstruse doesn’t even begin to cover it.”

“Whoa, okay there, slow down, Professor.” Mickey chuckled and stepped past him to the Learn to Speak Languages section. “Besides, I’m more interested in learning Russian, anyway. Well, more Russian. All I know is out of the Red Book and those are pretty limited in their application.”

“I can teach you,” James offered as she pulled down a thick textbook. “Stuff in there’s only going to teach you touristy phrases and mostly-useless verb conjugations.” He stretched upward to the top shelf and delicately extracted a thin book, flipping through it before putting it back. “Real Russian, street Russian, you have to learn that from a native speaker.”

“Oh, and you’re a native speaker?”

James poked her in the side, making her squeak softly in protest. “Hush, you. Why do you want to learn?”

Mickey didn’t reply at first and covered her hesitation by opening the textbook to casually scan the chapter listing. “Well… I figured, on the days when you struggle with words…”
“Russian’s only one of god knows how many languages, though. I don’t even know all of what I’ve got stuffed in my head.” Frowning slightly, James looked over his glasses at her. “Besides, we’ve got a built-in translator; JARVIS can speak every documented language.”

She bit her lip as she looked down at the floor. “Um… well… you, um, you talk in your sleep sometimes. Usually in Russian. Too quiet for JARVIS to pick it up. I… kind of wanted to see if I could understand it.”

James closed his eyes and sighed quietly. “I talk in my sleep?”

“Sometimes. Yeah.”

There was a short pause while he thought it over, then he shrugged. “Menya zovut Aaron.” He gave her a defeated smile. “Meenya zahvoot. It’s how you say ‘my name is,’ more or less. Give it a try.”

***

“Oh, pass me the salt?” Mickey held out her left hand as she stirred the sauce slowly. A cold ceramic bowl settled into her palm. “Ta.”

“It’s adorable how you still say that,” Nat teased, tossing a cherry tomato into her mouth. Mickey and Bucky hadn’t been undercover in Portland that long, but the quirks they’d adopted to pass as Australian still had yet to disappear in some areas.

Reaching out, Mickey gently swatted her hand away from the salad bowl. “That’s for dinner, stop it.”

“Make me.” Dancing out of the way of Mickey’s spoon, Natasha smirked and wagged her eyebrows at Mickey before darting in for another tomato.

Mickey’s breath caught in her throat, as well as the sharp retort she’d been planning, and she blinked, bit her lip, and turned back to the stove.

“Mickey?”

“’s nothing.” Squeezing her eyes shut, Mickey sighed softly. “I’m fine.”

“Like hell you are.”

And there it was again.

She set the spoon down and turned the burner down to a low simmer, then turned to face Natasha. “It’s… disorienting. How many of Bucky’s mannerisms you have. You’re just like him in some ways.” Swallowing, Mickey frowned at the salad and bread waiting on the kitchen island. “The way you throw a basic punch, the way you pop the caps off your beers. The phrases you use, stuff like that.”

Natasha leaned forward on the island, red eyebrows furrowed as she looked up at Mickey. “I spent a lot of time with Kolya when I was growing up. He practically raised me and all the other girls in the Red Room. And, yeah,” she admitted with a quiet chuckle, “I know there’s people that think it’s creepy that he and I…”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind.” Mickey reached up and scrubbed her fingers through her hair. “I’m kind of glad he had someone, back then. The way he talks about it, you made things better for him.”
“Made, key word. That chapter’s done.” Giving Mickey a soft smile, Natasha looked down at the granite under her elbows. “He needs you, now. You’re good for him. I didn’t get to see Kolya much after they split us up, but… I haven’t seen him smile like he does with you in a really, really long time.”

“Be nice if he was here, though.” For lack of a better thing to do, Mickey turned back to the stove, sampled the sauce, and added the salt that she’d forgotten about.

“You know he’s doing this to protect you.”

She huffed out a quiet laugh. “Doesn’t mean I have to like it. Also, I can never convince his overprotective ass that I can take care of myself. I swear, he’s worse than Jack sometimes.”

“Yeah, that’s just something you’ll need to get used to.” Natasha took a deep breath and exhaled it sharply. “I was there when he came back into Clint’s house before he left. Awake, I mean. I woke up when he walked into the room we were sharing.”

Closing her eyes, Mickey swallowed down the wet, thick feeling rising up in her throat. She’d always remember waking up, seeing Bucky’s things neatly piled on the nightstand, running out into the field in her pajamas to find the long wild grasses blown every which way in the spot that Fury’s Quinjet had been. She’d always remember how Steve had held her tight as she stared into space, barely able to breathe, ears ringing and hands numb. The furtive glances, the hushed words as the team decided what to do next - go after Ultron, or go after Bucky.

“Why didn’t you stop him?” Mickey demanded before she knew what she was saying. “Why didn’t you tell him to stand down, or- or, go to bed, or…”

“Do you really think any of us could force him to do anything he didn’t want to do?” The wry tone in Natasha’s voice and that single arched eyebrow silenced Mickey quickly.

Natasha stepped around the island and reached out to pull Mickey into her arms. Smoothing down the taller girl’s hair, Natasha closed her eyes and gently rocked from side to side. “You know as well as I do how fiercely he loves. In his whole life, he’s only ever loved three people that much: you, me, and Steve. That loyalty, that burning fire inside him… Honestly? I think it scares him shitless. I know it scared me when I felt that the first time, and it still does. You remember what happened in Portland when he thought they’d killed you.”

She leaned back against the counter when Mickey’s arms tightened around her neck. “You’ll probably need to be patient with him when he comes back, you know. Might need to give him time to come back out of that headspace. He left Bucky Barnes behind with you because he trusts you to help him pick up the pieces a second time. Right now, he’s the Winter Soldier, but he’s still loyal to you in a way that he never was to his other handlers. I think it’s confusing him a bit, and it’s definitely scaring him a bit, too.”

Sniffling, Mickey nodded. “You think he’s okay out there?”

“We have to trust him, okay?” Natasha squeezed Mickey tighter. “He knows what he’s doing, and he’s the best at what he does. Besides, he’s got a reason to make sure he comes back in one piece.”

“Hm?” Pulling back, Mickey blinked at Natasha in confusion.

With a sad smile, Natasha wiped her thumb over Mickey’s cheek. “What wasn’t with the things he left behind?”

Mickey’s forehead wrinkled as she frowned.
In answer, Natasha pulled out her phone and tapped to the video Hardison had sent them of Bucky in Rome. It was grainy and almost colorless, his features barely visible as he turned halfway to look over his shoulder. His left hand was at shoulder height, pulling the door open, and something glinted at the camera when he straightened his fingers and released the door.

Mickey pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes in the hopes that it would stop the tears when she realized he was wearing the ring they’d issued him in Portland.

***

“Are- are those Cookie Mints?” Bucky’s voice was soft and almost squeaky. He leaned down and reverently picked up the green cardboard box.

“…they’re called Thin Mints,” one of the girls replied slowly as she raised an eyebrow at the strange man leaning over her cookie booth. “Always been called that.”

Steve chuckled. “Actually, they called them Cookie Mints and Chocolate Mints for a while before they ever settled on Thin Mints. And I think they switched back a few times after the war.” He held out his hand to the befuddled troop leader. “Steve Rogers. The goldfish holding that box of cookies – how much are they, by the way? – that’s Bucky Barnes, his girlfriend Mickey, and Sam Wilson.”

Bucky was still blinking at the box in his hands.

“Wait… Sam Wilson? The Falcon?” one of the girls asked, huge brown eyes staring out of a coffee colored face through thick, bouncy black curls. “Are you actually the Falcon?”

“Um… yeah.” Sam blushed and reached up to scratch the back of his neck. His gap-toothed smile was shy and self-conscious. “I guess so. Yeah, that’s me.”

“Oh MY GOD. Guys, guys, it’s the Avengers!” The girl whipped around and tugged on every sleeve she could reach. “It’s the Falcon and Captain America and- and- oh my god.” She turned back to Sam and gave him a dazzling, toothy grin. “You are, like, so cool. I dressed up as you for Halloween. My brother said it was weird but I don’t care.”

It was Sam’s turn to blink in amazement, and the silence was only broken when Bucky reached into his pocket for his wallet. “You sell these things by the case?”

“…yeah?”

“How many you got? I wanna buy ‘em all.”

Sam turned to Bucky, eyebrows rising even higher. “Whoa now-”

“Um,” the troop leader interrupted, standing and looking between each of them. “Not that I mind – here’s the keys, Kristen, go get the rest of the cases out of the truck – but… why?”

Bucky smiled at her, eyes crinkling, and slung an arm around Sam’s shoulders. “Because that’s the first time anyone’s ever focused on Sam when we’re out in public. It’s the first time anyone’s actually seen him, and honestly? That’s fu- really awesome.” He turned to Sam and chuckled. “Stop blushing, pal. The girl said you’re cool, the least you can say is ‘thank you.'”

Sam stumbled through the rest of their grocery trip, head over heels about the fact that a bunch of middle school girls had asked for his autograph. One of them had a Falcon lunchbox.

***
The ice rink in town had finally gone out of business and as a result, Tony decided it was high time to dig another gigantic hole in the ground and set a rink up onsite next to the underground pool.

All in all, Mickey wasn’t complaining.

The ice was a welcome change from being topside among so many living, breathing things. As much as she’d finally begun to appreciate the abilities she’d gained, it was still nice to escape away from all the pulse signatures to a place where she could relax and truly unwind.

Cold and crisp, the air in the rink always seemed to dampen her abilities to the point that she could leave her cuffs or bracelets on the bench with her bag. She secured the laces on her boots quickly and trotted over to the door in the rink wall, pushing out onto the ice and closing her eyes as she leaned into a smooth glide.

Everyone knew where to look first if they couldn’t find Mickey; the rink had replaced the roof garden as her main sanctuary. And while she hadn’t expressly asked people to stay away… no one disturbed her while she was there. If any of the cadets needed her or a briefing was called, FRIDAY would let her know.

The sports bra she wore nearly flattened her chest; a ribbed tank top and black sweatpants gave her the freedom of movement that she needed. Skating was one of the few times where she could just move, just exist in the moment, one of the few times she felt comfortable picking up a piece of her past before her transition.

*The ice doesn’t care who or what you are.*

Bucky had been right when he’d seen the differences in how Mickey skated compared to most women; her movements were broader, using every last ounce of power available as she swept through the various steps. Several weeks of regular practice gave her the confidence to try a few jumps, and she grinned from ear to ear when she landed each of them easily.

Mickey had also been telling the truth when she claimed she couldn’t dance to save her life - if it wasn’t on skates. A quick request to FRIDAY filled the rink with music and she began flowing through the choreography of a routine from a lifetime ago. She’d been competing in men’s singles at that point, but… the ice didn’t care who she was.

She spun through a triple lutz jump, landed smoothly and turned into the next step. Song after song, swirling around the ice, carving wide arcs into the pristine surface, Mickey fully relaxed for the first time in several days.

Eventually she took a break from choreography to simply skate laps around the rink, hands on her hips as she shifted back and forth. Every turn, she stepped neatly into back crossovers and switched back around when the curve straightened out.

She coasted to a stop in the middle of a lap when she noticed Jack quietly watching her near the door.

“Hey, peanut.”

Mickey’s skates bumped against the wall as she leaned her elbows on it, frowning slightly.

“Something happen?”

“Nope. Just wanted to watch you skate, if that’s okay. It’s been a while.” Jack gave her a hopeful smile and tucked his hands into the pockets of his light hoodie.
“You know, Tony bought up the rentals from the rink in town. There’s bound to be a set of hockey skates in your size.” Pushing away from the wall, Mickey turned her back and stroked out to the center of the rink.

Her brother chuckled awkwardly. “Nah, it’s been forever. Haven’t played hockey since high school, remember?”

“You sayin’ Bucky’s a better skater than you?” Mickey shot back. “I had him landing single jumps with me within an hour of setting blade to ice in Portland.”

If there was one weapon Mickey knew she could always turn against him, it was his pride. Grumbling and swearing under his breath, Jack stumped off to the cubbies on the wall and rifled through the skates until he found a set in his size. “You’re gonna be the death of me, you know that, right?”

“Baby sister’s job.” Slapping her hips, Mickey raised her arms in a shrug and smirked at him while she swept by the benches. “Got ‘em all sharpened last week so you should have a good edge to work with. C’mon, get your ass out here. Ice ain’t gonna bite you.”

Jack rolled his eyes as he straightened the cuffs of his jeans and stepped smoothly out onto the ice. “You know, I think this Barnes boy is a bad influence. Mum and I didn’t pay for charter school for you just to have you ain’ting at me.” He dodged Mickey as she whizzed by to shoulder-check him.

Skidding to a stop with a spray of ice, Mickey turned to look at him with a serious, almost sad expression. “I am going to miss you, you know. Do you really have to go off the grid? No phone, no nothing?”

“You know I do.” Jack slid up to her and pulled her into a hug. “I have to promise him that. No way for us to be tracked.”

She was quiet for a minute before sighing heavily. “You don’t even like the guy. Hell, you keep saying he scares the shit out of you. Why’re you doing this?”

“Because he cares about you, and you care about him.” Catching Mickey’s chin with a finger, Jack made her look up at him. “And I’m scared shitless of the Winter Soldier, not Bucky Barnes. I mean, yeah, he’s probably just as terrifying, but…” He frowned, trying to find the right words. “I thought… I don’t know what I thought, when that bomb went off, or when I had my rifle up. But… you protect each other. He helped you find your path again, and you helped a shattered man piece himself back together. I don’t know him but I know how much he means to you. So, yeah. That’s what I’m going to work with for now.”

He tugged Mickey forward by her hands, blades scratching over the ice as he turned, hand wrapped around his sister’s. “You love him?”

After several seconds, Mickey smiled, eyes on her feet. “Yeah. Yeah, I really do. He’s something special.”

“Good. I just don’t want to see you end up in another relationship like you had with-”

“It’s not like that one, Jack.” She pulled her free hand over her face. “Claire was a crazy teenage bitch who took a unique pleasure in gaslighting people and preying on their insecurities. Bucky, he… he’s different. When shit started getting bad with Shelby, he pulled me off the punching bag and made me talk to him. Gave me a place to crash to get away from her. Didn’t push, didn’t make any sort of advances. Hell, I didn’t even know he was interested until I ended up in the hospital.”
“I don’t think he knew, either. It was kind of adorable, actually, the way he appointed himself your personal watchdog. A watchdog with three fucking guns and more knives than I can count, but…”

“I swear, he should’ve been in the Marines.”

Jack snorted, laughing quietly. “A fuckload of bullets, and maybe a boot knife.’ Unofficial motto of your unit, right?”

“Damn straight.” Mickey arced out into the rink, sweeping through large, lazy circles. “Some of my boys came to visit me. I didn’t wake up until after they left, though. Still, it was nice. Thompson stopped by. He’s a major, now.”

“His grandpa worked in the SSR, right?” Jack remembered Thompson: young, tall, blond, and full of fire. Loyal to his Marines, and fiercely protective of his Mickey.

“Yeah, something like that. Chief of the New York office for a bit, I think.” Turning, Mickey gathered speed for several seconds before planting a toe pick in the ice and flawlessly landing a triple toe loop.

“That routine you did earlier, was that one of Kurt Browning’s?” Jack watched her spin through a twizzle before she glided back to his side.

“Yeah, loosely. There’s some stuff I just don’t have the muscle mass for, not yet. The guy’s a goddamn beast and his choreography reflects that.” She reached up to brush her hair out of her eyes. “Triples are still a little iffy for me sometimes, so I’m not even going to think about going for a quad.”

“Oh, triples are iffy,” Jack scoffed as he leaned forward, stroking faster and then coasting through the turn. “Triples are iffy. I can’t even land a goddamn single, Mickey Mouse, and you’re bitching about your triples?”

“Hey, god help me if I ever have to hold a hockey stick. I’m useless without toe picks.” To prove her point, Mickey swept her way to the end of the rink and turned, stepping forward into a dizzying sequence of complex footwork. Her arms were out to the side for balance, perfectly poised and controlled as her toe picks clicked over the ice. “See? Can’t do that on rockers.”

“Showoff.”

“Pansy.”

Jack sped up towards her, pivoting at the last minute to spray her with ice and grinning from ear to ear when her indignant squeak echoed through the rink. “Age and treachery, kiddo. Old age and treachery.”

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“Draymond!” Thompson lunged forward to catch her when a rock shifted under her foot. With a choked-off cry, Mickey tumbled to the ground and rolled up onto her knees, rifle cradled carefully in her hands.

“I’m fine, sir, just slipped,” she managed to growl out as she took Thompson’s hand. As soon as she put weight on her left foot, though, she bit her lip so hard that it bled. “Okay, not fine. Not fine. Gotta sit down.”

One of her Marines helped her slide out of her pack as another lowered her down and crouched in
front of her. “You gonna be okay, kid?” Morris was one of the oldest in their unit, old enough to be a father to nearly everyone there. His eyebrows tightened together when he saw Mickey’s gritted teeth.

“Yeah, just… gimme a sec.” She didn’t want to remove her boot in case it was a fracture; it would act as a splint until they could get back to base and get proper treatment. Manipulating her foot with her hands, Mickey grimaced through the pain. “I think it’s just a sprain. I can make it back to base.”

“Not with that pack, you’re not.” Granger started strapping bits and pieces of Mickey’s gear to his own pack, loading it down as much as he could. “C’mon, guys, help me out here.”

Several hours later, Mickey sank gratefully into one of the chairs in their barracks and lifted her splint-encased foot up to set it gently on the ottoman. A shower and clean fatigues were a godsend after days of dust, mud, and dirt; she let her head fall back against the chair and squeezed her eyes shut.

Footsteps scuffed against the floor as someone approached, and Mickey opened her eyes to see Thompson holding out a bottle of Gatorade. “Here, drink up.”

She took the bottle with a smirk and a snort and twisted off the cap. “It’s funny, I’m usually the one on your ass about hydration, sir.”

“Well, you sit down and let us spoil you for a few days, okay? Our unit’s only gonna make it through this if we take care of you too, Doc.”

A warm, excited smile spread across her face as Thompson patted her on the shoulder and walked away.

Doc.

A mark of respect form her Marines.

She’d earned it.

***

The two things Mickey missed most about the Tower were Bucky and the breathtaking view. The Compound was nice, nestled in the forest in upstate New York, but it didn’t have the beating, throbbing pulse of the city flowing below it every second of the day. It didn’t have the wind catching the raindrops and snowflakes and making them swirl around in ways that defied gravity. It didn’t have the jaw-dropping sunrises that covered Manhattan in a blanket of golden light.

And it didn’t have Bucky.

Steve had awkwardly offered to share a bed with Mickey if it would help her sleep through the night, his face burning red as he scratched at the short hairs on the back of his neck. So far, Mickey hadn’t taken him up on it. The whole idea felt… weird. Really, really weird.

So, she’d dealt with the nightmares and the sleepless nights, restlessly rolling over again and again hoping that she’d bump into a warm body. At this point, she’d even welcome being woken up in the middle of the night by the cold metal of Bucky’s left arm against her back or stomach.

Hopefully when Jack deployed, Bucky would finish his crusade and come home.
Mickey pulled her knees into her chest and dropped her forehead onto the fabric stretched between them. Closing her eyes, she drew in a breath, held it, and let it out in a quiet rush.

“Mickey?”

FRIDAY only ever used her first name when it was just the two of them.

“‘m fine, sweetie. Just having trouble sleeping again.”

“You still have some of your prescription left.”

“No, god no.” Rubbing her face, Mickey pulled her hands down her cheeks and groaned. “You have no idea how batshit bonkers my dreams get on those things. Nope.”

FRIDAY didn’t respond at first. Finally, she said, “Well, I’ve still got a few of Mister Barnes’s recordings. There’s one Mister JARVIS made just before Christmas, though I don’t think Mister Barnes knew at the time. You haven’t listened to it yet.”

“Sure, go ahead.” With another deep breath, Mickey scooted her pillow up and leaned against the headboard. “Seems to help sometimes.”

She closed her eyes and waited a few seconds, and then Bucky’s smooth, soothing tenor enveloped her as he sang without accompaniment.

Seoithín, seo hó, mo stór é, mo leanbh

Mo sheoid gan cealg, mo chuid gan tsaoil mhór

Her breath caught in her throat, the Irish Gaelic words dragging her back through her memories to before her mother had died.

Seothín seo ho, nach mór é an taitneamh

Mo stóirín na leaba, na chodladh gan brón

When she closed her eyes, she saw her mum’s black-brown hair, ice blue eyes, and thin, soft face leaning over her, singing quietly.

Jack must have heard the sob that Mickey tried to stifle, because a few seconds later he was knocking on her door. “Mickey? Everything okay? Who’s… what…” He pushed the door open and saw her hugging her knees, shoulders shaking as she tried not to cry.

Tá mise le do thaobh ag guidhe ort na mbeannacht

Seothín a leanbh is codail go foil

“Is that Bucky?” Jack asked quietly as he sat on the bed, wrapping an arm around his sister’s shoulders.

She nodded and took a deep breath. “He likes singing. The piano in the living room is his, too. Fuck, I didn’t know he knew this one.”

Ar mhullach an tí tá síodha geala

Faol chaoin re an Earra ag imirt is spoirt
“Mum used to sing this to us when we were little.”

“Yeah.” Her voice cracked. “I knew that Steve’s mom was Irish, but…”

_A leanbh mo chléibh go n-eirí do chodhladh leat_  
_Séan is sonas gach oíche do choir_

Jack shifted on the bed so he could hug Mickey better. “He’s got a really nice voice.”

“Mmhm.”

“You having trouble sleeping again?”

“Mmhm.”

The recording finished, and Mickey let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding in. “You really need to go tomorrow?”

“Yeah. You going to be okay while I’m gone?”

“No.” Raising her head, Mickey wiped clumsily at her eyes and sniffed wetly. “But I’ll try to be. Once Steve and the rest of the team get back from dealing with Ultimo it’ll be better.”

Jack ran his hand over her hair, forehead wrinkling as he frowned. “I hope so. I don’t like the thought of you bouncing around like a pinball here, all by yourself.”

“I’ll have Nat take me shopping.”

Pushing away from her, Jack tilted his head down and raised an eyebrow as he met Mickey’s eyes. “You _hate_ shopping.”

“Yeah.” Mickey chuckled and wiped her nose again. “Yeah, I do. But it’s better than sitting around here yelling at cadets all day.”

Jack hugged his sister again and reluctantly stood back up. “Bugle’s at 0600 for me and I need to get some rest. Can’t sleep on planes.”

Rolling her eyes, Mickey laid back down and tucked her arms under her pillow. “It’s five hours on the Quinjet, stop bitching.”

“Yeah, and I’m getting airdropped in the middle of goddamn Chile.” He turned and leaned against the door frame, giving Mickey one last concerned look. “I promise you, if anything goes wrong, I’ll find a way to call you. _I promise_, okay?”

Jack waited for Mickey to nod before he smiled at her and pulled the door shut behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Here’s some amazing artwork from DeanDraws - Bucky and Tripod! Go give him a Like and a Reblog because seriously, he’s a huge blessing to our community.
So about Mickey’s orientation - I’ve never explicitly specified it, for a reason. Things get a little complicated when a transgender person tries to adhere to a heteronormative, gender binary conforming lifestyle when it’s not who they are. So, suffice to say, Mickey’s dabbled around a bit? I know she went through an exploratory phase shortly after discovering that she doesn’t fit the labels she was born with, but I intentionally haven’t fleshed that out too much. Sometimes I need to let the characters write themselves :)

Kurt Browning (a wizard on skates, I swear) skating to “Feeling Good":
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fyUCqUbkvpA

Justin Morrow skating to “Feeling Good” and basically how I see Mickey pre-to-mid-transition on her skates, about 16 or 17 years old: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AJkJdzbAs0Q

The lullaby Bucky sings: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWUrdjWNNMY
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Shelley! He’s a very minor character in Leverage, only appears in one episode (4x14) so there’s not a whole lot to go off of for his characterization besides young, snarky, shark-like grin, and badass. I’ve been waiting to unveil this character for a while now. Hope you enjoy!

Also, Helena is one of my favorite characters from Warehouse 13, so… yeah.

There’s like, one line of Spanish. Maybe two. Someone smack me and tell me what to actually use if I got it wrong, please.

**Trigger Warnings:**
- References to dehumanization
- Direct references to torture, specifically waterboarding and drowning. A new character is found in and rescued from a torture environment
- References to suicidal thoughts
- Internalized dehumanization
- Struggles with the implications of immortality
- Earthquake: people trapped, panic, and significant property damage. No on-screen or deaths
- Profanity (I feel like I should put this more than I have been)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Soldier’s eyes were tight as he sat in the cockpit of the jet, glancing over to the instruments every few seconds. Tripod sat in the copilot’s seat, ears perked as she stared attentively out at the clouds they flew over. Quiet noises drifted in from the main cabin as Shelley stripped and cleaned the guns they’d used in the last mission.

Shelley. Gillespie Shelburne, but he’d kill you if you ever called him that. Shelley. Just Shelley.

Tripod whuffled quietly at Bucky, nosing up against his hand when he reached out for her. The last mission had been a wash; they’d gotten the intel they needed, but barely managed to escape before local law enforcement descended on the base. She could sense his anxiety and frustration better than he wanted her to, sometimes.

He could only describe what had happened as a bloodbath. The AIM division hadn’t been prepared for the Winter Soldier and another operative, but they were better equipped and trained than he’d expected. What was supposed to be a stealthy infiltration and extraction turned into a firefight, and the Soldier had been forced to use hastily rigged explosives to cover their retreat.

As much as he might want to, though, he couldn’t put this on Shelley. The man was highly trained, an excellent partner; they’d done everything according to plan, everything by the book. They just hadn’t been expecting to run up against twice as many people, all of whom were armed.

A quiet knock on the wall of the cockpit made the Soldier turn. Shelley stood there, head tilted as he looked at the Soldier with concern in his eyes. “You good?”
The Soldier turned back to his instruments. “We’ll be on the ground in Belarus in forty-five. Get some rest.”

“That ain’t what I asked, Moose.”

“And that’s not my designation.” He reached out and engaged the autopilot, turning to face Shelley. “Why do you insist on calling me that?”

Shelley’s eyes were defiant and steely. “Because I refuse to dehumanize you just like HYDRA did, and you damn near shot me the last time I called you Bucky. Go take a nap, man. You’ve been awake for over twenty-four hours.”

“I’m fine.”

“When’s the last time you ate?” When the Soldier couldn’t give him an immediate answer, Shelley shook his head and jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the small kitchenette in the port wing. “Go eat something, seriously. Don’t make me turn that into an order.”

The Soldier gave him a halfhearted glare as he twisted his way out of the pilot’s chair. “I don’t have to follow your orders to begin with, even if you outrank me, sir.”

Shelley just slapped him on the shoulder and gave him a push towards the kitchen.

After the Soldier peeled open an MRE and folded himself up at the tiny table, Shelley leaned his head out of the cockpit. “What’s our next move once we’re on the ground?”

“We find the AIM base that’s been fuckin’ around with bioweapons and blow it up.”

Shelley’s eyebrows knitted together. “Don’t we usually avoid tryin’a mix explosives and evil death juice?”

“This ain’t my first rodeo, Shel.” The Soldier shoved a spoonful of something vaguely resembling pasta in his mouth and spoke around it as he chewed. “This AIM stuff? Only way to get rid of it is to burn it. Remember the Spanish Flu bioweapon that Eliot’s team had to deal with?”

His face ashen, Shelley nodded. “Kill it with fire. Got it. What exactly is this stuff gonna do?”

Flicking his eyes upward, the Soldier fixed Shelley with a solemn look. “We’ll be lucky if we don’t find out.” He turned when a soft ripping noise caught his attention. “<Tripod, stop it. Don’t chew on that. Go find your bone.>”

Tripod paused in mid-gnaw, the corner of her bed caught between her teeth. She snorted, opened her mouth, and clamped down hard on the fabric.

“<No. No! What did I say? That is not a chew toy!>” The Soldier stood, dropped his bagged meal on the table and stalked over to stand above Tripod. “<You shred this one, I’m not buying you another.>”

Shelley had to cover his mouth to keep from snorting out a laugh when Tripod tilted her head back and let out the strangest noise he’d ever heard a dog make.

“<What was that? Did you just talk back at me?>”

She got her back teeth around a section of the bed again and looked up at the Soldier. A growling whine came out as she essentially dared him to do something.
“<Don’t chew on that. No, not a toy.>” The Soldier snapped his fingers when Tripod set up to chew again. “<Stop being a brat. Go find your bone.>”

Tripod blinked and made some sort of uwuwuwuh noise that dragged an unflattering giggle out of Shelley and earned him a glare from the Soldier. “Not helping, asshole.” He turned back to his dog and put his hands on his hips. “<That’s not a goddamn chew toy. You want to worry at something? Go find your bone.>” He snapped his fingers again and pointed to where the bright red rubber bone lay on the other side of the jet. “<Bone.>”

With a grumpy growl and huff, Tripod lumbered over to the bone and began to gnaw on it with quiet, wet squeaking noises. The Soldier watched her with narrowed eyes for nearly a minute before scoffing and walking back to the table. He took several bites of his food before he noticed Shelley watching him with barely contained glee.

“What.”

“Man, the Winter Soldier just had an argument with a dog. This is now officially the highlight of my career.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

Shelley had to duck back into the cockpit to avoid the glob of mushy pasta-like stuff that whizzed toward his head.

***

They’d been expecting bioweapons. They’d been expecting resistance. They’d definitely been prepared for a firefight and another shit-make-it-explode-now moment.

They hadn’t been expecting to stumble into a room that wasn’t on the blueprints.

Shelley and the Soldier burst into the room without any preamble, gunning down anything that moved. Nearly identical in matching black and red combat armor, masks, and goggles, the two of them quickly cleared the room of hostiles. At a signal from the Soldier, Shelley began dragging the bodies into a line against the wall, swallowing thickly as he tried not to look at the gleaming metal tools carefully laid out on tables and trays.

The Soldier prowled through the large room, ignoring the strange prickling on the back of his neck when he passed by a cart of artifacts that should have been safely locked up in the Warehouse. He stopped in front of a gigantic black plastic box; the lid was heavy and thick, with pneumatic supports bolted to the sides and sturdy steel clamps securing it in place. Quiet footsteps told him that Shelley was just behind him and to his right.

“...I’m guessing that ain’t a jacuzzi.”

Stepping forward, the Soldier reached out and snapped the clamps off with his metal hand. “Won’t know til we open it.” Shelley raised his rifle, settling it into his shoulder as the Soldier lifted the lid. The pneumatics hissed as the tank slowly opened, the limited light in the room disappearing into its depths.

Another thing they hadn’t been expecting: a strange-smelling, clear, colorless liquid full up to the lip of the tank, and a naked woman’s body suspended in the fluid.

She wasn’t moving.
The odor tickled the Soldier’s nose and he suppressed the urge to sneeze as he gingerly reached forward and dipped his fingertips in the fluid. Rubbing his thumb over his fingers, he shot a concerned look at Shelley. “This isn’t water.”

“Well then, what the shit is it? Formaldehyde?” Shelley shot back as he turned to watch the door. “I get that this is an interrogation chamber, but why in the everloving fuck would they have a dead woman’s body in a big black tank? Supervillains, man. Fuckin’ *morbid* sons’a bitches.”

Leaning forward, the Soldier peered into the fluid. His eyes widened when he saw the faint movement of her ribs, a quick gasping motion that his own lungs mimicked out of muscle memory. “She’s not dead.”

“What?”

“Shel, *she’s not dead.*” Without a second thought, the Soldier lunged forward into the fluid and dragged the woman toward him.

“*The fuck are you-***

“It’s a PFC. Breathable liquid.” Carefully, the Soldier lifted the barely conscious woman out, crouching to the ground as he hooked one arm under her hips and supported her forehead with his other hand. He positioned her with her nose near the floor and her hips in the air, holding her steady as she gasped, choked, and coughed. “Easy, easy…” he murmured. “Let it drain out. It’s okay to cough. You’re going to be fine.”

Shelley stared at the Soldier, baffled beyond words.

“Perfluorocarbon. Carries enough oxygen for you to breathe it like air.” The Soldier’s voice was soft as he helped the woman roll to her side. “Higher viscosity, so it takes more effort to draw it in. Great way to drown someone without much risk of them actually dying, as long as you pull them out before the CO2 toxicity kills ‘em. Whoever she is, she must be important; that shit costs around a grand a liter.”

Glancing up, the Soldier jerked his head back to the door and waited until Shelley raised his rifle again. “Reason they didn’t train you for this in SERE was because it’s cost-prohibitive for anyone except a high value target. Besides, they can train you to resist waterboarding, but they can’t teach you not to drown.” He turned back to the woman and pressed his fingers to her wrist. “Cough it all up, doll, that’s it. Get it out so that you can get air back in. It’s gonna hurt, that’s okay. You’re gonna be okay now.”

He pulled a clump of slick black hair away from her face as she sputtered and turned her head towards him. Bloodshot black eyes stared up at him, and the woman bared her teeth as she feebly raised her arms to ward off a potential attack.

“We can’t take her with us,” Shelley hissed. “Exfil’s gonna be hard enough as it is with the base on high alert.”

“You’re proposing we leave her here?” The Soldier’s voice was flat and firm and Shelley didn’t need to see his eyes to know they were narrowing dangerously.

“I dunno what to do. We came in here to rip apart a HYDRA base, not rescue a civilian.”

The woman coughed, the sound rasping out of her throat as she curled into a ball and tried to cover herself. She looked between the two men with wide eyes, and her hands shook as she curled them in towards her collarbone. “Not HYDRA,” she gasped quietly.
Both men turned to look at her, their combat masks hiding their confusion. The Soldier was the first to speak. “…what?”

“Not HYDRA.” She sounded English, her voice rough and ragged from the coughing. “Leviathan.”

Stunned silence greeted her words while the Soldier looked up at Shelley. Just as Shelley was muttering, “Leviawhatnow?” the Soldier slowly reached up to remove his goggles and mask, brushing his shoulder-length hair away from his face.

“If you know what Leviathan is, then I’m hoping you know who I am.” When the woman nodded slowly, the Soldier turned his head slightly and pointed to the bodies against the far wall. “Get her something to wear, Shel. No bloodstains.”

Slowly, the woman pushed herself upright and curled herself into a tight ball. “…you’re here to take down Leviathan?”

“Not really, no.” The Soldier grimaced slightly and looked at the floor in front of where he was still crouched. “Thought this was a HYDRA base going in.” He paused and chewed on his lip, unsure of how to continue. “What’s your name?”

“Helena.” She gratefully took the too-large coat and pants that Shelley brought her and slipped into them without a second thought.

Nodding, the Soldier reached out and helped her to her feet. “Any idea what they wanted from you?” Shelley quickly moved to Helena’s other side when she swayed dangerously. She squinted up at the Soldier, thinking, then nodded. “Pete and Myka like you, so…” Sighing, Helena adjusted her arm over Shelley’s shoulder. “Helena Wells, Warehouse 13.”

“…ah.” The Soldier turned to glance over at the table of hackle-raising objects before he realized what he was doing. “Artifacts.”

Helena’s smile was small as she looked down at the floor, dizziness still evident on her face. “Not quite. They want me to build another time machine.”

“…dude.” Shelley shook his head slowly as he let Helena lean against him. “Get your mask back on, Moose. We’re officially rescuing not-male, not-dead HG Wells.”

It took all of two steps to figure out that Helena’s legs weren’t capable of supporting her weight. After that, it took all of two seconds before the Soldier ordered Shelley to carry her and follow close on his six.

An hour later, the Soldier led them confidently back to the jet, the dull boom of the explosives still echoing in his ears. His hands still twitched around his knife and pistol, and he gave Tripod a quick shake of his head when his boots finally hit the Quinjet’s ramp. Not a good time. Too high-strung.

Tripod seemed to understand, turning instead to Helena as Shelley set her down gently on one of the spare bunks. The Soldier heard Shelley rummage around in the bins of food until he found what he was looking for; sitting heavily in the cockpit, the Soldier reached back and slid the blast door shut behind him.

He needed a moment of peace while he processed everything that had just happened.
Tucked into a net in the cargo hold was a large bag of strange devices that Helena had deemed too dangerous to leave behind, even knowing the facility would be reduced to rubble. Looking through the bag have to wait until the next day though; first order of business was remembering how to person, then find Helena some clothes, and then find a way to drop her off at the Warehouse without being detected.

Groaning, the Soldier leaned forward and dropped his head into his hands, ignoring the pinching of the armored plates across his stomach. What was supposed to be a solo mission to eradicate HYDRA and company was quickly devolving into something he wasn’t sure he still had effective control over. First a dog, then another operative, and now a legendary inventor.

Fuck it, he thought with a small shake of his head, squinting his eyes shut for a second before reaching out and booting up the jet’s computers. Might as well make the best of his ragtag team while he still had them.

***

“Here. Give it a try.” Helena handed the knife over and gestured toward the large watermelon sitting on a rock in front of them. “Remember, it’s a three second delay.”

Shelley lounged under a tree several yards away, casually running a sharpener over the edges of the large supply of knives they’d accumulated. He occasionally glanced up but otherwise paid the other two little attention, heavily-lidded eyes focusing on the blade in his hands. All three of them were bare-shouldered and sweating slightly in the muggy, hot forest making up the Parque Nacional Cumbres del Ajusco; Tripod sprawled out in the largest scrap of shade she could find, eyes drooping as she fought off a nap.

It hadn’t been the most fashionable batch of clothing he’d brought back, but when the Soldier returned with multiple bags stuffed full of surplused Army gear, no one complained. In fact, Helena looked right at home in the same grayish-green tank top and dark combat pants that the Soldier and Shelley wore. He’d even found her a few pairs of well-fitting sturdy boots.

Looking down at the knife in his hand, the Soldier turned it over gently, taking care to avoid the release button at the base of the blade. “Injection knife. Clever. What’s the payload?”

“Nitrogen; less likely to be traceable than the standard CO2 discharge.” Helena held up an innocuous steel cartridge that would have looked right at home in an Airsoft gun. “These aren’t easy to charge out here so we’ve got enough for three test runs and the real thing. Don’t waste it.”

She dropped the cylinder into her pocket and smoothed her sweat-damp hair back from her forehead. Taking one last look at the knife, the Soldier pressed the button, stabbed the knife firmly into the watermelon, and jogged backwards until he stood next to Helena.

Precisely three seconds later, the gas cartridge discharged with a percussive hiss and the watermelon ruptured into multiple fragments that rolled haphazardly off the rock. Tripod scrambled to her feet and chased one of the chunks as it rolled down the hill, yipping in excitement.

“Well.” The Soldier raised his eyebrows and nodded approvingly. “I think that’ll do the trick. Time for me to go get dolled up.”

An hour later, a tall man with coppery red hair, faint freckles, a stubborn jaw, and a fluid, swaying grace in his movements wove through the pressing throng of foot traffic. He glanced over the heads of most of the people around him, his shoulders rounded and loose as he unconsciously tried to hide his height. He stopped outside of a doctor’s office, pulled out his phone as if to check his text
messages, and glanced up just as another man in a suit pushed his way through the doors and down the steps to street level.

After a few seconds, the red-haired man continued walking, and glanced back at his phone once more before locking the screen and sliding it back into his pocket.

When the two men reached the corner of the street, the red-haired man made a strange motion with his arm as he walked up next to the doctor, as if to pat him on the back. The doctor stiffened with a sharp intake of breath, and less than a second later was tumbling into traffic, right into the path of an oncoming bus.

Later, the bystanders at the scene said the bus’s brakes hissed loudly right before the impact.

The doctor’s body was pulled from under the bus with one section of his torso frozen solid and another section missing completely. Baffled, the forensics team chalked it up to a freak accident. After all, they weren’t able to find a murder weapon.

“Was the injection knife really necessary?” Shelley asked while he watched the Soldier carefully remove green-colored contacts.

Fixing the younger man with unsettling, mismatched eyes, the Soldier waited a second before quietly responding. “Insurance. This one was personal.”

“One of your…”

“Primary neurosurgeon.” The Soldier turned back to the mirror in the cramped latrine and succeeded in pulling out his other contact. Blinking several times, he put a few drops in each eye and then rubbed them with his flesh hand. He leaned forward on the narrow steel sink and raised his eyes up to his reflection; a youthful face and ancient, tired eyes stared back at him. With a quiet sigh, he turned away and motioned Shelley towards the cockpit. “Get us in the air. Next set of coordinates are in the computer.”

His watch beeped at him and he swung through the kitchen to grab a bottle of water before heading to the bunks. The box with his medications was stowed in the stack of drawers that doubled as a ladder to the top bunk, and the Soldier traced his finger down the chart he’d written up before grabbing the necessary pills.

The air mattress he’d originally thrown on the floor had long since been stowed, and four thin submarine-grade bunks folded down in its place. So far, the fourth just served as extra storage; Helena had claimed one of the two top bunks and left the sturdier, larger lower bunks for the men. She was up there now, legs stretched out in front of her and crossed at the ankles as she researched and cross-referenced the artifacts and devices they’d seized from the Leviathan base.

“Find anything interesting?” the Soldier asked in between mouthfuls of water, stepping over to peer at the data on the screen.

Helena handed him a round disc-shaped object with faintly glowing blue bands around an outside ring. The metal was a dark, gleaming silver and on the underside SSR 44 097 was scratched into it. “I’ve been able to identify everything but this one. Artie and I arranged a dead drop for the Warehouse artifacts, so that shouldn’t take any time away from your missions.”

Turning the device over carefully, the Soldier capped his water bottle and tossed it onto his bunk. “Well, I can tell you right off the bat that you won’t find this in any of your databases.”

“Oh?” Helena leaned over to take a closer look at it. “Any particular reason?”
“Yeah. It’s a prototype that I found in a HYDRA facility in 1944, see the engraved mark there? There should be another one somewhere, Item 98.”

“…another what?”

Chewing on his lip, the Soldier frowned at the all-too-familiar device. “Another doorway. It’s a portal generator, or something near as makes no difference. HYDRA designed it for rapid movement of troops, vehicles, and artillery.” He pointed to the set of dials in the center, a control panel that looked vaguely reminiscent of a vintage radio. “We thought you had to pair them properly, sort of like Bluetooth nowadays, but we never could get it working after we recovered them. We only ever found two, though.”

Helena took the portal generator back and began examining it with an inventor’s eye. “There had to be a problem with it. This is too valuable a tool for it to fade into the footnotes; one would think a device like this would have revolutionized warfare.”

“Oh, it did.” The Soldier laughed bitterly. “When they realized that they only had a one in five chance of the troops actually making it out on the other end though, they got curious. Then, stuff started coming out that they didn’t send in.”

“So, you’re saying…”

He met Helena’s eyes with a worried look. “The multiverse exists, this is the key, and Leviathan’s come back from the dead to play with it. We need to find the other one as quickly as possible.”

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The Soldier rubbed his swollen eyes with one hand, his other gingerly holding the plastic mug full of tea that Helena had given him. “Sorry,” he mumbled, squeezing his eyes shut tightly for a second before staring into the tea.

“It’s quite alright.” Helena smiled gently at him and tugged the weighted blanket back up on to his shoulders. “Tripod gave us plenty of warning.”

And Helena was right; she had. They’d been out in the nearest town stocking back up on food when Tripod started whining, pawing at the Soldier’s leg, and nosing at his hands. Experience had taught him not to ignore her warnings, so Helena hurried them back to the jet while they left Shelley to finish gathering supplies.

“<Good girl.>” The Soldier dropped his shaking hand to where Tripod’s head poked out from the blanket they were both wrapped with. She tilted her head into his hand and blinked up at him as she whuffled quietly. “<I’m feeling better now, I promise,>” he reassured the dog. “<Stop being such a worrywart.>”

Helena chuckled as she tied off the trash bag with the Soldier’s soiled clothes. “She cares about you, that’s all. We all do.”

“Why?” The question flew out of his mouth before he could stop it. “I’m just a- some- just a random fucked up living weapon that-”

Her flat, furious glare cut him off in mid-sentence. “You are so much more than that, Moose. And don’t roll your eyes at me, I’m not going to call you ‘Soldier’ and you’ve already made it clear you left your other name behind. So please, just humor us? Shelley, he sees so much more in you than the cold killing machine that the ghost stories talk about.” Helena tilted her head to the side as she raised an eyebrow. “Trust me as someone who’s been somewhere similar to where you are now,
you have to hold on to whatever humanity you have left, lest your quest for revenge consume you.”

The Soldier snorted and shook his head slightly. “I’m not human, not anymore. I’m not even close. I just look like one.”

“What color do you bleed?” Helena’s eyes were dangerously narrow when the Soldier glanced up, startled by her question.

“…what?”

“What color do you bleed?”

Blinking a few times, he answered, “Red, why?”

“Do you know the difference between right and wrong?”

“Well… yes, even though I sometimes ignore it…”

“When you look in the mirror, what do you see?”

He was starting to get a vague idea of where she was heading, but refused to play her game. “Eyes that have seen way too much for a life that’s lasted way too long.”

“And do you want to die?”

“What? No!” Tripod growled halfheartedly at the Soldier when he sat bolt upright, stomach muscles complaining at the sudden movement. “I mean, yes, eventually, but…” He relaxed back against the pillows between him and the wall and let his eyes fall back to the mug in his hand. “I… I don’t know if I can. That’s one reason I’m doing this. I want to find Lukin and make him pay for what they did to me, I want to make sure that HYDRA and all its bastard children will never hurt anyone ever again, and…”

It was almost too hard for him to admit it, but when Helena crouched in front of him, he found himself saying, “I want to find out if I can even die at all. I saw myself outlive everyone I’ve ever loved in a waking nightmare that I can’t shake off.” The Soldier held up his left hand and tapped the ring with his thumb. He’d finally sorted things out enough in his head to remember that Mickey wasn’t just the Handler. “She died of old age right in front of my eyes. I stood at Steve’s grave and the stone was weathered and old. I…”

Helena took his free hand in hers and gently rubbed her thumbs over the back of it. “Life without the ones we love often feels like it isn’t worth living anymore.” There was a long pause as Helena studied the intricate patterns of the gaps between the metal plates under her thumbs. “I can help you in your search, if you wish. I know a thing or two about outliving everyone I once cared about.”

“I’ve died before.”

That got her attention. “Beg pardon?”

Raising the tea up to take a drink, the Soldier tried to force the tension out of his shoulders. “It’s… It’s not that I haven’t ever died. It’s that I keep coming back. Eventually, I want that to stop. Because it isn’t like what they tell you.” He took another drink, staring at the blanket over his knees with a far-off, haunted gleam in his eyes.

“When that bomb went off in DC in November and I got on the news again… Mickey said my heart stopped for about fifteen seconds before she was able to start CPR. I know I’ve been dead longer
than that before, but that’s the first time I’ve had a point of reference.” Closing his eyes, the Soldier tried to focus on the feeling of Helena’s fingers brushing over his metal hand. “Felt like weeks… months, maybe. I don’t know if it’s different for people who can’t come back, but it feels like eternity’s been squished into a single second.”


The Soldier nodded. “My memory’s not the best in the world, but I remember what it felt like every time I died. I… don’t want to live forever. Not if it means that.”

He’d finished his tea before Helena spoke again.

“Do you love her?”

“Wha- of course I do.” After several seconds, he realized what she was awkwardly trying to ask him. “Oh. Well, she’s not the only one I’d rather not live without, but… yes. Yeah, I s’pose I do.” A fond smile ghosted its way across his face.

Helena’s dark eyes were empathetic and determined when he looked up to meet them. “Then I will do everything in my power to help you find the answers you’re looking for.”

“…thank you. You don’t have to do this. I appreciate it.”

“Consider it repayment of a very, very old debt,” Helena told him quietly with a sad smile, then stood to leave him alone with his thoughts again.

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The square was bustling with people, warm strings of lights and the sharp, spicy smell of food permeating the air. Normally, the Soldier wouldn’t have been willing to risk exposure, but… three people and a dog living in each other’s pockets in a Quinjet? They all needed to blow off some steam, get outside for a bit, breathe some fresh air.

He lifted up the small paper tray in his hands and took another bite of the delicious filled pastry that Shelley told them was an empanada, eyelids fluttering slightly at the explosion of flavor. “Damn, Shel, good call on the food,” he muttered around a mouthful of spicy meat.

“Indeed.” Helena was already halfway through hers, cheeks glowing as she looked around them. The sun was on its way toward setting, vibrant colors painting their way across the sky as it slowly darkened. “Definitely beats those freeze-dried meals in a bag.”

“Better than Soviet rations. Taste like sawdust, and just as nutritious.”

Shelley let out an expressive snort. “He’s right, you know. God, ration bars have got to be some of the most disgusting things I’ve ever eaten. They’ll keep you alive, but it ain’t Eliot’s cooking, that’s for damn sure.”

They wandered over to a storefront where a group of street musicians were set up, playing lively music in the hopes that they might earn some money. The Soldier took the time to finish his food, handed the tray and Tripod’s leash to Shelley, and reached into his pocket to pull out a few bills. With a sly glance at Helena, he turned and held out his hand, slowly stepping out into the open area in front of the musicians.

He dropped the bills into the violinist’s case, and grinned when he saw Helena had followed him. “Might I have this dance?”
The impromptu audience’s attention had already shifted to the two of them as the Soldier clasped one hand around Helena’s and put the other on her waist. She looked up and gave him an embarrassed grimace. “I’m not entirely sure—”

“Just follow my lead.” He smiled down at her, eyes crinkling, and caught Shelley’s eye as he led Helena through the steps. The younger man was grinning from ear to ear, arms crossed and empty food trays dangling from one hand.

Helena turned out to be an excellent dancer, picking up on every subtle cue the Soldier gave her. The next time the Soldier led them in front of the musicians, he noticed that the cases they’d laid out for money were considerably less empty and the violinist flashed him a brilliant smile as he spun past.

Eventually, Helena patted his arm and huffed out a breathy laugh. “Easy there, Moose, I’m getting a bit tired.”

“If you insist.” Raising up his arm, the Soldier let her step into a spin and exit gracefully into the crowd where Shelley was waiting for her. Within seconds, a young woman sauntered her way up and tilted her head back with a challenging smirk.

“¡Baila conmigo!”

He took her outstretched hand, and the musicians started up a sultry, rhythmic tango.

Several minutes later the girl made her own exit and he found himself handed off from partner to partner as more people wandered their way onto the unofficial dance floor. The Soldier felt light, happy in a way that he hadn’t been in a long time, unable to wipe the delighted smile off his face every time he caught Shelley or Helena’s eye.

It would have been easy to ignore the strange, unsettling feeling that suddenly rocketed up the base of his spine if Tripod hadn’t started whining at him. Politely excusing himself, the Soldier wove his way through the dancers and knelt in front of his dog.

“What is it, girl?” She didn’t push her head against his hands like she normally did with a seizure warning, though; she began barking, tugging against her leash, claws scrabbling against the uneven paving stones.

“Moose?”

He shook his head as he looked up to Shelley, confused. Snaking a hand under the top strap on Tripod’s harness, he tried to pull her towards him and soothe her but she didn’t respond. People around them were starting to watch, and he glanced around when he heard a few other dogs barking as well.

“Aw, hell.” Panic dropped into his stomach, cold and heavy. Standing, he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, “<Get away from the buildings! Move!>” The musicians faltered, shooting him confused looks, and several people turned to stare at him. “Terremoto! Terremoto!”

That got their attention.

Seconds after he’d shouted, the rumbling started and the ground rolled under his feet. The Soldier kept his right hand firmly clamped on Tripod’s harness and tugged Shelley and Helena close to him, curling his left arm around their heads as best he could. The shaking slowed and settled, and he tried to control his rapid breathing when he realized that Tripod still hadn’t stopped panicking.
Shelley was muttering a continuous stream of curses under his breath and Helena was already straightening to assess the damage when the Soldier grabbed her by the shoulder and shoved her back down. “There’s more,” he hissed. “Stay down.”

Twenty seconds after the first shock hit, the ground buckled and swayed with the full force of the earthquake.

He lost track of time as he sheltered his companions with his body as much as he could, grunting in pain every time a stone hit him in the back or side. Finally, the earth settled once more and a stunned silence echoed through the square for several long seconds before the screaming started.

Quickly spitting out orders, the Soldier had Helena and Shelley split off to provide emergency care after verifying that their comm units still worked. Tripod shook at his side but followed his commands as he picked his way over to the nearest building. The large façade had collapsed, potentially trapping people inside.

Kneeling down, the Soldier unclipped Tripod’s leash. “Hey. Hey.” He caught her attention and made her focus on him, cupping his hands around her eyes. “<Search.>” She gave his nose a quick lick before weaving her way through the rubble and into the building. A sharp yip answered him moments later.

The Soldier stepped forward and ran his hands over the stone in front of him as he studied the pieces; the largest weighed at least five hundred pounds and would take some creative thinking to move. After a moment’s consideration, he commanded Tripod to stay where she was and flicked off the hologram on his arm, rolling up his sleeves as he did.

He drew his left arm back, shaped his hand into a flat blade, and drove his fingers straight into the sturdy masonry. It crumbled and split under his hands and he glanced behind him to check that the way was clear before shoving the chunks down the steps.

An hour later, covered in sweat and dust, shoulders and lungs burning, the Soldier wrapped his arms around the column that had collapsed across a doorway and heaved upward with all his strength. He set the column on his shoulders and let out a harsh growl as he pressed upward with his legs.

Tripod waited patiently to the side as the people who’d been trapped stumbled their way out of the building. With a shuddering groan, the Soldier let the column fall and sank to his knees for a minute to catch his breath. “Braves mädchen,” he mumbled as Tripod came up to his side, tiredly scratching her behind the ears as he praised her. “<Search.>”

He followed her around the square until the sun was shining in the sky again. Aftershocks shook through the city the whole night, and some of the people Tripod found had been crushed beneath more falling debris. As the Soldier followed Tripod to the next pocket of survivors, he tugged his shirt off and used it to wipe the dust out of his face.

“Well, I guess our cover’s blown now.” Shelley came up behind him, matching his pace, and handed him a bottle of water and a protein bar. “You’re on international news again. At least it’s good press this time.”

“I’m more worried about the people here than what Twitter has to say about me.”

“It’s going to be a helluva lot harder to run undercover ops now.”

They stopped when Tripod split to the side and began pawing and pacing in front of another building. “That’s fine. I think I’ve run out of individual targets for the most part anyway.” He
handed his shirt to Shelley, letting the early morning air prickle across the skin left exposed around his undershirt, and went back to work.

Helena found him several hours after sunrise and made sure he had a full meal and fluids in him before letting him go back to work. For the most part, he coordinated well with the search and rescue teams, lending a hand when they needed extra strength and machinery wasn’t available or feasible.

Tripod finally staggered to a stop around noon, laying down on her side with a heavy sigh as one of the other dogs’ handlers checked her over.

Grunting as he tore out a chunk of plaster, the Soldier ripped apart a wall to allow EMTs to access a trapped family. Once the family was out, he leaned against the remnants of the wall and let his head fall back, closing his eyes as the sun burned across his face.

“<Sir? Everything okay?>” one of the EMTs asked him.

With a groan, the Soldier stood back up. “<I’m fine. Just tired.>”

Dark, concerned eyes looked up at him. “<Maybe you should rest for a bit.>”

“<There’s still people trapped.>”

With that, he found the German shepherd and handler team that he’d been paired with after Tripod left. He followed Mali’s fluffy, wagging tail into the bowels of what looked to be the courthouse until they found another pocket of civilians behind a door that had jammed shut. The Soldier’s shoulders and chest ached as he reached out with his left hand and tore the door clean out of its frame.

Stepping back to let the people make their way out to the street, the Soldier rubbed a dirty hand over his face as he let his shoulders thump against the wall. Without any warning, another aftershock hit and he glanced up just in time to see a huge section of the balcony split off and come crashing down.

He dove forward, bodily shoved a young man out of harm’s way, and roared in pain as the rubble pinned his left leg and arm to the floor. Planting his right hand against the stone, he pushed as hard as he could but it wouldn’t budge.

Mali must have run to get his handler, because within seconds several of the search and rescue team were jogging into the building.

“Okay buddy, keep breathing, you’re gonna be okay,” one of them said, kneeling down at the Soldier’s side.

The Soldier’s vision swam as he tried to look up at the man; a thin, sharp face hovered over him as the man quickly assessed the damage.

“Stay with me, buddy. How’re you feeling?”

“Flat,” the Soldier ground out between gritted teeth. “Decidedly flattened.” He closed his eyes and took a shuddering breath. “I think there’s another stone underneath it. My arm’s pretty firmly held in place but I think my leg’s okay, I just can’t pull it free.”

“Any mechanical damage?”

He groaned and turned to look back up at the man, squinting as he tried to focus his eyes. “Um…
wrist is sending all sorts of unhappy signals. Fingers are okay. Elbow has a bent plate, and I think I’m missing a plate on my bicep. How…”

The man chuckled. “You really did take all the stupid with you, didn’t you?”

“…Steve?” No, the man’s hair was brown and his face was too thin. A fresh wave of pain washed over the Soldier and he blinked hard when consciousness threatened to slip away from him.

“Nope, just me. We’re gonna lift this off of you on three, okay? Stay with me, bud.”

He made it two seconds after they freed him before he passed out.

It must have been some time before he regained consciousness because he found himself on a gurney being rolled up the ramp of the Quinjet. Shelley said something to a person that was out of his narrow, blurry field of view, and Helena glanced down at him from his left when she noticed he was awake.

“Welcome back, Moose.”

“…Moose?” a male voice asked, and the Soldier groggily rolled his head to the side to stare into Rollins’s face.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” the Soldier growled, but it came out more like a moan. The jolt when the gurney rolled over the transition from ramp to cargo hold sent a jolt down his left side and it took him a moment to realize the high-pitched, reedy whine that followed came from him.

Motors whirred as the Quinjet’s access ramp rose up, and the Soldier heard Shelley jog over to the boxes of medical supplies.

“What’s the damage?” he slurred, hoping he’d made sense.

“Broken fibula, dislocated kneecap, your hip’s been twisted harder than a wet rag, and your arm’s going to need some serious repair.” Helena reached over him to take something from Shelley and the Soldier realized a few seconds later that they were working on a more permanent splint for his leg while the bone healed.

“You can fix it, right?” Rollins asked. “Mickey said that after Stark’s last upgrade, he’ll be feeling everything, including pain. Guy’s got to be fuckin’ delirious right now, is there a way we can shut it off until it’s fixed?”


While Rollins dug out the tablet, the Soldier reached over with his right arm and tried to pry off the plate over the data port, but it wasn’t there.

“Jack grabbed it when they got you out,” Helena told him. “We’ll get it back on after I’m done with the repairs.”

A tablet swung into view above him and Rollins connected the cable up to his arm. Taking his time to make sure he hit the right keys, the Soldier tapped a few commands into the terminal window, connected to the microcomputer in his arm, and shut it down.

He let out a heavy sigh when the artificial nerves shut off, and his head cleared significantly within seconds. “Jesus fuck,” he breathed, closing his eyes for a few seconds. Giving himself a bit longer
for his head to stop swimming, the Soldier blinked up at the ceiling of the jet while it slowly came back into focus. “Hokay.”

It took considerable effort to push himself into a sitting position one-handed, even with Shelley helping. Once his arm was in a sling and he was in his bunk leaning against the wall with his leg stretched out in front of him, the Soldier called everyone over.

“Fill me in on everything since I passed out, and you’d better have a damn good reason for why that man is on my plane.”

Rollins sucked his lips in and looked away.

After patiently listening to Shelley’s report, the Soldier nodded and motioned towards the cockpit. “Get us in the air, someplace unpopulated where we can live off the land for a few weeks. I want to stay off the grid until my hashtag stops trending again.”

Shelley snorted, tossing him a lazy salute and a lopsided smirk as he stood and walked away.

“Helena, go take inventory of what we’ve got for food and supplies; coordinate with Shelley for a restock in a small town along the way. And if you could bring me something to eat and some of that extra-strength motrin, I’ll owe you laundry duty for a week.”

Alone with the Soldier now, Rollins shifted uncomfortably where he sat on Shelley’s bunk under the scrutiny of unreadable gray eyes.

“Why are you here?” the Soldier finally asked him.

Rollins glanced up. “Conditional release. SHIELD deployed me to find you and bring you home.”

The Soldier thanked Helena when she handed him an MRE, a spork, and the bottle of painkillers. “Yeah, that ain’t gonna happen.”

“Not saying it will.” Rollins leaned back in the bunk, shoulders bumping into the dull gray wall behind him. “Well, the finding part did, but I have no intention of bringing you home until you want to be home. Mickey’s missing you pretty badly and I hate seeing her like that, but—”

“Give me one good reason to trust you and believe that you ain’t gonna stab me in the back, son.”

Rollins chuckled mirthlessly. “Cap said the same damn thing to me when I got to the Compound, and Mickey warned me you might not want to see me.”

“Tempted to toss you out the cargo hatch when we hit altitude,” the Soldier replied dryly around a mouthful of something resembling chicken.

“Please don’t.” Shelley’s voice drifted back from the cockpit. “We’re low on fuel and that’ll fuck up our aero. Besides, people go splat without ‘chutes and I’m pretty sure that counts as murder. I don’t wanna be an accessory.”

“Says the guy from Delta Force.” Shaking his head, the Soldier stabbed back into the pouch with his spork, nearly dislodging it from where he’d wedged it between his left arm and chest. “Still waiting, Rollins. Two of the three times I’ve seen you after the Uprising, you had a gun pointed at my head, so I don’t have much in the way of trust for you right now.”

Rollins swallowed and frowned slightly, staring down at his knees. “I know. Um…” He started picking at his nails; his cuticles were red, spotted and swollen from the nervous habit. “Honestly? I
just wanted Mickey to be safe. That’s why I ended up on STRIKE Alpha: the benefits package. Half the guys there, HYDRA had something over our heads to keep us from coming clean once we were there for long enough. But after they made me take the shot that nearly killed my sister?”

Looking up, Rollins met the Soldier’s eyes with a steely look. “I want to tear apart the bastards that ordered me to do that.”

“If you’re lying to me…” The Soldier pulled the spork between his lips to clean it, then brandished it at Rollins. “I’ll use this to carve your heart out.”

“…that’s a spork. You’re gonna kill me with a spork?”

“It’s dull, you twit. It’ll hurt more.”

Rollins suddenly burst into laughter, clutching his sides. “Oh my god,” he gasped out. “I can see why she likes you.” Once he caught his breath, he pushed himself to his feet and walked back into the cargo hold, coming back a few seconds later with a book in his hands. “Here. Mickey said to give you this, said it might help you trust me a little more.”

Setting aside the nearly-empty MRE bag, the Soldier took the book from Rollins and bit his lower lip when he saw the title. Wafer-thin pages and archaic Italian greeted him when he let it fall open in his hand, and the stamp on the inside cover told him it was the same book he’d bought in Portland so many months ago.

“Okay.” His voice cracked slightly. “Okay, you’re good.” After a breath, the Soldier looked up to meet Rollins’s eyes and gave him a tired smile. “Welcome aboard.”

“Moose!” Helena poked her head around the corner. “I’ve got everything ready, just let me know when you want to start the repairs.”

Rollins rubbed his forehead and shook his head slightly. “Okay, someone has got to tell me why you’re calling him ‘Moose.’ Y’all know who this is, right?”

“Winter fuckin’ Soldier, man,” Shelley answered him. “But I ain’t callin’ him Soldier or Soldat or Asset or whatever the fuck, and he’s as big an’ stubborn as a moose, and he damn near shot me when I called him Bucky the first time, so…”

Turning slowly, Rollins raised an eyebrow and gave the Soldier a skeptical look. “‘Moose’ it is. You know if I tell Mickey about that, she’s never going to let you hear the end of it, right?”

“Better than Frosty the Snowman.” The Soldier hauled himself up out of the bed and half-hopped over to where Helena had set up a work table. “Or Frozone, Tin Man, Snow Cone, Bigfoot, Terminator, or any of the other stupid-ass nicknames Tony gave me.”

Helena helped him pull his arm out of the sling and position it on the table. “This way, yes, thank you. I’d love to meet this Tony Stark sometime. He sounds like quite the interesting fellow.” A small wrinkle formed between her eyebrows as she leaned in to look at the intricate mechanisms inside the Soldier’s arm.

“Interesting’s definitely the word for him. How’s the team doing lately, Rollins?”

Rollins shrugged and leaned against the wall just outside the bunks. “A little shook up after having to take down Ultimo. HYDRA managed to salvage enough vibranium from the wreckage in Sokovia to build a giant death robot. Cap took the team to somewhere in Eastern Europe and stopped it from flattening a small village. I deployed right before they got back so all I’ve got to go
on is radio chatter with the pilot that airdropped me.”

He shifted slightly and his eyes softened while he watched Helena work. “Mickey’s doing better. She’s got these new bracelet things, woven and wrapped wire. Thor brought them down for her, I think. Doesn’t need the dampers as much anymore. Tony built her a rink at the Compound and she skates there a lot. Has a garden up on the roof that she uses to practice and learn how to control everything.”

“Good, that’s, uh—” The Soldier twitched slightly when Helena prodded a damaged plate near the seam of scar tissue on his chest. “Good. Yeah. Ow. Could you be a little more careful?”

Helena blinked up at him, confused. “I thought you said the nerves were turned off.”

“Mostly. The implants are, but that bit’s still decidedly squishy in places.”

“Alright then.” She picked up his wrist and turned it over, gently removing the plates as the Soldier pointed to the access points. “This might be easier with it powered on if you could extend each plate individually for me.” When Rollins coughed emphatically, Helena turned to him. “Something to say?”

“Sorry, it’s just, last time he had it worked on live, he sent the technician crashing into the wall in a bank vault with enough force to shatter his skull and neck.” Rollins shrugged. “And that’s before he had sensation in it.”

“Rollins, I think Shelley might need a copilot.”

“Nope! Just fine!”

The Soldier flicked his eyes towards the cockpit without moving his head. “Shel, you need a copilot. Rollins. Go.”

Rollins blinked at him for a few seconds before turning and leaving; he pulled the door shut behind him and the Soldier relaxed noticeably as soon as it sealed shut.

“You don’t like him.” It was an observation rather than a question. Helena grabbed a penlight and handed it to the Soldier. “Point it here.”

“Well, he was the gun on my head if I ever fucked up working for HYDRA. And then after that, he kind of tried to kill me, twice and a half.”

“…and a half?” One of Helena’s eyebrows quirked up, but that was all the reaction he got.

“Bomb, then twice with a gun. I think the bomb was more of a distraction than anything else though, probably didn’t expect me to actually run towards it.”

“Jack said something about ‘taking all the stupid with you.’ I’m assuming that’s what he meant.” Something clicked loudly inside his wrist.

“Was that a good click or a bad click?”

“Good click, I hope.” Sitting up, Helena rolled her shoulders back and rocked her head from side to side. “The articulation is exquisite. When was this designed?”

The Soldier gave her a one-sided shrug. “No idea. I don’t even remember exactly when I got it installed. But going back to your previous question, he’s kind of my girl’s older brother, so…”
Helena gave him a slight smile and a nod before leaning back in. “Probably best to keep him among your friends, then.”

“Something like that.”

While Helena worked, Shelley kept a video feed of them active on one of the screens in the cockpit.

“You don’t trust her?” Jack asked quietly.

“Nah, it ain’t that. She’s a smart cookie and she’s helped us out of enough scrapes that she’s part’a the team now.” Shelley reached down to scratch Tripod between the ears as she blearily stared out the windscreens panels near the floor. “Plus, the dog likes her, so I figure she’s alright. I’m more worried about him.”

Looking up in concern, Jack searched Shelley’s face for any fear or other risks but couldn’t find any.

“What do you mean?”

“Well… he’s got some stuff he’s dealin’ with. Brain’s a little messed up. Has to take all these pills, and he’s still barely functional sometimes. The seizures are scary, and sometimes he just goes catatonic. What HYDRA did to him, man… it’s…”

“It’s horrible.” Jack’s voice was hoarse, his throat dry. “I know. I was there. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the screaming.”

“So, it’s really true, then? All of the stuff they talked about during his trial?” Shelley didn’t look like he wanted an answer.

“Yeah. The Chair, the torture… I watched them do most of it.” Jack leaned forward in his chair and dropped his head into his hands, brushing his fingers through the short, fluffy hair that reminded him every day of his time in the Raft. “Didn’t know who he was until my SO figured it out. All we’d been told for years was, ‘He’s dangerous. He’ll kill you if you give him any leeway in your orders. Keep him under control no matter what you have to do.’ Some of the guys took that to heart more than the others. They…”

“I know. Let’s not talk about that bit.”

Jack glanced up; Shelley’s eyes were tight as he stared out the windscreens. “Pierce was the only one that had absolute control over him. Treated him like a child, and… with what they did to his head, he probably wasn’t that far off. But the Asset… Barnes… they were right. He only followed orders to the exact letter. If you didn’t directly order him to kill someone, he wouldn’t. If you identified two targets in a group of three people, it’s like the third person didn’t exist unless they attacked him.

“He’d hunt targets down like a bloodhound, and sometimes we’d lose his trail until he reported in for extraction. The training he had, he’s a fuckin’ ghost. Just…” He snapped his fingers to illustrate the point. “…disappear on you, right like that. Mission reports were always… he’d never tell you anything except what you asked for, so you had to know what you needed. Tiny little bits of rebellion, and I didn’t even see them there until it was too late.”

“Hey, don’t put this on yourself, man.” Shelley looked over at him and frowned. “Nothing you could’a done. If even half the reports are true, HYDRA had its tentacles in everything.”

“Yeah, and I nearly got my baby sister killed because of it.”

“Draymond?”
Jack couldn’t help but smile warmly. “Yep. Mickey, my little Mickey Mouse.” He laughed, shaking his head. “God, talk about karma. Barnes ends up at her gym, they become best buddies, her roommate gets her kicked out so he’s a goddamn gentleman and sleeps on his own couch for a month so she’s got a place to crash. She gets hired by SHIELD because she’s awesome and she’s a doctor, and then they assign her to be his handler. Fast forward a bit, she takes a fucking bullet for him.”

“What is this, a romance novel?” Shelley snorted expressively but couldn’t keep the smirk off his face

“Nope, just some really, really bitchy karma coming back to bite me in the ass.”

“So…”

Exhaling sharply, Jack leaned back in his chair and hooked his elbows over the headrest. “Yep, my baby sister’s knockin’ boots with the Winter Soldier. Good thing Mum and Dad aren’t around anymore or holy shit would family holidays be awkward.”

“God, yeah…” Shelley rolled his eyes and laughed. “No guns at the dinner table! New house rule!”

Tripod woofed quietly and Jack reached down to scratch her shoulders. “Really, though, I don’t give a damn what those two get.”

The Soldier’s voice was audible even through the blast door. “Rollins, you ass, you give so many damns they’re visible from space!”

“Great. Supersoldier hearing. Fucking fantastic. When this is over, I want my sanity back,” Jack groaned into his hands.

Chapter End Notes

Braaaaaain. My brain needs rebooting.

Update on Book 2: just finished the first draft of Chapter 14. I have high hopes that I can start posting it right away after Prizrak finishes, and that we won’t have any downtime!

Also, the Away Team is so. much. fun. Their team dynamic just writes itself. I think I barfed out like three chapters in one night on a writing binge. It was awesome.
Chapter Notes

The flashback scene at the beginning of this chapter is pretty heavy and dark. Please heed the warnings and skip if needed - it’s a fairly relevant plot point, but it’s referenced enough in other parts of the fic that you won’t miss too much.

**Trigger Warnings:**
- Flashback: directly referenced off-screen death of very minor character: cancer
- Flashback: domestic violence and psychological abuse
- Flashback: killing in self defense, defense of others
- Flashback: transphobia
- References to overdose/poisoning used as assassination method
- Combat mission gone bad - significant but non-fatal injury, appropriate medical attention
- Assassination via sniper rifle
- PTSD triggered by unexpected situation

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cancer.

They’d said it was operable. They’d promised him she wasn’t too far advanced. He’d had to beg and borrow and plead and do everything but get on his knees in front of Greg just to afford her treatment.

And she still died.

And there was nothing he could do.

Jack snarled and swung another fist, long past caring about his technique. If he took it out here, where he couldn’t hurt anyone… That was better. It was always better. Imagining Greg’s face on the bag in front of him made it easier not to punch the guy in person.

He’d heard the acidic words Greg dripped into Mickey’s ears. He’d seen what it did to her. He knew how afraid she was in her own home, how she never left her room unless she absolutely had to. The only time he ever saw her smile any more was when she was skating.

Three more months until Mickey could begin treatment, and Mum wasn’t going to be there to see her daughter become who she was supposed to be.

Sharp spikes of pain shot through his hands every time he slammed his fists into the bag. The wraps were already stained red over his swollen and bruised knuckles.

It was better this way.

“Hey, Rollins!”

Jack ignored the voice and kept swinging.
“Rollins!”

Footsteps approached him.

“Jack, come on, man. Knock it off, you’re gonna hurt yourself.”

Someone reached out and hooked his elbow. With a growl, Jack spun around, his other hand flying towards the face of whoever had stopped him.

Brock blocked the blow easily and grabbed Jack firmly by the wrists, looking at his hands with alarm. “Jesus, man, what the hell happened?”

Panting, Jack tried to answer but words caught in his throat and his vision blurred. He finally succeeded in gasping in a breath before Brock reached for his shoulders and pulled him in for a tight hug.

“I’m so sorry,” Brock whispered in his ear. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Awkwardly holding his hands to avoid getting blood on Brock’s shirt, Jack leaned into him and tried to remember how to breathe better than the wet, choking gasps that were all he could manage.

A faint chirping noise caught Brock’s attention and he led Jack over to the wall. “Sit, I’ll answer it.” He dug through Jack’s bag and pulled out his phone. “This is Rumlow.”

Brock’s eyes hardened as he listened to the person on the other end of the phone. “We’re on our way. Be there as soon as we can. Stay safe, okay?” He hung up and tossed the gray brick back into Jack’s bag, then crouched down next to him. “Mickey called. She’s scared and Greg’s yelling at her. Says it’s bad, worse than usual this time. I’m gonna drive you home and we’ll make sure she’s okay.”

Nodding absently, Jack let Brock tug him to his feet and followed him out of the gym.

They pulled up to the house just as the front door opened and Mickey fell out; she stumbled, tripped, and rolled down the stairs from the porch. Greg stomped out after her and threw a large duffel back towards her that landed heavily on her legs. Jack could barely understand what Greg was shouting with how thickly he was slurring the words together, but he knew what it meant.

Brock and Jack reached Mickey at the same time. She was curled into a ball, hugging her arms in to her chest, and Brock growled softly when he saw the bruising and swelling on her wrist. “C’mere, sweetheart,” he murmured, helping her sit up and pulling her in tight to his chest. “Jack?”

Jack was already pushing himself to his feet and stalking towards Greg, fury written across his face, but he stopped dead when Greg pulled a gun out of his waistband and swung it up.

“You keep that sissy boy outta my house and outta my life.” Swaying where he stood, Greg could barely keep the gun level.

“You keep that sissy boy outta my house and outta my life.” Swaying where he stood, Greg could barely keep the gun level.

“Let me through and I’ll pack up all of our things and you’ll never have to see us again.”

He wasn’t sure what happened next; one second, Greg had the gun pointed at him, and the next, it drifted towards Mickey and his trigger finger tightened reflexively when he stumbled slightly. Jack threw himself to the side just in time to have the report of the gun ringing through his ears and searing pain shoot up from his bicep.
The next thing he knew, he was sitting with his legs hanging off the back of an ambulance, with a blanket around his shoulders and a paramedic fussing over his arm.

Mickey was already sitting in Brock’s truck, hugging a too-large jacket around herself tightly and staring blindly at the dashboard.

Brock spoke with the police officers, pointing back and forth between Jack and the house. Blood was smeared on the porch and door frame, and two people hauled away a body bag.

“That was a brave thing you did,” the paramedic told Jack quietly. “Your friend was just telling everyone how you saved their lives.”

“Where’s Greg?”

The paramedic stopped working on his arm and leaned over to get a closer look at Jack. “You don’t remember?”

Shaking his head was a mistake; the world swayed under his feet and Jack nearly threw up. “What happened? My head hurts.”

“He pushed you too far is what happened. Took a shot at you and you fought back. He managed to pistol whip you in the head pretty hard before you broke his neck.” When Jack paled, the paramedic patted him on the shoulder. “There won’t be any charges filed, from what I’ve heard. They’re calling it self-defense. Your neighbor came out when he heard the gunshot, he backed up your friend’s story word for word.”

“So… he’s gone?” Jack must not have been able to hide the relief in his voice completely, because the paramedic gave him another concerned look.

“I noticed Mickey had some marks on…”

“Her.”

“Her wrists. Thank you. Was that from your dad?”

“Stepdad. Neither of us are related to that son of a bitch.”

“Okay.” The paramedic finished cleaning the graze wound on Jack’s arm and set a piece of gauze over it. “Did he hurt you?”

“Oh, he wouldn’t touch me,” Jack answered with a bitter laugh. “I work in armed security.” Close enough to the truth, anyway. SHIELD still wasn’t public knowledge.

“So, he hurt your little sister instead.”

Jack nodded, looking back over to where Mickey sat. She still hadn’t moved except to wipe away the tears that just kept coming. “I need to get over to her. She’s pretty shook up and she’s got skating practice in a few hours.”

The roll of medical tape squeaked at the paramedic as he pulled off a piece. “Ice skating?”

“Yeah.”

“Get her out on the ice but make sure her coach knows to keep an eye on her, okay? That’ll help her more than anything else right now. Keep things as normal as possible to give her as much stability as you can.” When the paramedic finished applying the bandage, Jack stood slowly and
folded up the blanket.

“Thank you. Um… did she get looked at?”

“Yeah, you were still pretty out of it, though. Sprained wrist, some bruises on her knees from where the bag landed on her. She’s probably going to need a lot of support after this.”

Jack did his best to smile. “That’s what she’s got me for.”

When he got back to the truck, Brock was waiting for him. “You two can crash at my place until things settle down, okay?”

Nodding, Jack slid into the backseat. Brock had already packed away all of Jack and Mickey’s meager belongings and thrown it in the back of his truck. “Hey, my car’s still at the gym, can we swing by there on the way?”

“Sure thing.” Brock cranked the truck to life and threw it in gear before glancing over at Mickey. “How you holding up, peanut?”

“Can we hit the ice early?”

Jack blinked away the prickling in his eyes and reached forward to hug Mickey around the car seat. “Sure. I’ll dig my skates out once we get to Brock’s place and then I’ll take us to the rink. How’s that sound?”

Mickey nodded and reached up to wrap her hands around Jack’s arms, holding on tight until Brock dropped Jack off at the gym.

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Jack didn’t know what he’d been expecting when he made contact with Barnes and his team, but this… this wasn’t it.

The Green Beret turned Delta Force soldier was flipping burgers on a portable charcoal grill, humming off-key pop songs to himself as he danced back and forth wearing a shockingly pink apron.

The military working dog with a state-of-the-art prosthetic leg snored in the shade next to the jet, legs twitching as she chased dream bunnies.

The supposedly time-travelling and not-a-dude genius inventor lounged on a towel in a bikini popping bubblegum that matched her overlarge sunglasses, halfway through Fifty Shades of Gray.

And last but not least, the world-feared, infamously deadly assassin stripped down to his briefs and ran whooping towards the lake before swan-diving off a rock.

All in all, this wasn’t looking like the team of lethal black ops specialists he’d been led to believe he was joining.

“C’mon, Rollins!” Barnes hollered from where he was treading water some fifty feet out. “Get yer ass in the water!”

“It’s a lake. With things living in it. Nope. No, thank you.” Jack stretched his arms upward and laced his fingers behind his head, crossing his legs at the ankle as he sat in one of the folding chairs from the jet. “I’m just fine here, dry and not getting my feet bitten off by fish I can’t fucking see.”
He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, taking a long, deep breath of the clean forest air around them. It was nice, he had to admit, being able to take a bit of a breather after so long without sunlight and then months of brutal training and conditioning.

Somehow, he didn’t hear Barnes emerge from the lake or approach him, so it came as a surprise when a cold, wet arm grabbed him by the waist and hauled him out of the chair.

“Jesus—” He tried to struggle for a few seconds, then stopped when he caught Helena’s smirk as she looked over her sunglasses at him. “Tell Mickey I love her,” Jack called over to her, resigned to his fate. “It’s been nice being her brother all these years. I’ll—”

He didn’t get to finish his sentence before Barnes unceremoniously tossed him off the large rock.

Sputtering, Jack clawed his way up to the surface and coughed out the water he’d accidentally inhaled. Barnes grinned savagely down at him, fists on his hips and head tilted cockily.

“You’re lucky my phone was in the jet, asshole.”

“It’s a burner anyway.” Barnes crouched, jumped, and somersaulted through the air into another perfect dive. When he surfaced, his reddish hair was plastered to his head in ropy curls and his eyes crinkled when he smiled at Jack. “Plus, the lake’s dead anyway, must’ve inverted recently. Nothing’s come close to me since I got in or I wouldn’t’ve dumped you in here.”

Jack was already swimming towards the shore. “Gee. Thanks.” Once he was in water shallow enough to stand, he straightened up and tugged off his sopping wet shirt and jeans, tossing them onto the sandy lakeshore before turning back to the water. “If anything eats me, I’m going to haunt you for the rest of your very, very long life.”

“Oh, I’m so scared,” Barnes taunted him.

“Y’know, I’m starting to wonder if the reason they kept you muzzled is because otherwise you’d sass and duckface your targets to death.”

Letting out a short bark of laughter, Barnes followed Jack further into the lake. “Nah. Has to do with a mission they sent me on in the 70s. Basically no one in China had ever met a white guy before, so—”

“Wait. They sent you to China in the 70s?”

“Um… yeah?” Barnes blinked at Jack, hands sculling slowly through the water. “Right around the time Deng Xiaoping ended up in power. Anyway, the Chinese team had never seen a white guy before except on TV, much less one that spoke Mandarin. They thought I was from Hebei, at first. Said my accent could peel paint.” He chuckled and lazily leaned back, staring up into the cloudless sky.

“Djenya – my handler at the time – he didn’t speak a lick’a Mandarin so he had basically no control over the guys, and he couldn’t really control me because they didn’t have any of the equipment there to wipe me. The Chinese team ended up taking orders from me, which kind of fucked up our power structure a bit. God, Djenya was pissed.”

“I’ll bet.” Intrigued, Jack treaded water slowly as he watched Barnes.

“I ended up doing tai chi with them a lot. Took ‘em four days to figure out that I have the alcohol tolerance of a goddamn grizzly bear, and I think we ended up drinking more shaojiu than water when we were off duty. I think they thought I was some sort of movie star or somethin’, I dunno.
And then after that, when they dropped me in Vietnam, they gave Djenya a translator and slapped that muzzle on my face.”

“God, the KBG actually dumped you in the middle of isolationist China and thought that’d be a good idea?”

“Hey, at least I got to enjoy myself a bit that time. I didn’t get to smoke a single fuckin’ joint during the Summer of Love.”

Jack did a double-take. “You were there?”

“Mnhm.” Barnes flipped over onto his stomach and started swimming out further with long, smooth strokes. “Population control.”

Startled, Jack had to resort to dog paddling to keep himself afloat. “You mean crowd control.”

“Nope. Definitely population control. Lots of political dissidents that needed to be quietly removed. You know how HYDRA does things. That many drugs freely available? Easy enough to mix something in that wouldn’t get detected until it was too late.”

Jack snorted and winced uncomfortably. “God, thanks for reminding me how evil my superior officers were. Oh, random question and you don’t have to answer, I’m just stupidly curious…”

“Shoot.” Barnes turned to face him and smirked.

“Well, back… before, you know…” With an awkward smile, Jack gestured toward Barnes’s chest. “You weren’t quite so… hairy.”

“It’s easier to attach heart monitors and other sensors when you’re waxed bald,” Barnes answered flatly. “Once every two weeks, for as long as I can remember.”

Jack didn’t know how to respond to that, so he simply stared in shock. “…fuck, man.”

“Wasn’t so bad. Made it easier to clean things up after missions, you know.”

“Jesus… I just…” Jack splashed water on his face to hide the shame burning in his cheeks and slicked his hair back. “To know that it was you inside there this whole time. How much they had to do to you to keep that buried that deep. I can’t even imagine it, and god, I feel so responsible. You’re nothing like the Asset anymore, but it’s still uncanny and I can’t get over the fact that you had this mountain of sass and snark and personality just hiding away in there this whole damn time.”

He was rewarded with a lopsided, friendly smile. “Well, Mickey had a lot to do with it. I mean, there’s a lot of people that helped, but Micks, she’s somethin’ special.”

“Yeah, speaking of which.” Jack swam a little closer. “I mean, I’m kind of terrified of you because you actually can kill me with a spork if you really wanted to, but… break her heart and I’ll, um…”

“Break m’ kneecaps?” Barnes drawled.

Chuckling awkwardly, Jack shook his head. “Well, I was going to say that but I think we both know how that would turn out. I’ll just make sure you never get another bite of her cooking.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t dare.”

He fixed Barnes with a wolfish grin. “Try me.”
Fifteen minutes and an exhausting water fight later, the two men trudged up the shore and gratefully picked up the towels that Helena had pulled out for them at some point. Jack did his best not to watch as Barnes dried himself off, stepping away a bit to give the man some space. Once dressed, though, Jack noticed that Barnes’s normally thick, wavy hair was starting to frizz quite a bit.

“Damn, dude,” he muttered, stepping forward and taking a closer look. “Mickey hears about you dye-burning your hair, she’s going to kill me. How many times have you done this?”

“About once a week since I left New York.” The towel muffled his reply and Barnes peeked a baleful eye out of the wad of terrycloth. “And yes, I know it’s ruining my hair, but I don’t have much of a choice. Probably going to have to shave it off soon anyway.”

“Mickey’s going to kill me.” Jack reached out, waited for Barnes to nod, and then combed his fingers through the frizzed russet-brown hair. “I mean, there’s a few tricks I used on her hair when she first started bleaching it, but… I can’t make any guarantees.”

“I’m all ears,” Barnes told him with a shrug. “What do you need?”

“Coconut oil and honey. Olive oil works in a pinch.”

Helena rolled onto her side and tucked a bookmark into her book before looking up at them. “You’re in luck. I picked up some stuff for my own hair at the shop. It’s in my drawer in the bunks, go see if that’ll work.”

Once Jack had Barnes seated in front of him and the goopy, sludgy mixture of hair-be-better waiting in a bowl, he pulled out his phone and opened a video he’d taken before deploying. “Here. Figured you might like this. It’s the new routine she’s working on.”

“Hmm?” Barnes took the phone and tapped the play button. His mouth fell open slightly when he saw Mickey step into the frame and glide out onto a gleaming white ice rink. “Oh.”

Jack patted him gently on the shoulder. “She’s looking forward to skating with you again, by the way. Now hold still so I can see exactly how much work I have in front of me.”

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Jack still couldn’t entirely wrap his head around how Barnes could jump from one shipping container to the other, tuck and roll out of the fall, and get up running without making a sound. Equally baffling was how he managed to do that in full combat armor with guns and knives strapped to every limb and a rifle slung over his shoulder.

Pacing forward slowly, Jack cleared the next zone for Helena to scan while Shelley covered the rear. If they didn’t find the container soon they’d be sitting ducks when the day shift showed up; sunrise was less than two hours away.

Barnes’s voice crackled through the comms. “Heard something at the south gate. Stay here.” The barely-visible silhouette hovering over one of the shipping containers two rows down slithered back and disappeared. Quick hand signals from Shelley directed Jack and Helena to a more defensible position, sheltered from attack on as many sides as possible.

Forcing himself to breathe evenly, Jack dropped to a knee and drew his sidearm, handing it to Helena. She glanced at it briefly, stowed the device she’d been using to scan the containers, and racked the slide as quietly as possible.

Thirty heart-stopping seconds passed before Barnes spoke again, barely breathing the words.
“Company, southeast corner. Eight hostiles, three heading your way. Sounds like we tripped a silent alarm.”

Staccato bursts of gunfire echoed through the shipping yard, and it took a single glance between them for Shelley and Jack to agree that now was the time for a tactical retreat.

“They have an enhanced. Do not engage.” Barnes grunted and the solid thwack of hand to hand combat filtered through. “Repeat – fuck – do not engage!”

Shelley spun rifle-first around a corner and immediately stumbled backward when several rounds slammed into the armor plating on his chest; Jack grabbed him by the harness across his shoulders and dragged him back into cover. “Not an option!” he hollered. “Kinda stuck with the engaging part!” They flattened themselves against the shipping container, Jack and Shelley switching positions to allow the younger man to catch his breath.

Without a moment’s pause, Jack lobbed one of Helena’s shock grenades at the hostiles, sneaking a glance to confirm the area was clear before leading them forward. “Barnes, time to set up an extraction. Where are you?”

The only response was a thick, ripping explosion at the other end of the yard that sent a shipping container careening into the air.

“Got it, thanks. On our way.”

“Do not, repeat, DO NOT engage-” Barnes’s voice was choked off by a pained grunt, and the rest of his team broke into a run directly toward his location.

They paused for Jack to boost Shelley up through a running jump onto the top of a shipping container when they neared the explosion site, and Helena immediately fell into place on Jack’s six. When they finally rounded the last corner, though, all they saw were the scuffs and smears of dirt thrown around by the fight, the burned-out shell of a shipping container laying askew, and Barnes on his back in the middle of it all.

He choked and gasped around the knife protruding from the narrow gap between two of the armor plates on his chest; the blade was driven deep into his ribcage a few inches under his right collarbone. His lips were stained bright red, and his hands shook weakly as he fought the urge to yank the knife straight out.

“Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.” Dropping to his knees, Jack quickly looked over the wound. “We can’t take that out of you here, buddy. Can you walk?” Barnes didn’t respond until Jack gently patted him on the rough surface of his mask where it covered his cheek. “Hey. We gotta go. Shelley, give me some help!”

They couldn’t avoid jarring the wound as they lifted Barnes; he let out a ragged, reedy cry when Shelley ducked under his right arm. Jack tossed his rifle to Helena and took back his pistol and they slowly made their way out of the shipping yard. Barnes was barely conscious by the time they reached the jet, his feet dragging in the dirt behind them.

“He’ll heal from it quickly as long as we can keep him from bleeding out,” Helena said as she pulled out the boxes of first aid supplies. “Just set him down right there, and get his mask off. Tripod, auf dein Platz. Is there an exit wound on his back?”

Shelley grunted as they gently flipped Barnes over to lie on his back in the middle of the cargo hold and immediately removed Barnes’s armor plate by plate before cutting away the black underlayer
surrounding the wound. “Knife’s only three inches long, serrations go in about a half inch.” He had
two of the same model knife strapped to his right shin at that moment.

“Good. Jack, I need you to seal the wound as soon as I remove the knife.” Helena handed him
something resembling a hot glue gun with bright blue material in it before using a syringe to inject a
local anesthetic into Barnes’s chest.

Barnes made a noise that was a cross between a gag and a whine as Helena carefully worked the
blade free. As soon as the tip cleared, Jack clamped down on the gun’s trigger and pressed as much
of the goopy blue material as he could in and around the wound. He set the glue gun down once he
was sure he’d applied enough medical glue and dug through the rest of the supplies until he found a
decompression needle.

“Okay, big guy, this is gonna hurt.” Without any further warning, Jack uncapped the needle,
measured out the insertion point, and firmly pressed it into Barnes’s lung. The hiss of trapped air
leaving Barnes’s body very nearly made Jack gag, but training and practice kept his hands steady as
he pulled the needle out to leave the thin metal catheter in place.

“Goddammitwhatthefuck-” The words were barely a gasp, but Barnes was finally starting to come
around.

“Had to be the enhanced that stabbed him,” Shelley muttered, eyeing the material the knife had
pierced. “Takes a lot of force to get through this stuff.”

Groaning quietly, Barnes rolled his head to the side and blinked, squeezing his eyes shut each time.

“Hey, man, you with us?” Jack waved a hand in front of Barnes’s face to get his attention, and
Barnes closed his eyes and rubbed his face with his left hand, leaving his right arm limp at his side.

“Mother fucker. Explosion must’ve ruptured my eardrums.” After a few seconds, he let out a
gurgling sigh. “Get me on the horn with the Avengers. We gotta call this one in.”

“…what? No.” Shelley shook his head. “We can’t do that, you specifically said-”

“I know what I said, and I’m countermanding it now. Get off yer ass and bring me a tablet or I’m
gonna get up and do it myself.”

“Okay, fine, fine. Cool yer tits, Moose.” Shelley rolled his eyes as he stood and walked to the
kitchen to grab Barnes’s tablet. “What’re you gonna tell ‘em?”

“We got a new player on the board: enhanced man who can’t feel pain. Something’s familiar about
how he fights and what I could see of his face and neck are covered in burn scars.” Barnes tried to
take a deep breath and grimaced. “I couldn’t get a positive ID though, so they’ll have some work to
do.”

“What do we do about our target?” Helena asked quietly, glancing down in surprise when Barnes
chuckled weakly.

“They led me right to it. Blew it sky high, ain’t nothin’ left of it now.” Wincing, Barnes kept his
right arm tight against his torso as he slowly pushed himself up into a sitting position. He glanced
down at the catheter sticking out of his chest, slowly weeping blood, and grimaced. With an
unsteady hand he grabbed a scrap of the underlayer they’d cut off him and draped it over the
catheter. “Someone get me a pencil and paper, they’ll need to know what that bastard looks like.”

Jack helped Barnes remove the rest of his armor once he was done wincing and swearing his way
through the drawing, revealing the wide array of purpling bruises spread across his body. “Damn, dude, you really took a beating.” Shelley hadn’t fared much better, hissing shallowly as he worked his way out of his own armor before letting Helena check over his ribs for damage.

“’s what I do,” Barnes hissed between gritted teeth, eyes squeezed shut as Jack eased off the right sleeve of the underlayer. A litany of colorful curses followed as Barnes curled inward on himself, pressing his left hand over the blue glob on his chest. “Don’t mean it hurts any less, though. Godfuckingdammit ow.”

After a few seconds, Barnes straightened and picked up the tablet Shelley set next to him. “Let’s get in the air. Shel, you’re on the stick. Helena, punch in the coordinates we uncovered last night; they’re in my laptop, you know the password. Rollins, do a full ops check on everything and then get it cleaned and stowed. Mark down anything we’re low on so we can restock next time we’re on the ground. Any questions?”

Barnes watched his team split off to their own tasks and snagged a blanket from the medical supplies to wrap around his shoulders. It took him a few minutes to collect and package all the intel they’d gathered on Leviathan and then compile a field report for the shipping yard mission, and once he was done he dropped the whole thing into the upload queue.

With a few quick taps, he brought up the communications system and tuned it to the right settings. “Just in time,” he muttered when he pulled up New York local time.

Taking a breath to steady his nerves, Barnes paused with his finger over the Open Channel button. He let out a quiet, short sigh, and pressed it.

Three thousand miles away, the Avengers were sitting down to a ‘family’ dinner after a thankfully uneventful day; the highlight so far was a broken wrist from a training accident that Mickey patched up easily.

Tony set down a large glass dish of lasagna with a solid thunk and picked up the serving utensils just as the speakers in the common area crackled and a voice spoke through them.

“Ground Control, this is Major Tom. Do you copy?”

Stunned silence greeted the words.

“Ground Control, repeat, do you copy?”

Tony was the first to speak. “Hi- hey, Rocket Man. That’s an affirmative.” He glanced over at Steve and Mickey to see them both go noticeably pale; if Bucky was contacting them like this, something had gone very wrong.

“Fantastic. I’ve got some pretty interesting stardust to send home. Is this line secure?”

Natasha snorted in amusement and smirked. “Secure as it gets.”

“Buck?” Steve’s voice was choked and thin.

“Hey, Rogers. Take a breath or you’re gonna give yourself an asthma attack again. I’m fine. Seriously, though, I really gotta get this intel to you guys. We have some new players on the board that you’re gonna wanna know about.”

“Send it over.” Tony gestured over the table and FRIDAY obligingly threw up a bar indicating the download progress. When the data finished transferring, it spread into several different files.
“Leviathan? Thought they disappeared after the Midnight Oil scare back in the late 40s.”

Natasha’s head snapped up. “What? What did you- shit.” She stood and tugged the corresponding file towards her. “If Leviathan’s active again, this could be bad.”

“You’re telling me. I got a couple’a bags here full of all sorts of fun stuff. SSR Item Aught-Niner-Seven’s in here and we’re on the lookout for its other half.”

It was Steve’s turn to react now, apparently, because he stood and swiped through the files until he found the one he was looking for. “The Bridge to Nowhere devices, right?”

“Isn’t that a road in California?” Mickey asked.

“Peggy named them the Door in the Air, actually. But yeah, I sent over everything we have on Leviathan. I have Helena from the Warehouse here with me, she’s been helping me catalog everything. Leviathan had her captive, she said they were trying to make her build another time machine.”

“Wait.” Tony closed his eyes and frowned. “Did I hear that right?”

“Helena Grace Wells. Yes, she’s a woman. Have Mickey call up the Warehouse if you need more information.” A choked-off, stifled grunt of pain barely made its way through the comm channel but it was enough to get Mickey’s attention.

“Bucky? Are you hurt?”

“He hissed quietly and Tony could practically see the man squirming slightly. “Next batch of intel’s pretty thin, we just ran into this team earlier today. Got a tip that someone was trying to smuggle in some pretty nasty tech and managed to get the number of the shipping container it was in. This guy had a whole damn Conex box full of SHIELD tech from the Fridge that never got recovered after the Uprising.”

Tony expanded the latest file, throwing the images and data readouts up in the air around him.

“We were trying to seize the box, empty it out, get all the stuff to the Sandbox or something. Plan went south when we couldn’t ID the container before we tripped some sort of silent alarm. Team of seven mercs led by an enhanced showed up at the gate.

“The enhanced is an adult male, late forties to early fifties, highly trained. Five foot ten-ish, roughly one seventy-five and strong for his size. I didn’t get a clear look at his face and his voice was pretty hoarse so I can’t give you a good voiceprint. Burn scars on every visible bit of skin, deep partial to full thickness. Guy doesn’t seem to feel any pain and he can take a hit better than he should.”

Mickey caught Tony’s glance and nodded; she’d look into the medical side of things.

“Do you think he got some form of serum?” Steve asked, eyebrows knitting together as he frowned at the sketch Bucky had sent them. Thick, blocky steel plates wrapped around the man’s torso and he wore a crudely designed gauntlet on his right arm.

“No idea. I don’t think so. He didn’t… feel right. You know what I’m talking about.” Bucky paused again. “Tried to get a look at his face, take his helmet off. Got a knife in the chest for my troubles and no luck on a positive ID.”

“You WHAT.” Mickey looked something between baffled and furious. “You got a WHAT in your-”
“Rollins patched me up, I’ll be fine. I promise. Clean wound, no tearing. Important thing is that the enhanced got away. I think I heard one of his men call him Crossbones.”

“Fitting.” Natasha scoffed and shook her head slightly. “Someone gave him a name. Why is it that they only get dangerous after they get a name?”

“At least it’s better than Jolly Roger or something, I dunno. That’s all I got, though. I did the best sketch I could of his eyes in case you can match the shape to something. I know it’s not much, but…”

Tony was already chewing his lip thoughtfully as he sorted through the surveillance stills and footage. “No, I think I can work with this. Might take me a tad bit longer, but if our mystery man shows up anywhere else, I can set up an alert. Want us to ping you?”

Bucky hesitated for a few seconds before answering, and the reluctance in his voice was palpable. “No. I’m handing this one off to the official team. You’re probably going to need a tac team supporting you, so you’ll want to keep this manhunt on the right side of the law. The guy’s good; I barely held my own against him. He’s got some sort of pneumatic gauntlet that magnifies the force of his blows and he’s already using ballistic strikes. Take a look at the footage of us fighting; there’s something bugging me about it.”

“You sure you don’t want in on this?” Steve asked. “We could probably use the additional manpower.”

“I… got something I gotta take care of first. Most of the loose ends are tied up, but there’s one last string to pull and I’m gonna have to pull it pretty hard.”

Mickey was already nodding slightly, unhappy understanding written across her face. “You’re going after Lukin.”

“…yeah. Finally got a solid lead. I need to do this.”

She nodded again and scrubbed her hands over her face. “Be careful, sweetheart.”

“Always.” Bucky’s voice was fond and soft. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to clean the blood out of my ears and let Helena check me over for a concussion before she mother-hens me to death.”

The line went dead with a quiet click before anyone could respond.

Clapping his hands together to dispel the maudlin mood, Tony put on his best press conference grin. “So. Leviathan’s reared its head again, and we’ve got a new big baddie to go after. Just tell me where you want to start and what toys you want to play with.”

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“I’ve plugged in the target’s coordinates,” Helena said as she handed Barnes’s phone back to him. “There’s a ridge about a mile’s hike from here that should have clean sightlines for you.”

Nodding his thanks, Barnes pocketed his phone and turned back to the rifle case in front of him. He popped the latches and gently lifted out the CheyTac M200, running one hand down the barrel almost affectionately.

“Hell of a gun.” Jack walked up behind him and gave the rifle an appreciative look. “What’s her name?”

Barnes flicked his eyes up to Jack’s for a second, one eyebrow slightly raised. “Minerva. How’d
Chuckling as he checked over his Glock, Jack smiled. “No matter how many times they put your brain in the blender, you never forgot the names you gave each of your guns.” He slotted the pistol into its holster and shrugged on one of the heavy white coats they’d be wearing as camouflage against the snow. An M-16 rifle followed it, and Jack rolled his shoulders to settle the strap into place across his chest. Swinging his arms around, he made sure he could still move freely despite the extra thermal layer helping him retain heat - months of training and extra calories, and he was still skinnier than he liked. “Still remember the time you taught me how to fire Veronica.”

“That was the big ol’ Barrett, right?” The magazine slid smoothly into Barnes’s rifle and settled in place with a satisfying click. “Never led me wrong, that one. She was always well-behaved.”

“That’s the one. I have to admit, it was a little strange getting the ‘feel the gun’ speech from you at the time, but it worked.”

Barnes set the rifle back in the case and snapped it shut before slinging the long strap over his shoulder. “Just like knives. Trust them to do the hard work, and they’ll tell you what they need.” He tugged up the zipper on his own coat and took the pair of thick snow goggles Jack held out. “Shame you never got to fire Vera, my old Johnson from the war. Stark kitted her out with all the fun little bits and bobs. She was somethin’ else.”

“Get a move on, you two, I’m freezin’ my balls off! You can reminisce about your favorite boom sticks later!” Shelley hollered from the kitchen, and Helena gave them an apologetic look as she wrapped a second blanket around herself.

“Tripod, stay on the jet. Stay.” Barnes ran his thumb over Tripod’s forehead before snapping his fingers and pointing back into the jet. Reluctantly, she ambled inside and sat next to Helena, watching the two men as they walked away into the snow.

Jack and Barnes didn’t talk much as they hiked their way to the ridge, taking turns to break a path through the snowdrifts.

“Why’d the fucker have to retire in Canada?” Jack grumbled at one point when they traded positions. “Why not somewhere warm like, I dunno, the Bahamas?” Barnes didn’t answer him except for a grim, flat look.

They got to the ridge earlier than expected, with almost half an hour to spare before their target was supposed to be in view. Once Jack got the spotting scope set up and aimed, he reached into his pack and pulled out a protein bar and canteen for each of them.

“Once all this is over,” he began as Barnes sank his teeth into the brown bar, “you going to go back to being an Avenger?”

Barnes shrugged as he chewed. “Dunno. Probably. Retiring didn’t last very long the first time and I kind of have a habit of attracting trouble, so…”

“Yeah, Mickey’s mentioned that much.” Jack laughed as Barnes shot him a harmless glare. “But seriously, what would you do if you wanted to?”

He dug into his own protein bar, washing it down with as much water as he could. Barnes looked thoughtfully at the snowdrift in front of him, eyebrows furrowed, and bit his lip.

“I’m not sure. Maybe go back to college. I never got the chance to finish before the war.” He glanced up at Jack with a slight smile. “I wonder if the GI Bill applies to World War Two veterans.
Pretty sure my credits at CCNY won’t transfer over, though. There’s gotta be an expiration date or something.”

Jack couldn’t help but laugh a bit. “Well, let me know. I know some folks in the admissions department at U of M where I went, maybe I can pull some strings for you.”

“What’d you study? Mickey said you got your degree but she never said what.”

“Criminal Justice.” When Barnes rolled his eyes, Jack held up his hands defensively. “What? I wanted to become a cop.”

“But you got recruited for SHIELD instead?”

Sneaking a hand under his hood to scratch the back of his head, Jack nodded. “Yeah. Rumlow and I went to the same gym for a long time; I’ve known him since I was in high school. He ended up getting me into the Operations academy pretty shortly after I got my bachelor’s.”

“Target is in position.” Shelley’s voice through the radio caught their attention. “Target in position, over.”

“Copy that.” Barnes unpacked his rifle as Jack settled into place behind the spotting scope, reaching an arm over to hand him a pair of range earmuffs. The comms in their ears would allow them to talk even with their hearing dampened. “Start giving me numbers, Rollins.”

It didn’t take long for Barnes to wrap himself around the rifle, pressing his cheek to the stock as he made the adjustments Jack specified. He slid the bolt home smoothly and settled his hands into place.

“You sure you’re good for this distance? I’m reading it at nearly 3,200 meters.” The quiet, slightly offended huff was all the answer he needed. “Just sayin’.”

“I was shooting perfect groups at a mile before I pinned on Corporal, asshole. They didn’t let just anyone play with the fancy new Stark tech in Basic.”

They made their final adjustments as the target stood next to a tall patio heater, stretching his arms upward toward the warmth for several seconds. It felt familiar and strangely satisfying for both of them; Jack had often been sent with Barnes as a spotter during sniper missions while working for HYDRA. He’d seen Barnes make impossible shots time and time again to the point that he considered the man’s disturbingly accurate marksmanship a superpower.

Jack waited for the last confirmation from Barnes and shifted to a more comfortable position behind his scope. “Send it.” Just as he spoke, the target turned around and faced toward them, eyes closing as he tilted his head back in the late morning sun.

The crack of the rifle drowned out Jack’s startled gasp, and time seemed to stall while he traced the trail of the bullet as it distorted the air around it. He heard the solid, mechanical cl-clack as Barnes ejected the spent casing and chambered another round.

What felt like an eternity later, the target crumpled to the ground.

“…hit.” Jack’s voice cracked, and Barnes closed his eyes and released the breath he’d been holding since he’d fired. Slithering back from the ridge, Barnes cradled the rifle in his lap and took several deep breaths. “Barnes.”

“What?”
His throat dry, Jack slid down to look Barnes in the eye. “I think we got the wrong man.”

Steel gray eyes flicked up to meet his as Barnes’s eyebrows knitted together. “That was Lukin. I’d know him anywhere.”

“Barnes, you’re not… I’m not saying that wasn’t Lukin.”

Cold understanding slowly dawned on Barnes. “You’re saying someone else was giving the orders.”

Jack nodded and swallowed, ignoring the dry, scratchy lump in his throat. “I got my orders to take you out in person. The man I got those orders from…. the man you shot wasn’t him.”

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“Oh, for-” A stream of annoyed German drifted toward the front of the jet and Tripod’s claws skittered on the floor as Barnes shoved her out of the latrine. “<Just because I have to watch you shit doesn’t mean you need to return the favor!>”

In the bunks, Jack stifled a laugh and Helena rolled her eyes. “Dinner and a show. Shel’s missing out.”

Her face falling, Helena looked toward where the blast door was pulled across the entrance to the cockpit. “I’m not sure he knows or cares. He’s still rather shaken after our last mission.”

“Think the kid’s going to be okay?” Jack asked quietly, swinging his legs over the side of his bunk. Helena lounged opposite him on her own bunk, tapping away on Barnes’s laptop while she looked for any information she could find about the man who had claimed to be Lukin.

“I certainly hope so.”

Shelley hadn’t said a word since they’d left the last base, his eyes haunted and shadowed with waking nightmares that only Barnes could relate to. While Jack stayed behind on the jet to guard Helena and Tripod, Barnes and Shelley set up an infiltration op that should have been textbook.

Should have been.

Four hours later, without the intel they’d been looking for and severely bloodied and bruised, they’d emerged from the base with seconds to spare as it crumbled inward with concussive crashes. At first, with the way Shelley was slung over Barnes’s shoulders, Jack thought he’d been hit.

When Barnes stumbled up the ramp of the jet and sank to his knees, carefully lowering Shelley to the floor, they’d found the kid shivering and shaking, his bloodshot eyes staring sightlessly ahead. Barnes simply shook his head when Helena asked what had happened, sat back on his heels, and pressed the back of his wrist to his forehead.

It had been four days, Shelley still hadn’t spoken, and Barnes wouldn’t say a word about what Leviathan had waiting for them other than, “Here there be dragons.”

“Whatever it is,” Helena continued, dragging Jack back to the present, “Moose seems just as upset by it. I think he’s had more practice dealing with situations like this, though. Nothing much seems to faze him.”

Tripod clacked over to them, the sleek prosthetic limb Helena had designed adding a sharp click to the noise her claws made. She hopped up onto Barnes’s bunk and let out a heavy, whuffling sigh as
she curled up in a tight ball next to his pillow.

Grunting his agreement, Jack dropped down from his own bunk to sit next to Tripod. He scrubbed the short, wiry fur behind her ears with his fingers, rolling his thumbs over the soft folds where her ears met her forehead. “Wish they’d tell us what happened in there.”

“You don’t want to know.” Barnes’s voice was quiet as he stepped around the corner and walked over to the stack of ladder-handed drawers against the wall. Rifling through the drawer with his name written on it in Sharpie, he tugged out his shaver and charger. “Please trust me. I meant it when I said we’re making a mad dash into uncharted waters and there’s going to be some pretty fucked up stuff waiting for us.”

“Just worried about Shelley,” Jack reassured him, continuing to stroke down Tripod’s shoulders. “He’s not usually this quiet. I’m starting to miss the sass.”

Barnes nodded and patted Jack on the shoulder as he walked back towards the latrine. “Just give him some time. Helena’s right, I’ve got more practice dealing with having my worldview violently shattered.”

Pausing at the corner of the starboard wing, Barnes tilted his head back and sighed heavily. “I… this really isn’t my place. Really should come from Shelley. But… there’s some secrets that are meant to stay hidden, some that we bury for a reason. We bury them so deep that sometimes, we forget they’re even there. And sometimes, they get buried for us against our will.”

He turned and fixed Helena with those unsettlingly old eyes, and Jack knew from the look that passed between them that they were remembering a conversation they’d had previously.

“He remembered something that shook him to his core,” Helena murmured, and Barnes nodded.

“On one of his first missions, he took a hard hit and lost consciousness. His heart stopped beating for a bit before they managed to resuscitate him. When we saw what was in there in the base… he remembered what it was like when he died.”

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It took another six days and nights before Shelley broke his silence; the screaming woke Jack and Barnes so quickly that they were both on their feet with guns in hand before they realized where they were.

When Barnes saw Shelley curled in a ball in his bunk, arms wrapped tightly around his head, he handed Jack his SIG and stepped forward to pull the younger man into his arms.

Helena stumbled out of the cockpit, eyes wide, her strange stun gun cradled in her hands. She saw Shelley shaking in Barnes’s arms and immediately motioned for Jack to follow her back into the cockpit. Sliding the blast door shut behind them, Helena sat down heavily in the pilot’s chair and glanced over the surveillance screens they kept watch over at night.

“That’s not for us to hear,” she told Jack quietly. “As much as I hate to admit it, there’s nothing we can do to help the poor boy. This is in Moose’s hands.”

Pressing his lips into a thin line, Jack settled himself into the copilot’s seat as comfortably as he could and prepared himself for another long, sleepless night.

Chapter End Notes
In the flashback scene, Mickey’s about 16 or 17 and Jack’s in his mid-20s. Just for context and timeline placement.

Credit where it’s due: I read this AMAZING headcanon post a while back and I couldn’t resist. I tried posting a link, but for some reason it isn’t working. It’s the one where the Winter Soldier got deployed to China, fairly similar to what I’ve described here.

Also, decompression needles are a wonderful, amazing, life-saving tool, but oh my GOD don’t watch demonstration videos unless you have a strong stomach. Where’s the brain bleach?
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

I’m going to let loose a minor spoiler which I’m not really sure is a spoiler at all: I won’t be shying away from the Sokovia Accords. Those will crop up late in the second work, possibly early in the third work in the series, but the groundwork that eventually gets catalyzed into the Accords can be traced as far back as Bruce’s unfortunate lab accident that created the Hulk.

Personally I think that’s one thing the MCU has gotten wrong frequently; there are a few points at which they handle accountability and consequences VERY well, but for the most part, I feel like they have too many OH LOOK A MAGIC SOLUTIONs going on. We’ll see if I can do any better, I suppose.

I’m really looking forward to seeing Thor: Ragnarok soon! I can’t watch movies in theaters due to neurological and sensory problems, so I have to wait until it gets released for home viewing :( but I’m really excited! Also, for those of you that watch Agents of Shield, I dropped in a reference to help you place this chapter in the MCU timeline.

Trigger Warnings:
- Discussion of accountability
- Severe head trauma, brain injury
- Near-suicide to save someone else
- Necrosis - localized tissue death
- Discussion of death, fear of death, fear of immortality

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The sharp, pulsating strobe of camera flashes and the bristling microphones pressed in on Mickey as she sat at the long table set up in the ground floor of the Tower. A tiny red light winked at her from the base of the gooseneck microphone in front of her, and the lights from the ceiling glittered in the small glass of water next to it.

What had started as a fairly run of the mill press conference had quickly devolved into something that they didn’t have much hope of controlling any more. Tony was doing everything he could to keep them on topic, steering them back time and time again to the main issue of the day: accountability.

Even with the Stark Relief Foundation, even with countless scholarships and sponsorships, even with all of the effort they spent on community outreach and goodwill, the Avengers were finding themselves at the center of a vicious debate about the accountability and oversight of enhanced individuals. The storm began brewing when the Chitauri descended on New York, gaining intensity every time another large incident occurred.

New York had rebuilt. London had rebuilt. Novi Grad… they’d rebuilt what was left. Johannesburg was still an open wound for many of them, and they still hadn’t located Bruce. Washington DC was still sorting through piles of rubble from the wreckage of the helicarriers and the ruins of the Triskelion. Countless other SHIELD facilities still reeled from the power struggle that had only just begun to wind down.
Enhanced people popped up right and left; Inhuman, radioactive waste, or lab experiment gone wrong, the public didn’t care when civilian deaths and millions of dollars in property damage showed up on the news. Add Bucky’s international rampage to that, and the public had some very, very compelling reasons to be unhappy with the Avengers and any other enhanced people.

It was for this exact reason that the Avengers unanimously agreed to keep Mickey’s powers a closely guarded secret. She wasn’t even on the SHIELD Index.

The press conference passed by in a blur and soon Mickey found herself filing out with the rest of the team, flanked by Steve and Sam as reporters pressed forward. The elevator ride up to the main common area was tense; everything had been renovated and restored since the first fight with Ultron destroyed it, but the large room held unpleasant memories for nearly everyone on the team.

Collapsing onto one of the couches set around the large coffee table, Mickey dropped her head into her hands and mentally walked herself through one of Bucky’s breathing exercises. A warm, large hand gently dropped onto her shoulder and she looked up to see Steve leaning over and holding out a mug of hot chocolate.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, taking it and wrapping her hands around it. Giving her shoulder a quick squeeze, Steve nodded and walked away.

To her surprise, it was Rhodes that sat down next to her a few minutes later, hands clasped tightly around one of Tony’s fancy crystal tumblers, old whiskey swirling around between his fingers.

“How you holding up, sailor?”

Mickey laughed and tried her best to smile but it ended up more like a wince. “Wish I could say I was fine, sir, but I think we both know I’d be lying through my teeth. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know we’re in pretty deep shit right now.” Realizing what she’d said, Mickey grimaced apologetically and glanced over at the Aerospace Engineering PhD sitting next to her. “Sorry, sir. No offense intended.”

“None taken. You’re thinking about Barnes.” It wasn’t a question. Rhodes peered through his drink for a minute before taking a sip.

“Yes, sir.” Tightening her fingers around the mug, Mickey stared at it like it contained the answers to the questions that were causing so many sleepless nights. “All this talk about accountability… I don’t disagree. We’re people, we’re citizens, and powers or not, we’re bound by the law of the land, but… It makes me wonder what’s going to happen when Bucky finally comes home.”

Rhodes nodded. “I can’t say I don’t see where he’s coming from. Hell, if I didn’t have so much brass breathing down my neck, I might be out there with him despite the guaranteed court martial. But when it comes to whether or not it’s legal?”

“Yep.” Mickey’s eyes tightened and her shoulders hunched inward slightly as scenario after scenario played through her head. “He barely survived one trial. I don’t think he’d walk free from a second, now that he’s doing this of his own free will. I’m- I’m really worried, sir.”

Giving her a sympathetic smile after another sip of his whiskey, Rhodes nodded again. “I know. He’s putting all of us in a bit of a tight spot, isn’t he?”

Mickey stared moodily at the floor for several long seconds before answering. “Me more than most. I’ve already got a massive conflict of interest going on and it’s through God’s good graces that I haven’t been called in front of a review board for it yet. I’m an agent of SHIELD, I’m a retired Hospital Corpsman, I’m Bucky’s primary doctor, his handler, and his girlfriend. When he comes
home, if I have to decide between my loyalties…” Scrunching up her face, Mickey dropped her head. “I really don’t know what I’m going to do, and that scares the shit out of me.”

“God, yeah. You know how hard it was, sitting through Tony’s hearings as he told a bunch of senators to suck a dick?”

“What.”

Rhodes laughed quietly. “Tony can really rub people the wrong way, and he even does that to me sometimes. I guess what I’m trying to say is, officially? As your superior officer? You know where your duties lie, I don’t have to tell you that. You know where your orders come from and what happens if you don’t follow them.

“As your teammate – and I hope I can be so bold as to call myself your friend - I think you’ll know what you need to do when you get there, and I think you already know what that’s going to be.” Brandishing his drink at Mickey, Rhodes gave her a playfully stern look. “You quote me on that, though…”

“You’ll bury me so deep in subpoenas that I’ll wish I never joined SHIELD?”

“Something like that,” Rhodes answered with a wink. “Seriously, though, the team’s worried about you. You haven’t been yourself lately.”

“I know, I’m just… I’m struggling with some anxiety. Keep playing chess in my head with everything that’s been going on.” Setting down her mug before her shaking hands sloshed hot chocolate onto the carpet, Mickey leaned forward onto her knees and sucked in a deep breath. “It’s been getting worse since Bucky left. My therapist’s got me on benzos but they only help so much.”

Rhodes reached out and rubbed her back between her shoulder blades; the firm, even pressure helped ground her. After a minute, he scooted towards her a bit and leaned in close.

“Listen, you never heard this from me, okay? Because if anyone knows I told you this, I don’t think I need to tell you how bad it’ll be for both of us.”

Mickey forced herself not to visibly react. “Yessir.”

“They’re already preparing a case against him, and it’s basically a guarantee that they’ll slap him with it as soon as he shows his face stateside again. What I’m about to tell you, though, this is way beyond your clearance level and I’m not even sure I’m supposed to know this at all.”

Under the pretense of having Rhodes help her through breathing exercises just like he did with Tony, Mickey listened intently to the words he quickly whispered in her ear.

The relief she felt when the truth of what Rhodes told her sank in was tempered by a chilling understanding of exactly how bad the situation really was.

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Steve was furious as he tossed the folder onto the large table; his face tightened into that special frown he only got when he desperately wanted to punch something – or someone.

“Can anyone tell me why it didn’t come to our attention that Rumlow not only survived the attack on the Triskelion, but he’s been moving around and recruiting bounty hunters and mercenaries? Anyone? Does anyone have a good excuse for why a man who covers his tracks like it’s goddamn fuckin’ kindergarten durin’ recess in a game of tag has managed to-”
“Rogers, sit down.” Natasha’s voice cut through Steve’s rant, silencing him immediately. After a few seconds of stunned frustration, Steve dropped heavily into his chair and glared at Natasha. “I already looked into it. His SHIELD ID was burned beyond readability when they uncovered him, and his face was too badly damaged for anyone to recognize him. He faked trauma-induced catatonia for several months before making his escape from the hospital he was being treated in.”

Leaning forward on the table, Natasha pursed her lips as she calmly looked at the folder. “Reason we didn’t see him until now? We didn’t know to look for him. I’ve heard rumblings about this Crossbones character going back to April, but I put him off as a small-time mobster that just got lucky… until he managed to stick a knife in Barnes.”

Mickey winced reflexively. She’d received medical reports from Helena as soon as they’d reached their next secure location.

They still hadn’t told Jack that Brock was alive, yet. It wouldn’t be a lie for Mickey to say she wasn’t looking forward to that conversation. It was a small mercy that they hadn’t crossed paths in the shipping yard.

Steve picked at the edge of the table for a few seconds before looking to the side. “Okay, anyone else got anything they want to ruin the rest of my Thanksgiving with?”

Wanda cleared her throat. “There have been some strange energies coming from Greenwich. The Ancient One has—”

“Not our division. Next?” Pointedly ignoring Wanda’s confused look, Steve looked around at the rest of the Avengers gathered at the table.

Mickey raised her hand slightly to get Steve’s attention before saying, “Aleksandr Lukin was assassinated at his home in Canada three days ago. Single shot, ballistics are inconclusive as they haven’t located the round yet. Estimated angle gives us several options for the sniper’s nest, but the closest one is 2,700 meters out and there’s no trace of activity there.”

“Why wasn’t I told about this?” Steve’s eyes narrowed as he turned to her.

“Because I only received the report a few hours ago. Local news put it down as a stroke so we didn’t know there was anything wrong until a ballistics analysis popped up. They’ve checked every possible location but several were disturbed like they’d had snow campers there. Bucky policed his brass and covered his tracks well enough that they can’t trace this back to him.”

“He’s getting bold,” Natasha muttered. “Let’s hope he doesn’t get sloppy, too.”

“What’s the status of the standoff between SHIELD and the ATCU?” Steve’s eyes were hidden behind thick blonde lashes as he studied the table intensely.

It was Rhodes’s turn to report. “Still pretty frosty. Inhumans are popping up right and left, and it’s tough for SHIELD to get to them quickly enough. Some of the ones that got taken in are making it pretty clear they don’t want to be there.”

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room and Mickey fussed with her wire bracelets, pretending not to notice the quick glances that flashed her way. “I’m… still under the radar, right?” she asked quietly.

Steve nodded, his face softening into something resembling a smile for the first time in weeks. “And it’s going to stay that way. I have no intention of handing over anyone on our team to authorities with questionable agendas.”
Wanda visibly relaxed at that, dropping her head into her hands and releasing a pent-up breath. A smooth red hand reached out to rest on her shoulder as Vision closed his eyes in relief.

Turning to Tony, Steve chewed his lip for a few seconds before continuing. “Has there been any progress with…”

“No.” Tony gave Steve a tired, apologetic look and shook his head. “Haven’t made any headway. Fitz is on his way to Morocco, thinks he might find something there. I’m pounding my head against a brick wall here, Cap, and I think I’m not the only one that feels that way.”

“Keep at it, Tony. You’re the best we’ve got, and we owe this to him after everything he’s done for us.”

“Get some sleep, though,” Mickey interjected, not looking up from the intricate wirework encircling her wrists. “You’re getting ragged again.”

It was a clear sign how tired and dispirited Tony really was when he didn’t throw back a witty retort but merely nodded and rubbed his fingers over his eyes.

Sensing the meeting was reaching its end, Mickey looked up at Steve and tilted her head slightly.

“Dismissed.” Steve traced his thumbnail over the wood grain of the table.

Mickey stood and rolled her shoulders in an attempt to loosen the knot of tension between them. “I’ll be at the rink if anyone needs me. I need to get my mind off things for a bit.”

Her skates were right where she’d left them, top left cubby against the wall to the right of the door. After doing a quick check of the edges with her thumbnail, she held each skate up to the light to look down the surface of the blade. Satisfied, she sat on a nearby bench and slipped off her shoes, quickly lacing up her skates with the ease of practice.

With the weather getting colder, she’d admitted defeat and started wearing gloves, a jacket, and heavier sweatpants while skating. Pulling a hair tie out of her pocket, she captured her hair into a stubby ponytail and stepped out onto the ice.

The storm in her head cleared steadily as she fell into the smooth, sweeping choreography she was working on after a thorough warmup. Eventually, the only thing on her mind was her next step, and after that, the next jump.

She worked through the routine several times, upping the jumps from doubles to triples once she felt confident. After the tenth time through, Mickey split off and did a few laps just gliding from foot to foot to give herself a chance to cool off a bit. Her triples were consistent, predictable, and clean, so… why wasn’t she happy with them?

Throwing caution to the wind, Mickey set herself up for another jump, sweeping around the ice as she prepared her path to the right spot at the right speed. Shifting to the outside edge of her skate, she moved through the familiar pattern, kicked off with her toe pick, and spun into the air.

The next thing she knew, she was blinking up at the ceiling of the rink with eyelids that weighed a thousand pounds each, unable to focus on the strange face-shaped blobs that hovered over her. She frowned as the lights in the rink began to dim – why was she feeling so cold?

She didn’t hear Steve’s frantic shouting as her head rolled to the side and she lost consciousness.

***
Jack stumbled as he lunged out of the cockpit, barely rolling out of the fall. Scrambling to his feet, he ran to the bunks and roughly shook Barnes awake.

“What? WHAT?”

Barely able to breathe, Jack grabbed him again by the shoulders. “Cap just called on the emergency channel.”

“Did LA blow up this time?” Barnes shifted onto his side, supporting his weight on one elbow as he rubbed at his eyes.

“It’s Mickey.” Barnes froze and flicked his eyes up to meet Jack, eyebrows drawing together. “She- she tried to-”


His stomach was cold and tight as he struggled to take a full breath. “She was skating, tried for a quad. Didn’t land it. Cap said she-”

“She did what.”

“She fell. Hit her- hit her head. He says it’s bad.”

Barnes only avoided braining himself on the bunk above him through reflex born of experience. He tugged his t-shirt back into place and headed for the cockpit. “Shelley-”

“Already en route, Moose. We’re an hour out. Supersonic in three, two, one.”

Helena rolled blearily to the edge of her bunk and shoved her hair out of her eyes as the jet rumbled past the sound barrier. “Wha…”

Unable to answer, Jack sat where he stood, the ringing in his ears drowning out even the roar of the jet as he fought to breathe. Barnes paced through the cargo hold like a caged animal, worry and anxiety written in the set of his shoulders and the heavy sound of his boots on the deck. From her position on the large, fluffy dog bed between the bunks and the cockpit, Tripod watched Barnes as he went back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.

She’d tried to pull him away from his pacing earlier only to get snarled at and ordered back to her bed. Ears laid back and tail between her legs, she’d slunk back to the plush cushion and kept watch over her human as best she could.

After what felt like an eternity, a voice hailed them through the comms and guided the Quinjet into its approach at the Avengers Compound. The cargo ramp hadn’t even hit the ground before Barnes was striding toward where Steve, Sam, and Natasha waited for him.

“How is she?”

Sam and Steve exchanged a meaningful look and Natasha glanced at her feet before she answered him. “Alive. That’s about all we can say right now. We’re looking at a pretty bad impact. The surgeon’s been working to drain as much of the blood as he can. We’ll brief you inside.”

Numb, Jack watched Barnes walk into the Compound flanked by Natasha and Sam. A sharp click caught his attention and he turned to see Shelley straightening from clipping Tripod’s harness on, her leash secure in his hand.
“You must be his team.” Steve stepped forward and gave them a half-hearted attempt at a smile. “Jack, could you show them to the guest quarters?”

When Jack didn’t respond immediately, Steve took another step forward and laid a hand on Jack’s arm. “Hey, pal.”

“I- yeah. Yeah. Sorry.” Jack shook himself and blinked several times. “This way.”

“Meet me in the common area once you get them settled in.”

“Yessir.”

Steve watched them walk away; the young soldier’s arm was slung around Jack’s shoulders and the woman – Helena – had her elbow linked through his on the other side. He slapped the switch to close the hangar doors behind the taxiing jet on his way back into the main Compound, then turned left and jogged up the stairwell to where the others waited.

Raised voices greeted him before he even opened the door.

“And what about the regeneration cradle? Fixed Clint right up after we grabbed the Scepter.” Barnes stood at one end of the rectangular table, palms flat against its glossy surface as he looked at Tony through tightly knit eyebrows. Transparent holographic panels with slices of Mickey’s brain scans floated idly around him, a disturbingly large black mass pressing in from the upper back of her head.

“That’s- that’s not how it works,” Tony told him reluctantly. “She’s got a pocket of blood in her-”

Gritting his teeth, Barnes stretched his fingers out straight against the cold table before he balled his hands into fists. “I know what a subdural hematoma is, Stark. You already cut open her skull and got the pressure down, so stick her in the Cradle.”

“No, seriously, that’s not how it works. I already talked to Doctor Cho about it. We can replace missing tissue, but we can’t reform what’s already there. In order to use the Cradle, she’d have to be missing part of her brain. And you know better than anyone what that would do to her.”

Barnes let out a frustrated sigh and dropped his head forward. “So we’re left with neurosurgery and prayers.”

“The neurosurgery’s the easy part,” Sam muttered. “Have to keep her so heavily damped and sedated that we don’t know what it’s doing to her, though.”

“…you have to what.”

Steve pointed to his forearm. “The gauntlets, Buck. Her dampers. She can’t control her powers right now. We take them off, she sucks the life out of anything within a twelve-foot radius. We don’t do that, the surgeons can’t operate, she doesn’t survive.”

Jack stepped into the room at that point, pale and unsteady on his feet. He collapsed into one of the free chairs and leaned forward onto the table, head in his hands.

“She doesn’t- she-” Growling quietly, Barnes dug into his pocket and tossed something small at Tony, ignoring the frantic fumbling that followed as it bounced from hand to hand. “You idiots don’t know shit about how her powers work. You’re trying to crush down the one thing that’s keeping her alive, and- and-”
Tony frowned at the flash drive he’d finally succeeded in catching. “What’s on this?”

“Six months of research,” Barnes snarled at him. “Because unlike you chucklefucks, I actually know what the hell’s going on with my girlfriend, and I’ve been AWOL the whole damn time.” He stalked over and took the flash drive from Tony’s motionless hand, stabbing it into the USB port just under the edge of the table before turning for the door. “Feast yer fuckin’ eyes while I go and do the only goddamn sensible thing and save her life.”

Files whirred in front of them and Tony raised his hands to grab a few. “When did you become an expert in molecular biology? Also, how did you get access to Fitzsimmon’s research? That should be beyond your clearance level.”

Steve winced as the door frame protested under the angry grip of a metal hand. “What do you think, moron? I hacked SHIELD.” Barnes turned to shoot one last furious look over his shoulder. “I’m having FRIDAY lock everyone out of the medical bay until I give the release order, and I have a gun.”

“Wait- Bucky-”

They were almost fifty feet down the hall when Steve finally caught up to him.

“Go back into the briefing room, Rogers. It ain’t gonna be safe for you.”

“Please don’t do what I think you’re about to do.”

Barnes didn’t stop as he practically ran towards the medical bay. “I’m the only one that has a hope of surviving it.”

“Bucky, stop. You know there’s-”

“I know there’s what, Steve?” Barnes roared, rounding on his friend. “What? A chance that I might die? A chance that she might? You’re already killing her!”

“But-”

Giving Steve a firm shove back toward the common area, Barnes turned away. “Look, there’s really only two things I’m good at, okay? Killing people and dying.”

“…you what?”

“It’s gonna kill me. I know.” Snarling silently as he counted every wasted second, Barnes turned slowly to face Steve again. “Trust me, I know. It’s happened before, it’ll happen again, and every single goddamn fucking time I come back. And you wanna know what happens? There’s no pearly gates, no Saint Peter, no clouds, no wings, no little golden harps, Steve.

“It’s just nothing. That’s all there is! Nothing. I close my eyes and die, and then bam I’m alive again. Happens whether I like it or not and I can’t fucking stop it. But this? Going in there and letting her kill me in the vague hopes that she won’t die?”

He took a step forward gave Steve another gentler push. “Steve, it’s what I do. I die so that the people I love don’t have to. I died falling from the train so that you could bring down Schmidt. I died so many times when HYDRA had me, and I died again when I ran towards a motherfucking bomb to try to save civilians. Let me do it one more time? Because I really don’t think I can keep doing this without her.”
Satisfied that Steve wouldn’t follow him, Barnes pivoted on his heel and strode into the medical bay. FRIDAY had already evacuated everyone and the main doors sealed shut behind him with a hiss.

“Lockdown complete.”

It didn’t take long to find where they were keeping Mickey, and when he did it took several seconds for Barnes to remember he needed to breathe to stay upright. She looked so small as he stared at her from the door, nestled among machines, scalp pale and bald. Gauze and medical tape arced over her head, covering the incision site.

Dark and stark against the pristine, sterile white blankets, large gauntlets covered both of her forearms up to her elbows. Her hands were gently curved where they rested over her stomach.

Less than five hours had passed since the accident. Within minutes of falling she’d been rushed into the medical bay and into the hands of some of the best doctors in the world. That didn’t mean they had any fucking idea what to do with her, though.

He closed his eyes and worked on dragging in shuddering breaths, releasing them slowly. Sitting gently on the hospital bed, Barnes paused while he fought off a flashback to another hospital, right about a year ago, watching over her as she slept. Once he was fully present again, he carefully undid the straps around her wrists and eased off the gauntlets.

As soon as her hands were free, a wave of exhaustion hit him like a punch in the gut. His hands ached, fingers stiffening as if he’d left them exposed in the middle of a blizzard. Cold seeped into him from the inside out, and he felt his muscles slacken and weaken as crushing fatigue washed over him.

But he couldn’t stop. Not this time. He wouldn’t.

Forcing his protesting joints to move, Barnes stripped off his shirt, lifted both of Mickey’s hands in his and pressed them to his chest, covering her thin, strong fingers with his own. He gritted his teeth against the sickening pull of energy just leaving his body and squeezed his eyes shut, breath hissing in and out as he fought to stay upright.

His chest stung andsmarted under her hands, and Barnes realized with a distant, almost observational clarity that localized tissue death radiated slowly outward from where her hands touched him. Dizzy and lightheaded, he swayed slightly and tried to blink away the gritty, dry sensation that suddenly hit his eyes. Every muscle in his body spasmed with fatigue, and eventually the effort of holding himself upright simply became too much.

Barnes tried to tear a hand away to catch himself as he slowly toppled to the side, but his muscles were locked in place. The last thing he saw as the world faded to black was Mickey’s lips falling open as she rolled her head to the side.

He came to in a hospital bed of his own, monitors beeping quietly around him. An unfamiliar pressure on his right index finger told him where they’d put the pulse-ox sensor. Raising his hands weakly, Barnes groaned when he saw the thick bandages swathing his right hand.

It hurt to breathe.

It was a deep, throbbing ache all the way down to his spine inside, as if every single one of his internal organs had just fucked off for the day and forgotten how to function. He didn’t even know he could feel his kidneys, but something fucking hurt.

Someone had removed his clothes and applied thick layers of bandages that he assumed were soaked
in some sort of antibacterial numbing goo, given the fact that he couldn’t feel his skin. The sharp, slightly sweet chemical smell invaded his nostrils and caused him to let loose an agonizing sneeze that felt like it tore his ribcage in half.

“Aw, hell,” he managed to croak out, pressing his head back into the pillow and closing his eyes. Based on the lack of sensation across his entire chest and down to just below his belly button, the necrosis had spread farther than he’d thought. Chances were that the doctors had abraded it off just like they would with a normal patient; it would speed up his healing process, but the jury was out as to whether wrinkly pink not-quite-skin was preferable to sloughing off dead tissue for the next three or four weeks.

Barnes pulled his left hand over his face, not surprised in the least to feel deep grooves on his forehead and around his mouth and thick, sticky bags of sore skin under his eyes. If he looked half as bad as he felt, he definitely understood why he was still in the medical bay.

“Soon’s I can wiggle again without fallin’ over, I’mma punch yer fuckin’ lights out.” The words were slightly slurred and completely without venom; Barnes followed the sound to see Mickey calmly regarding him from the corner of his recovery room where she sat in a wheelchair. A thick strap wrapped around her torso just under her arms and her fingers curled loosely in her lap where they poked out of her dampers. The incision had healed into a scar, pink and knobby against her stubby scalp.

“Fair ‘nuff. Happy anniversary, I love you, you’re welcome.”

A ghost of a smile danced across her face. “Don’t ever do that again.”

“But you- you’re—”

“Conscious, yeah.” Mickey sucked in her lips and glared down at her hands. “Speech, fine. Sensory input, iffy but improving. Memory, fine, with the exception of fairly normal localized amnesia surrounding when I got hurt. Seizure risk, low to none. Depression and anxiety risk, no worse than usual.”

Barnes grunted involuntarily as he struggled to prop himself up on his elbows. “But?”

Mickey slowly raised up her hands, eyes filling with an aching longing when they shook uncontrollably with the effort of lifting them even a few inches. With a heavy sigh, she dropped her arms back into her lap.

“Can’t fuckin’ move. Can’t fuckin’ walk.”

He blinked at her, dazed, for several seconds before pressing his left hand against his eyes. “How d’your scans look?”

“They’re fine, thanks to you. Seems my problems with motor control are psychogenic. Should be easily treatable.”

“You don’t sound happy.”

“Because you nearly died, Bucky! You didn’t come back from this one as fast as you normally did; we thought we’d really lost you this time.” Her voice broke wetly. “You coded on us. They kept trying to bring you back and you kept coding on us.”

“Worth it,” he whispered without hesitation. “Sooner we get me away from all this goddamn medical equipment, the better, but still worth it.”
“I- it’s- but you-”

Holding up a hand to forestall any further argument, Barnes rolled his head to the side and waited until he had made eye contact. “My choice. You don’t get to take that away, r’member? Also, I saw your scans ‘fore I got here. You would’a been a fuckin’ vegetable and I don’t exactly have a zucchini fetish, okay?” With a pained groan, he fell back against the bed and held his hands stiffly above his chest as he fought off another wave of fatigue.

Mickey was quiet for several minutes as Barnes focused on breathing against the deep, tight ache in his lungs. Finally, she raised her eyes up and cleared her throat quietly. “I got a few questions, if it’s alright.”

“Always, babydoll.”

She nodded and sucked her lips in, chewing on them for several seconds before speaking again. “Why’d you leave? And I don’t want the answer you gave everyone else. I want the truth.”

“I…” Barnes traced his eyes over the dappled dots in the white ceiling tiles. “When that girl messed with my head, she showed me everyone dead and gone. Well, everyone in our little dysfunctional family. I outlived everyone. I watched you die in front of me, with silvery-white hair and skin that looked like rice paper. And, I- I can’t. I can’t do that. Because when I looked up at the mirror on the other side of your bed, I hadn’t aged a day.” His voice cracked and he squeezed his eyes shut.

“You already know that I can’t die, at least not in any way a normal person can. So I left to go on a mission, for two reasons. First one is, I had to know if I even can die at all, and I wanted to watch the life leave the eyes of every single person who had a hand in making me… making me like this.” Gesturing helplessly to himself, Barnes hoped that Mickey understood. “I’ve lost count of the number of times it’s happened, when I get yanked back up, but I feel like I’m- I feel like I leave another piece of me behind each time.”

He looked back over at Mickey, wishing he had the strength to get up and hug her. “Most people are terrified of dying. I’m terrified that I might never be able to.

“The other big reason I left is because I couldn’t live with the thought of HYDRA getting their hands on you again and hurting you like they did to me, Natasha, and all of their other playthings. I couldn’t live with the thought of them doing that to anyone. So, I stopped them.”

“Is it… are you…”

Nodding just enough to show, Barnes closed his eyes and let out a sigh. “Crossed off the last big player a few days ago. No more heads, not that I was able to find. Seems like if you cut enough of ‘em off, they eventually stop growin’ back. We’ve got rumblings of someone else, but whoever they are, they’re covering their tracks well enough that we need more resources to go after them anyway. It’s bigger than the five of us can handle on our own.”

“…five?” Mickey raised an eyebrow, confused.

“Well, there’s me, your brother, and then Helena from the Warehouse. Shelley’s one of Eliot’s teammates from when they were in the Green Berets together, and then there’s Tripod, who’s probably raising holy hell right now unless Shelley can keep her calmed down.”

“The fuck kind’a name is Tripod?”

“She’s my dog,” Barnes chuckled. “Had to get one of her legs amputated when I found her.”
“…she’s your…”

“Dog. Yes.” He turned to smirk at Mickey. “Found her in the forest in Germany or Austria, I can’t remember which. She’s a good girl; knows when I’m gonna get twitchy, sometimes hours in advance.”

“Bucky, you have a dog.” Mickey’s voice dripped with incredulity, and Barnes stared up at the ceiling, arms resting limply at his sides.

“Yes. I got a dog.”

***

In the end, it would take almost four weeks for Barnes – Bucky – to heal from the drain. Most of that time he spent gradually readjusting to life with the team and, more importantly, Mickey. While some parts of their daily life fell into place without any effort, others came in fits and starts, awkward motions, and stilted conversations.

Jack and Steve still stayed in the two other rooms in the large apartment, providing as much of a semblance of normalcy as they could. Steve was gone most days, though; between setting up missions, monitoring their feeds, and training, his days were full and tiring.

On the other hand, Jack seemed content to retire from nearly every part of being an active duty combatant. He took over the training of Bucky’s team of cadets with a fervor that quickly exposed itself as a coping mechanism for his guilt.

They all had generous portions of that to go around, nowadays, and everyone knew better than to make an issue of it.

The day Mickey was released from the medical bay, Bucky carried her all the way back to their quarters and helped her settle into a nest of pillows and blankets on the couch. Despite the thick layers of blankets, the fluffy slouchy beanie covering her slightly fuzzy scalp, and the quietly crackling fire just a few yards away, she still shivered.

Hissing slightly as he stretched the raw, pink skin across his torso while he sat down next to Mickey, Bucky gave her a reassuring half-smile half-grimace. “Here. Drink up.” He handed her one of the two mugs in his hands and set the other one on the coffee table before helping her wrap her fingers around the warm ceramic. Somewhere, Tony had found mugs with handles on both sides and within days there were several available at strategic locations around the Compound.

Mickey took a long sniff of the wet steam curling up from the tea. “Blackberry?” When Bucky’s eyes crinkled and his lips stretched into a smile, she knew she’d gotten it right. Her sense of smell was slowly starting to come back. “Thank you.”

“Always.” Bucky lifted her feet and slid under the blankets so he could tuck her toes under one of his thighs, then patted the cushion on his other side to invite Tripod up. “I noticed you’re back to just the bracelets today.”

“Oddly enough, I think the fall gave me better control,” Mickey replied with a baffled chuckle. “I don’t get nearly as much noise coming in. What’s the prevailing theory on that one, Professor?”

Rewarding her with another smile, Bucky leaned forward to grab his tea and looked at it thoughtfully. “I haven’t made a lot of headway, if I’m honest. I think I really need to go to school for some of this stuff.”
“Moose, your dissertation on Inhuman biology is getting published in *Science Weekly*. You’re already one of the leading experts on the subject. I’m not sure how much going back to school is going to benefit you at this point.”

“Oh, God, not you too,” he groaned. “I *hate* that stupid nickname.” After throwing Mickey a half-hearted glare, he relented and let his head fall back against the couch cushions with a self-conscious smile. “They’re even publishing it under my actual name. James Buchanan Barnes, published scientist. Jesus Christ, I never thought I’d survive the War and now my research is getting *published*.”

Mickey hid her grin by blowing on her tea to cool it. “Some of the brains downstairs are complaining, you know. They got their Masters degrees and PhDs for stuff like this and you just waltz in and throw everything they thought they knew about people like me down the drain.”

“And then turned on the garbage disposal. Yeah, I know.” Bucky scrunched up his face a little and chewed on his bottom lip. “Simmons did most of the work, if I’m honest. I just expanded on it.”

Reaching out to push her knuckles against Bucky’s cheek playfully, Mickey snorted. “Stop being so modest.” She slotted her fingers back into the handle on the mug before it tilted too far, and felt herself smiling fondly as she looked at him.

He’d had to cut his hair after Jack wasn’t able to mitigate all of the dye damage, and Mickey had to admit it was a relief to see that familiar dark chocolatey brown again. The tips were still slightly reddish but she didn’t mind; it actually looked pretty good.

Bucky’s fingers traced lazy circles over Tripod’s forehead as he sipped his tea, eyes soft and relaxed in a way Mickey knew they hadn’t been in a long time. Reluctant to ruin the mood, Mickey took another long sip of her tea and savored the fact that she was finally starting to taste things again. It’d only been six days, but those six days were a torturous cycle of Pedialyte, Steve’s gelatin concoctions, and oversalted canned soup. She loved her boys dearly, but… they’d all be grateful when she could cook again.

“So…” When Bucky looked up at her, she pinched her lips together apologetically. “When are you deploying again?”

His face fell and he looked down at his tea. “Oh, um… I’m not sure. We’re still looking for the mystery man.” He paused and started running his thumb over Tripod’s ear. “Besides, I don’t think I want to. What was supposed to be a mission to protect you and figure out my questionable lifespan pretty quickly turned into a blood-soaked vendetta. I’ve… had enough of that. Yeah. I’m not sure if I *want* to fight any more.”

Quietly, after glancing up at Mickey, he added, “I’ve already got so much blood on my hands, I was thinking, how could it do more damage? But… I let myself become my worst nightmare. I let myself become the Asset again and I- I can’t. I can’t do that. Not again. Even if it means retiring completely. It took three people and a dog inviting themselves to join me to force me to remember who I am. The line’s so thin now that I don’t know when I’ve crossed it until it’s too late, sometimes.”

“You’d really retire again?” Mickey was having a hard time believing that and judging by Bucky’s reaction, it showed. His hand unconsciously went to the firm, steady steel of the dog tags against his chest, pressing them against his sternum.

“‘You have to hold on to whatever humanity you have left, lest your quest for revenge consume you,’” he said, his tone making it clear he was quoting someone. “‘Besides, the whole point of the
goddamn thing was to protect you and keep you safe, and I’ve got fuck-all to show for it. I was off gallivanting across the world taking down target after target and you still got hurt and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do to stop it.”

“Hey, don’t put this on you. I tried for that quad without a spotter or a helmet, I made the mistake, I pay the price.”

The look Bucky shot her was scathing. “Yeah, that was dumb as shit. What in the ever-loving fuck were you thinking?”

“I… wanted to…” Mickey frowned at her tea. “I had a routine I was working on. Singles were good, doubles were good, I got the triples down, but it still didn’t feel right.”

“Myshka…”

“I wanted to surprise you,” she said, her voice small.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt, but…”

Mickey looked up at the ceiling, an unconscious habit she’d developed after Tony had first booted up FRIDAY. “It’s fine, sweetie. What is it?”

“There’s been a call to Assemble. Captain Rogers wants to know if you’ll be joining the team, Mister Barnes.” Mickey pretended not to notice how FRIDAY didn’t even ask her. They’d be fine with Sam as the medic for this mission, but… it was her job. And now she couldn’t do it anymore.

Glancing around the room as he thought, Bucky took in the small touches here and there that reminded him how long he really had been gone. The knife block was on the other side of the stove, the fruit basket had more oranges than apples, and Steve’s art hung in different places than in the Tower. Their prized photograph of the Invaders as well as Steve’s Medal of Honor and other decorations were proudly displayed on the mantelpiece instead of to the side of the fireplace. While the new apartment was virtually the same down to the floorplan and the wood used in the wall paneling, something was just… different.

He’d been away far too long.

“You know what?” he finally said before finishing the last of his tea. “I won’t be. They got the full team geared up?”

“They do.”

Nodding, Bucky looked up at Mickey. “They’ll be fine without me.”

***

When the watery winter sun filtered through the curtains and fell across Mickey’s face, lighting up her short, fuzzy black buzz cut with little pinpricks of light, it was easy for Bucky to lull himself into believing they were a normal couple in a normal bed in a normal apartment in a normal city. Her lips were parted slightly, the corners curled up the tiniest bit, and her hands were curled up near her collarbone just like they were every morning that he remembered waking up next to her. Faint shadows played across her skin in the tiny divots left by the IED that had forced her to retire from the Navy.

It was easy to ignore her wheelchair when it was behind him; he lay on his side facing the window, his left arm stretched out under the pillow and his right draped over Mickey’s waist. The first few
nights had been strange for the both of them, having finally adjusted to sleeping alone, and this was the first morning he’d woken up refreshed and rested after a night of uninterrupted sleep since before the Ultron fiasco.

Mickey’s hands still shook, her weak grip strength didn’t let her hold much that didn’t have a mug handle or a strap, and her legs refused to support her weight for longer than a few seconds. The physical therapists and doctors kept insisting things would get better, her brain scans looked great, everything was fine, but… Bucky was doing his best to cherish the normal, happy moments like this one so that he didn’t get dragged down by the rest. The effort Mickey put into keeping her spirits up was commendable, even if Bucky knew things would eventually come to a head and they’d be forced to confront her new reality whether they liked it or not.

Between his own spastic brain chemistry and her motor control struggles, they made one hell of a pair.

He didn’t let himself dwell on that though. Gently rolling Mickey onto her back, Bucky shifted so that he could snuggle closer and press his face against her neck.

“Mm,” was the sleepy response. “G’mornin’.” She smiled into the kiss when Bucky pressed his lips to hers, raising her arms up to wrap around his neck. “Missed this.”

“Missed you.”

“Clearly.”

Bucky gave her a sly grin and shifted so he lay on top of her, running his hands up her sides and to her elbows. “You wanna do somethin’ about it?”

As Mickey smirked at him and opened her mouth to respond, someone knocked on the door and opened it without any preamble.

“Hey, you two, pancakes are gonna be WHOA now-”

“Rollins,” Bucky growled through gritted teeth, “get your ass outta our room and close the door behind you or so help me God I will take your favorite gun and shove it where the sun don’t shine.”

“Hokay.” The door clicked shut and Bucky groaned, dropping his head to the pillow as Mickey snorted out an unladylike giggle.

“For fuck’s sake, man.”

Mickey could barely hold in her laughter. “I’ll talk to him. We should also see about getting a lock for the door.”

“Noted. I’ll have it sorted later today.”

Swearing vividly, Bucky rolled over onto his back and let out a frustrated groan as he pressed his hands to his face. “Okay, FRIDAY, new rule-”

“Understood. My apologies.”

It took Mickey several seconds to finally get her giggles under control again. “Still wanna…”

“Nope, mood’s gone.” Bucky kept his hands over his burning face, elbows sticking up in the air as he lay on his back. “I think that was quite possibly the most unsexy thing that could have oh hi.”
He practically squeaked the last two words as Mickey wiggled her way over on top of him.

Quite some time later, Bucky walked into the living room with a spring in his step and Mickey in his arms, depositing her into her spot at the table. Jack refused to meet anyone’s eye and simply stared red-faced into his coffee, while Steve looked between Bucky and Mickey with a delighted smirk and a raised eyebrow as he flipped over a pancake.

“Where the sun don’t shine, huh?” Steve bared his teeth in a wicked grin and the red across Jack’s face deepened.

“Things I don’t need to know,” Jack muttered as he stood and crossed to the sink to rinse out his mug. “Things I don’t need to see.”

Bucky gave Jack a shark-like grin and slapped him on the ass as he walked by. “Oh, you’ve already seen all I got to offer, sonny boy.”

“Is this how karma works?” Jack asked the ceiling. “Because I’m pretty sure this is how karma works.”

“Jack?” Mickey slipped her hands into the straps on her silverware and started slicing up the pancakes Steve set in front of her. Bucky slid into the seat to her left, uncapped the whipped cream - coconut whipped cream, welcome to the brave new world - and squirted out a generous dollop on each of his and Mickey’s pancakes. Reaching out across the table, he snagged several slices of bacon for each of them, rolling his eyes and grabbing one more for Mickey when she looked at him, unamused, one eyebrow cocked.

“Oh, he’s just remembering the communal showers for post-mission cleanup. Depending on how much effort they put into the pre-mission wipe, I’d be fine handling weapons and fighting but I couldn’t wipe my own ass. Somebody’s gotta change those grown-up diapers.”

“Can we not.” Jack squeezed the bridge of his nose between his fingers and set his other hand on his hip, still facing away from everyone.

“Well, so far we’re two-for-two when it comes to embarrassing the shit outta you, and I’m gonna see if I can make that a perfect three.”

“Barnes, if you start making plane noises and spoon-feeding my sister…”

He stabbed a piece of pancake and began doing just that while Mickey attempted to maintain a straight face. Eventually she caved and snapped the piece off Bucky’s fork.

With a strangled groan, Jack stalked off to his room. “Was it Asset or Asshat? I’m having difficulty remembering now.”

“Fuck you too, Rollins!” Bucky shot back with a laugh.

“Not my type!”

Steve let out an eloquent snort as he ladled out more batter. The kettle started whistling and he grabbed it up, pouring steaming hot water into a mug with a teabag in it. “I feel kind of bad about that, actually. I had STRIKE Alpha under my command for the better part of a year and I never bothered getting to know any of the men that well, least of all what their ‘types’ were.”

“Jack doesn’t really talk about it much anyway.” Mickey was finally starting to get the hang of eating on her own after several days’ practice, and she didn’t even mind having to use a straw when
it was curly, blue, and had a Squirtle clinging to it. “Most of the guys on his team were pretty private, so Jack fit right in. Only really had the one serious long-term relationship, and we all lived together, that’s the only reason I knew anything about it.”

“What’ve you two got planned today?” Steve asked, glancing up at each of them as he plated a pancake for himself and covered it in maple syrup. Before he sat down, he scooped out the teabag from the mug he’d filled, added milk and honey, and set it in front of Mickey.

“Dunno. Bucky’s got a lot of TV to catch up on, pretty sure he didn’t get BBC wherever he was. I hate the fact that I’m getting squishy already but there isn’t much I can do about it right now.”

“Actually, I was thinking of taking you into town for a bit, now that you’re officially a free woman again.” Bucky shrugged. “Your physiotherapist recommended swimming and unless you got a suit since I left, we’re going to need to get you one.”

“Is it okay for you to be out in public yet? You know they’re going to try to bury you under charges as soon as they can find you again.”

His smirk made Steve chuckle. “Challenge accepted. Seriously, though, with a beanie, some glasses, and a little makeup, they won’t recognize either of us. I’ll need to borrow the truck if that’s okay, though.”

“Sure thing.” Steve leaned back and snagged the keys out of the bowl on the kitchen island before tossing them over to Bucky. “Camper shell’s still on it so you can toss the wheelchair in the bed.”

Tilting her head to the side to look around Bucky, Mickey made an unhappy face at the rain-studded windows. “Shit, is it still raining? No wonder my hip hurts.”

“Remind me which one of us is the geriatric again, babydoll?”

“Oh, fuck off.”

“Tripod!” Bucky whistled sharply and the dog’s head shot up from where she was sprawled in front of the fireplace.

“Is she allowed to have pancakes?” Steve asked with a frown as Bucky slipped her a few bites.

“As long as they don’t have any chocolate in them, a few bites won’t hurt her. Besides, she’s used to getting a bite or two of what I’m eating anyway.”

Rolling her eyes, Mickey scooted a piece around on her plate to catch the remaining whipped cream. “Bucky darling, you spoil that dog rotten.”

“Oh, it ain’t just me. The other three are just as bad.”

“Yeah, speaking of which, Shelley said something about heading out later today, figured you’d want to see him off.” Steve glanced at the clock over his shoulder. “Happy’s going to chauffer him into town in about half an hour.”

“Helena’s staying, right? She seemed to click with Selvig and Cho’s teams pretty quickly.”

Mickey couldn’t hide her smile. “I hope so. She’s pretty awesome and it’s nice to have another girl around. Wanda and Nat are cool but they tend to keep to themselves.”

Involuntarily flinching slightly at Wanda’s name, Bucky did his best to smile. “Yeah, I’ll understand
if she wants to head back to the Warehouse though. She says she’s freelance now, but that’s still home to her.”

“Whatever she decides, she’s welcome here. She knows that.”

***

Bucky found Shelley in the guest quarters, packing away his small assortment of personal belongings. He leaned against the frame in the open doorway for several seconds as he watched the young soldier slot his gear into the duffel with the efficiency of practice.

Finally, Bucky cleared his throat and stepped in. “Hey, Shel.”

Shelley turned and flashed him a bright grin, then dropped to his knees to greet Tripod. “Hey, you. Be good for him after I leave, okay? Promise me you’ll take care of this big idiot.” Obligingly, Tripod yipped at him and licked his face, leaving a slimy stripe of dog slobber up Shelley’s cheek.

“Where’re you going to go after this?”

“I got orders to report back to base for debrief.”

Bucky had to work hard to hide the chill that shot through him. “With who?”

“Relax, big guy.” Slapping him on the shoulder, Shelley turned back to his bag and stuffed in the last few items. “Handed the combat armor over to Stark, by the way. As awesome as it is, I can’t exactly go paradin’ around as y’r identical twin any more-”

“Grow two inches and put on thirty, and then we’ll talk, pal. Who’re you debriefing with?”

“Colonel Vance. He was in Special Forces with Eliot an’ me, he’s good. He actually gave me my deployment orders after Eliot mentioned ya might need a hand.”

“Can we trust him?”

Shelley let out a bark of laughter as he slung his bag up onto his shoulder. “Vance makes it a point to regularly flip the bird at those clowns that think they know how to run operations. He’s about as trustworthy as it gets, and he’s one of the only Colonels I know who’s still willing to do field work. Joins us on missions more often than he doesn’t.”

Considering this for a few seconds, Bucky chewed his lip and then nodded. “That’s good enough for me. If I get word that he’s leaked anything, though…”

The grin that answered him was feral and sly. “Oh, he knows. He’s got a hell of a broner for ya, man. I don’t think that’s gonna be a risk.”

“I’m… is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“Seriously, though.” Shelley stepped forward and rested a hand on Bucky’s shoulders. “You ever need Eliot, me, or as Vance is so fond of sayin’, a chopper full’a pissed off nineteen-year-olds in full body armor? We got your six.”

Giving Shelley a warm smile, Bucky squared his shoulders back and drew himself up into a salute. “Captain.”

The younger man returned the salute and nodded once at Bucky before stepping out of the room. “It’s been an honor, Sergeant. Take care of yourself and the girls.”
“Yes, sir.” He couldn’t resist dragging Shelley into a hug, though. “Thank you for everything, kid. Let me know the next time you’ve got leave. We’ll hit up that Indian place in Midtown that you like so much.”

Shelley smirked at him and waved over his shoulder as he walked toward the garage. Groaning unhappily, Tripod sat next to Bucky’s feet and butted her head against his knee.

“<I know, girl. I’ll miss him too.>” He reached down and scratched his fingers over her shoulders. “<Come on, let’s go find Helena.>”

Chapter End Notes

I… am kind of horrible to Mickey. I’m not sure what else to say besides that. I’m sorry?

Also, random note, for anyone wondering what Jack looks like after his experience with the Raft, when he meets up with Bucky’s team:
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

I didn’t actually know this was where this part of the story would end until I finished writing this chapter. But the story’s not over - I’ll be back next week with Chapter One of Book 2 - and it’s titled Valkyrie!

**Trigger Warnings:**
- PTSD attack in a public space
- Fragmented rolling flashbacks
- Visiting a grave and saying goodbye
- Discussion of and references to queerphobia, pre-Sokovia Accords accountability debate, rape and violence against targeted groups
- Guilt about past actions and violent legacy
- Drinking game, responsible alcohol consumption
- Chronic illness, and the resultant crankiness and frustration during a Bad Day

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James stood in the kitchen of his apartment - his apartment - and absently swirled his drink in circles on the counter. He still couldn’t entirely believe his luck; while Steve’s floor, his penthouse - damn, who’d’ve thought they’d end up in a penthouse - was wonderful, he’d never even dared hope that he’d be allowed the privacy of his own space.

Privacy was as foreign to him as being treated like a human being.

Less than a week, he’d lived here. It was furnished when he’d first opened the door, thanks to Barton taking point and arranging everything. And as much as he was reluctant to admit it, James had spent half of his nights so far sleeping on the couch. The mattress Tony sent him was softer than he’d ever thought possible, and after decades of sleeping on the floor, on the ground, in the snow... the couch was a somewhat happy medium between throwing a blanket and pillow on the floor and maintaining a semblance of being a functional adult.

Early summer sunlight filtered through the translucent white film covering the windows, a small blessing that James hadn’t expected to appreciate quite so much as he did. As far as hiding in plain sight in public, he’d been trained to do that better than anyone else alive, but when it came to his own home - his home, he still had trouble with that - it was nice to walk around without worrying about his arm.

A sharp tap on the door startled him out of his thoughts and he set down his drink before he dropped it. Only a handful of people knew where he lived, and of those, only-

“James?”

Sam, then.

Crossing the small dining area, James unlocked the door and opened it carefully, keeping his left arm out of view. Sam grinned at him and held up a motorcycle helmet, freshly spray-painted to cover the gaudy Falcon-inspired graphics. “Wanna get out of the house for a bit?”
“No, not really, but I guess I don’t have much of a choice.” James didn’t enjoy being anywhere he could be seen or recognized; the risks were far too great and he was still reeling from the last time he’d had a panic attack in public. Stepping back, he opened the door enough to let Sam past.

“Come in. I’ll grab my stuff.”

“If you don’t want-”

“Sam.” James pinched the bridge of his nose as he shouldered the door shut. “I know you’re not my shrink, but when a licensed therapist shows up on my doorstep and rhetorically asks me to get outside, I know better than to argue.”

“Just sayin’. We don’t have to go anywhere. I got my laptop in the car, we can watch some more Mythbusters if you want.”

Scrunching his face up, James headed into his bedroom to change into his riding pants. “I’m serious. You want me to come out of the cave, don’t give me an out like that. I’ll take you up on it if you offer again. You got a jacket or do you need to borrow one of mine?” Three armored riding jackets hung on pegs by the door: the one James usually wore, one that had quickly become too small after he’d finally gained back his muscle mass, and one that wasn’t even close to the right size because he’d clicked the wrong button on the website and didn’t have the heart to throw it out, return it, or donate it. Maybe he’d find someone half his size to give it to eventually. For now, it just hung there, forlorn and unworn.

Sam answered him by grabbing the slightly-too-small jacket and swinging it on. “I’ve got somewhere specific I want to take you today, if that’s okay.”

“Fine by me,” James mumbled as he reached up and lifted his helmet off its peg.

Steve’s Harley was waiting for them where James had left it pulled up close to the wall of the carports so that Sam had a dedicated place to park. Carefully walking the bike out into the parking lot, James patted the seat behind him to let Sam know it was okay to get on and tilted his head back to keep his hair out of his eyes as he slid his helmet on.

He twisted at the waist to check the strap on Sam’s helmet and do up the button on the jacket collar that Sam always forgot. Rapping his knuckles against the side of Sam’s helmet, James rolled his eyes as he flipped his visor down and turned back around. The bike kicked to life with a satisfying rumble and he slowly rolled forward out of the parking lot.

Whenever Sam rode pillion, he always put his hands on James’s shoulders, an acceptable compromise between stability and personal space that also allowed him to communicate directions without needing comms. Light taps told James where to turn and he steadily navigated them through the streets of DC until Sam gave him two taps on each shoulder: find somewhere to park.

He pulled into the first spot he could find and let Sam hop off before he backed the bike in. They took their helmets with them for convenience, and James raised an eyebrow as he recognized the gleaming white obelisk towering above the trees. Faintly in the distance, partially blued out through the thick atmosphere, he could still see the wreckage of the Triskelion and the helicarriers - the regime that nearly was.

“Why’re we at the Mall?”

Sam smiled and jerked his head to beckon James forward. “Something I want to show you. C’mon.”
As they strolled toward the Reflecting Pool, James considered shrugging off his jacket but satisfied himself with unzipping it. The heat wasn’t unbearable, and he’d rather deal with a little sweat than risk removing his armor against the world.

They stopped at the edge of an oblong ring of pillars with two large towers on either end. A curved wall covered in gold stars stood on the far side, and a deep blue pool with cheerfully curving fountains sat in the center of the ring. Dark gray squares offset the lighter gray paving stones, and a large, flat stone bore an inscription on it in neat black lettering.

“It’s the World War Two Memorial,” Sam said quietly. “I wanted you to see that everything you did, everyone you- what- wait-”

James was already stalking towards the pool, grumbling under his breath. When a hand hooked around his elbow and yanked him to a stop, he turned to glare at Sam. “If it’s a memorial, then tell me why in the hell there’s children wading in the pool and a man changin’ a diaper here.”

Frowning, Sam leaned to the side to look around James and there was, in fact, a man changing his toddler’s diaper right on the edge of the pool. Sam closed his eyes and sighed, turning away and pulling James with him. “Y’know what, I think we both need to walk away before one of us does somethin’ stupid.”

By the time they reached the other end of the Reflecting Pool, James hadn’t managed to stop Murder Glaring at everyone that walked by them. As much as Sam wanted to point it out, maybe ask James to stop, he had to admit that the bubble of space around them was refreshing. He gently steered James off to the right, weaving through the tourists until they stood in front of a long black wall covered in light gray names.

“What’s this one?” James asked quietly, stepping forward to trace a name with a gloved finger.

“Vietnam.”

Nodding, he chewed his lip as he read through the names. “I was there. I mean, I don’t remember it, not yet, but Doc says I was there.”

“Well, it spanned about twenty years, so I wouldn’t be surprised if they deployed you at some point.” They kept their voices low as James stood there, studying the endless rows.

He was quiet for several minutes until finally his fingers paused and his shoulders stiffened. “Sam.”

“Hm?”

“I- I think I need to get out of here.” James’s voice was distant and fuzzy as he stumbled back a few steps.

“Hey, man-” Glancing back at the wall, Sam found the name that had startled James just as his friend collapsed. “Shit. Shit, this was a bad idea. C’mon, man…” Morita. Of course he’d served in Vietnam, Sam should’ve thought of that. Rookie mistake; Sam cursed under his breath and mentally kicked himself.

He half-dragged James off to the side, ignoring the stares that turned their way. “Talk to me, buddy.”

“…can’t breathe…”

Sam led them to a tree and helped James sit against it, setting their helmets on the ground next to
“God, it’s the smell— I can’t stop smelling it.” Pressing the back of his hand over his mouth, James leaned over on his knees and dragged in ragged, shuddering breaths.

“Smelling what?”

His eyes were streaming as Sam crouched in front of him; clumsily dragging off his right glove, he wiped at his face with a shaking hand. “It gets in your lungs and on your skin and burns, it burns so bad, and the blood and the napalm and…”

“Sir? Is everything okay?” Sam looked up to see a park ranger approaching them, concern written across her face.

“Hang tight, breathe like I told you, 4-7-8, remember?” he murmured into James’s ear before giving the ranger a winning smile. “Just fine, ma’am. Found someone’s name that he wasn’t expecting to see. Tends to bring back some pretty rough memories for combat veterans.”

After a moment, the ranger’s eyes softened and she nodded before turning and walking away.

Sam felt James’s hand close around his, clinging tight for dear life. “Hey, man. Flashbacks?”

“I was there,” James whispered, a curtain of dark hair hiding his face. He took a deep breath and leaned back against the tree with his eyes closed. “I was there.”

“You know where you are now?”

It took him a few more breaths before he nodded. “DC, 2014. You’re Sam, we rode the bike here.”

“Good, that’s good.” Sam huffed out a relieved laugh. “Did you bring your notebook with you? You should probably get this written down soon.”

“It’s at home.”

Home.

That single, simple word filled Sam with more warmth than he was expecting and he barely managed to resist the urge to lean forward and hug James.

Home.

***

“Water wings?” Mickey was decidedly not amused as she glared at Bucky. “You make me wear those and you’re sleeping on the goddamn couch tonight.”

Shrugging, Bucky held up a life jacket in his other hand. “One or the other. Your pick.” When Mickey waved at the life jacket, he knelt in front of her, helped her guide her arms through the holes, and clipped it into place. “They’re Rescue water wings, though. Tony thought you’d like them.”

“Of all times for someone to misunderstand me,” she grumbled. “I said ‘search and rescue.’ Search and rescue. Not even a fucking codename.” When Bucky smirked and waved the pink plastic floaties with purple stylized medical symbols in front of her, Mickey groaned and closed her eyes. “They’re pink. Why do they have to be pink.”

Entirely serious, Bucky tossed the deflated water wings back into his bag and took Mickey’s hands
in his. The hair on his arm was beginning to stand up with the late December chill even this far underground. “They’re pink because that’s just the color Tony bought. You’re a role model, sweetheart; a lot of people look up to you, especially little cis and trans girls. The Avengers, we go around punching shit and leveling buildings. But you and Sam, you’re the ones that pull people out, make sure they’re okay, heal them, get them to safety… you’re the heroes. The real heroes.”

Her eyes prickled as she looked down at her legs, already soft and losing muscle tone. “Haven’t been doing much heroing lately.”

A cool, smooth hand pressed against her cheek. “You’ll get there. Be patient with yourself, okay? Just like you told me last year. You’ll have good days and bad days, just like me. I’m here now, though, and we’ll get through this like we got through everything else, yeah?”

“Together.”

“Always.” Bucky leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead, nose, and mouth. “C’mon. Let’s get you stood up.” Carefully, he held her arms as she shifted forward in her wheelchair, transferring her weight to her legs. “Good, good. I got you, I won’t let you fall.”

It took Mickey several seconds to finally feel stable on her feet. “Can you help me with my sweats?”

“Sure. Arms up.” Bucky gently tugged the loose, thick sweatshirt over her head and held her arms while she clumsily stepped out of her sweatpants. He nudged the pile of cloth to the side so she wouldn’t trip over it. “We’re gonna take a few steps, then I’ll lead you down the stairs and into the water. I’ll be here the whole time so don’t worry if your legs give out, I’ll catch you.”

Swallowing down her nerves, Mickey shuffled her feet forward, watching carefully to make sure she didn’t catch her toes on anything.

“You’re doin’ great, babydoll.” She didn’t have to look up to see the smile on Bucky’s face; she could hear it in his voice. “Absolutely great.”

It took them thirty seconds to reach the edge of the pool, and Bucky stepped carefully down into the water while he kept his hands secure just under Mickey’s arms. “One step at a time,” she said, repeating the mantra her physical therapists had drilled into her since her hip injury. “One step at a time.”

“You can do this.” Bucky’s swim trunks poofed out around his legs as he led Mickey further into the pool. “You’re already doing so well. I’m so proud of you.”

“Darlin’, we haven’t even moved more than ten feet yet.”

Another step into the pool, and Bucky was waist-deep in the water. “Still proud of you. Remember all those days where I went catatonic and you figured out how to have a conversation with me with nothing more than yes-or-no questions? Or when you convinced me that I didn’t have to hide in our closet after I knocked one of Steve’s teeth out during training?”

“Yeah. Steve was wringing his hands and making sad puppy noises for hours before you finally came out.” Mickey glanced up and grinned at Bucky as he helped her down another step. “Seriously, I should’ve made a Vine out of it. Hashtag: the star-spangled Labrador.”

Finally, they were in the pool, and Mickey gratefully let her aching legs go slack. She kept her hands on Bucky’s shoulders as he walked them further in.

“Speaking of which,” Mickey continued, “it’s adorable how Tripod keeps jumping into bed with us,
but you’re either going to need to train her to stay in her own bed or we need to get a king.”

Pure dread spread across Bucky’s face. “Promise me we’ll never go back to IKEA. Please. Please
promise me.” Mickey couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Yeah, no, we’re never going back there. I don’t know what that guy’s deal was, but that crazy old
bat he had with him was something else entirely.”

“And his face. Did you see his face?” They both shuddered slightly. “The next time I have a
complete stranger attack-hug me and kiss my cheek and tell me how proud he is of my redemption
arc, I will shoot them dead.”

“You and me both, love.” Mickey glanced down apprehensively as Bucky pushed off the smooth
roll in the pool floor where it deepened, tugging them out from the short side of the large L-shaped
pool and into the lap area. “You sure about this?”

“I got you. You got a life jacket on too, remember?”

“Right.” She took a deep breath and let her hands slide off of Bucky’s arms, sculling slowly as he
stroked back away from her.

Once he was about twenty feet away, he stopped and motioned her forward. “Swim over to me.”

“I- I don’t have my dampers on, I might-”

“I know.” His hands flowed back and forth as he treated water effortlessly. “I know, babydoll. We
talked about this. Let me heal for you. I can take it.” The purple-pink, puckered skin across his
chest and stomach made Mickey wince, but she bit down her protest and leaned forward.

All she was able to manage was a lopsided, slow, frustrating dog paddle, but after several minutes of
work, she floated into Bucky’s arms once more. He tugged her in by the straps on her life jacket and
held her tight, legs slowly circling under them as he kept them afloat.

“That was two more feet than yesterday.” Punctuating it with a kiss to her temple, Bucky rubbed his
thumbs over the back of Mickey’s neck. “Okay, we’ll do this four more times and then switch to the
next exercise.”

Mickey nodded, breathless as she clung to Bucky. “Fuck, I’m out of shape already.”

“Myshka, love, you cracked your skull open three weeks ago skating at a level most people can only
dream of. Cut yourself some slack?”

Letting her head fall forward, Mickey rested her forehead against Bucky’s. “I want to walk again.
And run again. And play guitar. And- and drink a beer, and… I want my hair back.”

“I know.” His thumb brushed over her cheek. “We’ll get there. One step at a time. You’re already
able to walk, remember?”

“Yeah, with help.” It was impossible to keep the bitterness out of her voice.

“You texted Steve without help earlier today. Better coordination in your thumbs already.”

If she refused to open her eyes, she didn’t have to confront the fact that she wore a life jacket like a
fucking kid. “Mm.”

“Saw you stand up and put your own bagel in the toaster yesterday.”
“Bucky, I know what you’re trying to do, but-”

“Remember my Aunt Sarah?” Mickey looked up at that, meeting his eyes.

“That’s your shithead word.”

“Still.”

Sighing, Mickey leaned back until she was floating on her own again. “Fine, I get it. Okay. Swim out again and make me go a few more feet this time.”

***

Bucky swore loudly as the sway bar popped loose from its end link and whacked him in the forehead. A small spray of dusty grit rained down from the underchassis, and he rolled out from under the car pawing at his eyes. Grabbing the first shop rag his hand landed on, he wiped off his face and blinked tightly a few times, propped up on his elbows while his eyes streamed and smarted and his head ached.

- hand pressed to the window, something wrong, there’s a plane, something wrong, orders, what are my orders, this is outside mission parameters, plane is bigger, turn around, yell, too high up, can’t evacuate -

Fighting off flashbacks by getting elbows deep in his Mustang might not have been the best idea after all. Once his vision cleared he scooted back under the car and scowled at the misbehaving end link. Bucky gritted his teeth and growled at the car; he couldn’t force the parts to align for fear of bending something irreparably, so, finesse and frustration it was. All he had to do was get the bolt threaded, it wasn’t fucking rocket science. Just one thread needed to catch and he could tighten it down with a wrench. Just one.

- hole in the sky, alien reptiles, flying robot, is that a man in the red armor, barrel’s too hot, aim is off, the uniform is wrong even if the shield is right, why is my fox here -

His hands spasmed and he dropped the bolt onto his chest. Closing his eyes, Bucky let his hands fall to his stomach, the sway bar dangling haphazardly in the air over his head, and sighed heavily. After several deep breaths, he wiggled to the side slightly, repositioned his hands, and tried again. Relief flooded through him when he finally managed to thread the bolt in and tighten it down.

Next on the list was an oil cooler; sometime during the Mustang’s hibernation in Clint’s garage, the fins had been flattened to the point that air wouldn’t flow through any more. Bucky carefully unpacked the new oil cooler, removed the plastic caps over the inlet and outlet, and slowly slotted it into place behind the front grille. New oil lines hooked up to the cooler easily and he bolted everything in place before checking the line fittings to make sure they’d sealed correctly.

- sand everywhere, is this really in mission parameters, air already chilling minutes after sunset, the team is unhappy, why, where are my orders, sand everywhere -

Leaning on the sturdy crossbar at the front of the engine bay, Bucky closed his eyes and sucked in a deep breath, trying to force the tension out of his shoulders. The huge windows along the east wall of the garage were still dark, and the only light that filtered in from outside came from the faint bluish white lights lighting the running path that wrapped around the perimeter of the Compound.

He’d kept the overhead lights in the garage relatively low, knowing that if they were bright enough he might risk waking someone else up at an hour that sane people were never awake. The dusky silhouettes of Tony’s cars watched him from the shadows of the expansive garage, lined up neatly
against the far wall while he stood in the corner with his beat-up old therapy car.

- Garrett is going to punish you, shut your mouth or you’ll catch flies you punk, gleaming bands of color in the sky, the other men are staring too, maybe there won’t be any punishment -

Drawing in a wet, shuddering breath, Bucky shook his head quickly to rid himself of the fragmented memories clinging to his eyes. He turned and stepped over to the small workbench against the wall with awkward, jerky movements, picked up the old radio unit he’d set there, and made his way back around the car.

The unit Clint had installed lay on the center console, a spaghetti-like mess of wires leading from it back into the dashboard. Bucky had already taped a wiring diagram above the opening, and armed with wire cutters and pliers, he gently tugged the rat’s nest out so that he could disconnect it from the original wiring harness. Several minutes later, he finished connecting the wires to the replacement radio unit and gently secured it into place. One more piece of the restoration, complete.

- turning a knob, nothing out here except static or men speaking about a vengeful God, flat long road, why not airdrop closer to the target -

He picked up the mess of wires from Clint’s patch job and climbed out of the car, tossing everything into a large plastic bin that he’d sort through later. The door at the other end of the garage that led to the Compound clicked open and quiet footsteps scuffed their way towards him. Bucky did his best to ignore whoever it was as he pulled a knife out of his pocket to carefully cut the packing tape holding on the wrapping around the Mustang’s new exhaust.

When he stood up, the front segment in his hands, Tony was leaning against the rear quarter of the car. The smaller man was rubbing his eyes and his hair stuck out in every direction, and he held two steaming mugs of something in his other hand.

“FRIDAY told me you were having a bad night,” he mumbled by way of explanation, then offered Bucky one of the mugs. “It’s some of Bruce’s tea that he left behind, that stuff that helps you when you’re twitchy. Why isn’t Tripod here?”

Bucky took a long sip of the tea and set down the exhaust piece. Squeezing his eyes shut, he rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. “Sleeping.”

“She’s your alert system, though. You should keep her with you.” Crossing his arms, Tony shook his head. “You aren’t alone anymore, Barnes. You’ve got people to look out for you.”

“I’m fine.”

Tony rolled his eyes. Shaking his head, Bucky set his tea on the workbench and picked up the H-pipe he’d set down. He slid back under the car and jimmied it into position, then started popping the small metal bars sticking off the pipe through the rubber mounts to hold it in place.

“I’m not going to tell you what to do, Barnes,” Tony continued as he crouched down so he could look at Bucky. ‘But I’m getting worried. What’s going on?’

“Just a rough night. Brain static. Pass me the resonator pipes.”

Two long sections of steel tube appeared as Tony obligingly handed them over, along with the screwdriver Bucky hadn’t remembered to ask for. “You gonna get her repainted?”

“Maybe.” He held the screwdriver between his teeth as he positioned the pipe clamps, then tightened them down. “Shame to have her all fixed up and still lookin’ like this.” The faded green
paint was covered in patches of oxidation, filler putty, and welded-in rust repair.

The driver’s door opened and Tony hummed quietly, tapping his finger against the peeling sticker on the door frame. “Let me make a call once all the normal people are awake. I’ll see if I can get the paint formula; I’ve got a line I use for the suits, should be able to take a chassis.” His slipper-covered feet scuffed over the garage floor while he picked up the muffler and tailpipes and set them down by the rear of the car.

Bucky grabbed onto the chassis and used it to rotate himself around so his feet were pointing toward the hood. “Dunno if I want to restore to original or go custom.”

“Your wish is my command, Tin Man.” Tony squatted next to the car and held the tailpipes in place while Bucky secured them to the rest of the exhaust. “White rocker stripes might look good, but the whole point of this model is the understated power. Just lemme know what you wanna do. She got a name yet?”

Smiling slightly, Bucky gave the exhaust a good strong wiggle to make sure it was firmly mounted. “Sandra. This one’s Sandra.”

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Despite the clear blue sky, bright sunlight, and picturesque white clouds dotting the horizon, Bucky shivered and tugged his jacket tighter around him. His footsteps crunched along the path, matched by the quiet scuffs of Tripod’s soft, warm paw boots. He curled his fingers in his pockets, trying to shake off the bone-deep cold that had settled in to stay even in his left hand.

Short-lived puffs of fog vanished into the air in front of him and his eyelids felt cold every time he blinked. Bucky burrowed his nose into the thick, fluffy scarf around his neck, and squinted against the sun in his eyes as he plotted his way forward.

Several minutes later, he stood in front of a familiar granite headstone. “Hey, Jim.” He traced the lettering with his eyes, then sat next to the cold stone. Tripod turned in place several times, nose to tail, before curling up at Bucky’s side with a sigh.

The endless rows of white markers rolled over the hills, shining in the early morning sun. Bucky let himself take in the view for several seconds before digging into his pocket and pulling out a fresh pack of cigarettes. He looked down at it, eyebrows drawing together, then quickly stripped off the plastic wrapper and shook one of the cigarettes into his hand. While he fished his lighter out of the pocket inside his jacket, he set the small box of Lucky Strikes on top of Morita’s headstone.

“Finally getting you back for that pack you gave me. Steve never knew about it, so… here you go.” Bucky cupped his hands around the end of his cigarette and lit it carefully, then dropped his Zippo back into its usual pocket. “Never got a chance to say thank you, before. All o’ you were the best men I ever knew, but you… you always reminded me why I was there. That there really was something - some one - worth fighting for.”

He took a long drag from the cigarette and closed his eyes as he exhaled, leaning forward on his knees. “What they did to your family… I read about it after I got back. I’m glad things worked out, and you got at least a few years of peace. Just wish I could’a been there, you know? Wish I could’a been that uncle we all talked about, how we’d all stay in touch after the war. How you’n’ Dugan would invite Steve an’ I over so we could be part of your families for the holidays.

“Sometimes I really wish we’d all made it through, so we could’ve leaned on each other while we fought off our ghosts. But that’s not the plan the world had for us, I guess.” A cold, wet nose
bumped against his hand and Bucky lifted it up so Tripod could nuzzle up against him. “I just dunno what to do anymore, Jim. You always had this plan, how things would go… you’d get home to your wife, meet the son she brought into the world while we were blowin’ up the Netherlands, work your farm, make an honest livin’. Give ‘im the schoolin’ you never got, send ‘im to college.

“And you did it all. Your boy’s son is runnin’ a school, now. Principal. Some place in Midtown. You should be proud’a him, Jim-boy. You’n’ Gabe an’ Dum Dum, you were the ones that made it work, had kids, had families. Just wish Stevie an’ I could’a been there to spoil ‘em all rotten.”

A deep breath filled his lungs with the chilly late December air, and Bucky absently fiddled with his cigarette as the thin line of smoke trailed away. His Brooklyn drawl was thickening and broadening by the second, falling back into the easy, casual cadence he’d spoken with during the war. “I dunno what I’m doin’ and I dunno where I wanna go. If you really are watchin’ over us, lookin’ down and watchin’, then you know who I am now and you know what I did. I can’t ever run from that. Do I keep fighting? I dunno if I can step back. It’s all I— all I know how to do is kill people.

“I mean, I got science an’ stuff. It’s fun, helpin’ out in the labs, learnin’ about biology and physics and chemistry and all that fancy shit we didn’t know about back then. They put a man on the fuckin’ moon and they’re gonna do it with Mars next… maybe I gotta call up Jane an’ talk to her for a bit, see if I can talk to the rich schmucks what gonna build the rockets. If I get the schoolin’ I need, maybe an unkillable astronaut is just what they need. Maybe an unkillable assassin is what they need, if there really are bug-men out there.

“But Mickey… she’s hurting. It’s baby steps, every day… I can’t leave her behind. Not again. Last time I did that she got her brainpan cut open. I just…” He stubbed out the cigarette against his left hand and held the butt loosely in his fingers. “I can either keep fighting at Steve’s side, or retire and do fuck knows what. And that’s only if the government doesn’t decide to lock me up again. We only scratched the surface of the HYDRA cancer that got its way into every major developed country, and people are already forgetting how dangerous it is, trustin’ a group o’ suit’n’tie clowns like that.

“They’re talkin’ about accountability, about how our international operations ain’t sanctioned or legal. They’re talkin’ about forcin’ us to register as— as…” His voice cracked and he sniffed back the wetness in his nose. “They wanna make Mickey publicly register as a living weapon’a mass destruction. She— she’s a healer. She helps people.” Taking a deep, shuddering breath, Bucky rubbed his hand over his face. “They wanna class her the same as someone like me, someone like Bruce. Jim, she can barely walk.”

Bucky paused to get his breathing back under control, ducking his head down and focusing on the quiet, calming presence of Tripod at his side.

“I don’t want to fight anymore,” he whispered. “I don’t wanna kill anymore. I don’t wanna hurt anyone anymore.”

As soon as he said the words, they settled like a heavy weight on his shoulders.

“I don’t wanna fight. But what do I do? They’re talkin’ about roundin’ us up, forcin’ us to register, forcin’ us to report… it’s like the goddamn camps all over again. We ain’t gettin’ gassed or interred, but we sure as hell ain’t gonna be free either.

“And then there’s the queers… Life’s better for them, now. I’m not sure if I should say ‘us’ though… I- I don’t know if I’m- I just don’t know. I dunno what bein’ with Mickey makes me, if it makes me different at all. I dunno what makin’ time with Steve that once makes me. But I ain’t any different from ‘em. Why can’t people see that? We ain’t different. Don’t matter who you love or
why. Isn’t that what we fought for? Isn’t that why you ripped that little pink triangle off that boy’s coat? Weren’t just the Jews, but no one seems to r’member that…

“It’s just… it’s all… It’s just wrong. The government’s supposed to protect people, but… we got a pumpkin in a toupee runnin’ for President alongside a woman an’ a socialist, and I dunno who the fuck to vote for. I dunno if I’ll even be allowed to vote. I just…”

“I don’t wanna fight anymore. But what if I- what if I have to? This ain’t the world we wanted to make, Jim. This ain’t the country we wanted to come home to. My girlfriend can’t go out in public some places ‘cause she’s known and she’s out and they threaten ‘er. Steve got a gun pulled on ‘im two weeks ago ‘cause he’s bi. If the Invaders didn’t have a problem with it back when bein’ queer got you raped an’ killed by the men what swore, why- why’s it different now?”

Snaking a finger under the edge of the surprisingly comfortable and warm hat Wanda made for him earlier that week as a peace offering, Bucky tucked a loose strand of hair back behind his ear.

“I really don’t wanna pick up a gun ever again. I got so- so much blood, and- and I just-” He sighed explosively and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. “I wish you could talk back. I need your advice right now, Jim. I need you to tell me what to do. Whether I gotta keep fighting even if I don’t want to. Whether I can just retire and try’n’ live in peace, try’n’ help my girl get better. I just- I don’t- I dunno what to do.”

Yes, you do. Morita’s voice seemed to drift into his head, the same patient response he’d given Bucky so many times so long ago. Yes, you do.

Grunting softly as he rocked to his feet, Bucky chewed on his lip and frowned as he rested a hand against the cold granite. “Miss you, pal.” He poked the box of cigarettes slightly to reposition it, then turned and drew in a deep breath as he stuffed his hands back in his pockets. Tripod bumped against his leg and looked up at him with large, dark eyes.

“<I know, girl. Come on.>”

If he stayed there, he’d never leave. The aching hole in his chest, the empty space left when he’d been torn from his closest friends, it’d never fill back up. The ragged edges might soften and dull over time, but… letting himself dwell too much on what he’d lost was no way to keep an eye on his future.

He let himself wander through the cemetery, stopping at a few markers to pay his respects; Riley’s had fresh flowers nestled next to a Christmas wreath. Eventually he found himself standing with a few weather-brave tourists, leaning against the sturdy brass railing as he faced the large white marble tomb. He hadn’t realized how unfocused and vacant his eyes must have been, the thousand-yard stare that blatantly marked men like him as he stood there, until he jumped when footsteps scuffed to a stop at his side.

The young man to his left looked tired and worn, but a proud energy filled his eyes nonetheless. A plain black beanie covered his head, and he wore sturdy civilian clothing chosen with a military-sharp eye for functionality.

Bucky looked down at his feet and rolled his shoulders slightly to shake off the chill that was settling into his bones. Gentle pressure against his leg reminded him of Tripod’s constant grounding presence at his side.

“I couldn’t help but see you earlier, sir,” the young man said softly, his voice pitched so that only Bucky would hear him. “Not a lot of folk go to visit Sergeant Morita.”
Bucky simply shrugged and tracked the smooth, rolling steps of the Sentinel on duty with his eyes. “Not a lotta folk remember him.”

With a smile, the young man turned to face Bucky. “That’s why we’re here. The Sentinels, I mean. It’s our honor to remember and to guard.”

The air bit into his sinuses as Bucky looked back at the tomb and swallowed, jaw clenched. “They deserved so much more. Empty graves, field burials… so many young Americans that never came home.”

“We give them what we can.” The Sentinel gripped the railing and leaned forward, breath fogging the air in front of him. “Sometimes it isn’t much, but… with all the shit and vitriol flying around right now, it helps to step back and remember.”

Bucky crossed his arms, hunching inward slightly against a gust of wind. “I’m not sure what to do anymore. Been alive so long that I ain’t even sure if what’s goin’ on right now is my fight to step into.

“I’m so tired of it all,” he admitted. “Got more blood on my hands than anyone else alive, and I just… I just want it to stop. I just want…” Frowning, Bucky huffed out a breath and looked down at Tripod.

“You just want a chance to live your life.”

“Do I get that privilege? Am I allowed?” He adjusted his scarf for lack of anything better to do with his hands. “Seventy-five years ago, we entered a war we knew both too much and not enough about. A year after that, I got drafted into a war I didn’t want to fight. And then, well… we both know what happened after that.” Scrunching up his nose, Bucky peered out across the cemetery. “I break free, I come home, and… the war isn’t over. It’s never been over. I can’t remember the last time the world’s been at peace.”

“That’s not your responsibility, though,” the Sentinel told him gently. “It’s ours. This is our world, now. You have a place in it, but it’s the world of my generation. It’s our responsibility to change it, this time. Maybe it’s your responsibility to carve out your own little bubble of peace wherever you can, and defend that against the rest of the world. God knows you’ve earned it.”

Laughing bitterly, Bucky shook his head. “Have I? Doesn’t feel like it.”

“We all serve in our own way, and we all find peace in our own way. This is mine.”

“It looks different,” he mumbled after a pause, then nodded toward the tomb to clarify. “Was smaller, back then. It’s nice, seein’ all the memorials. I just wish all those men and women were still alive to tell their stories.”

The Sentinel at his side smiled softly, eyes on the smooth flagstones in front of them. “Not that I would presume to give you an order, Master Sergeant, but… I think that’s where you should start.”

“Tellin’ stories?” Bucky snorted. “Technically speaking, the world doesn’t know I’m back stateside yet. What’m I supposed to do, set up a YouTube channel and beat my gums at a webcam?”

His sarcasm was met with a calm, intense gaze as the young man straightened and faced him again. “Tell the stories of the men that the world forgot, the ones that never lived to tell it themselves. This new war the world’s facing, it’ll be fought with words and knowledge as much or more than it’ll be fought with guns and bullets. Maybe what we need is someone to remind us why the war started, and to tell us the stories of the men that never came home, in body or in mind.”
A strange sense of relief and calm settled over Bucky as he stared at the young Sentinel in front of him. Something was familiar in those eyes, that challenging gaze that pierced through everything and laid bare the truths he’d been hiding from himself. The cocky but strong posture, the slight tilt to his head…

Bucky grinned. “Good to see Frenchie found some peace of his own, after all.”

“Grand-père gave me one hell of a legacy to live up to.” The Sentinel shook his hand, gave Bucky a quick nod, and turned. “I need to head back to base and get some rest. I hope you find your peace, Sergeant.”

“Thank you,” Bucky replied quietly. “I think now I know where to start, at least.”

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“I’m tellin’ you, it’s a fuckin’ tragedy. Didn’t even get all the way ‘round the sun ‘fore those eggheads knocked it off the roster.” Bucky stuck his chin out stubbornly as he turned over the hologram in front of him. “Big fuckin’ deal when they discovered Pluto, but now…”

Rhodes chuckled. “I hear you. Imagine the controversy when they stripped it of its planet status, if that happened today…”

“Tumblr would explode.”

Things with Rhodes had gotten off to a rocky start at first, and it hadn’t helped when Tony told him that the Winter Soldier caused that fateful crash so many years ago. Over the year and a half since his escape, though, grudging respect had evolved into friendship and eventually an easy companionship. Of course, tossing 3D blueprints for new repulsor boots back and forth like a basketball resulted in near-instant bonding between the two geeks.

“FRIDAY, run a stress simulation on this bracket,” Bucky muttered, sweeping his hands outward to give himself an exploded view. “Looks like it needs to have more meat at the curve.”

Walking over, Rhodes crossed his arms and frowned thoughtfully. “Tony’s had it that way since the Mark 8.” The bracket in question lit up with the test results, green through most of its length but subtly fading to orange at the curve Bucky had pointed out.

“Simulation complete.”

“Well, you’d only need to add about…” Spinning the part around, Bucky pursed his lips. “Ten grams? Gimme another sim.” Within seconds, the orange spot faded out. “Let’s knock it down to eight, as long as it stays within the threshold.”

“We’re over fifty iterations in, I think Tony would’ve fixed it if it was a problem.”

Bucky grinned at Rhodes and collapsed the boot’s parts back down. “If I’m thinkin’ about this right, you’ll thank me later when your fifth tertiaries don’t fatigue on you. Chances are you aren’t getting the actuation you need there because the bracket’s bent.” He walked over to where one of the older model boots stood on a workbench, partially disassembled, and peeled back one of the control flaps to expose the bracket. “See here?”

“Huh.” Rhodes leaned over to look at it. “Weird. Well, let’s put together a prototype and I’ll test it out once it’s off the line.”

“I’ll get it sent off.”
Bucky waved away the hologram and reached over to grab the bottle of water he’d been neglecting. “Thanks, doll.”

“You’re picking stuff up pretty damn fast,” Rhodes told him with a grin. “Steve always said you were a geek, but…”

“God, it’s great! You have any idea how much I fantasized about goin’ to the Moon? Wanted to be an astronaut before it was even a thing.” He snorted and shook his head. “‘I was a space nerd before it was cool.’ Fuck, I sound like a hipster now.”

“You used to help Tony’s dad out in his lab, didn’t you?”

Nodding, Bucky fiddled with the bottle cap. “Seriously, though, as awesome as all this stuff is, sometimes I miss the old days when the weirdest shit science made was Steve and the Red Skull. Things were simpler back then.”

They fell into companionable silence as Bucky watched Rhodes sift through digital schematics of the weapons systems on War Machine. Looking down at his metal hand, Bucky rotated it over so his palm was facing the floor, marveling at the tiny sensations of the fabric of his sleeve sliding over his arm.

Without intending to, he blurted out, “I know they’re gearing up for another trial.”

Rhodes froze, then slowly turned to face Bucky, his face unreadable.

“Makes sense.” Bucky shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “Soon as they get wind of me being back, they’re gonna wanna bring me in for everything I did while I was AWOL.”

“How well did you cover your tracks?” Rhodes asked slowly, and Bucky shot him an insulted look. “Well, the whole thing hinges on evidence. Circumstantial evidence will still fly in court if it’s significant enough, but without any hard evidence linking you to anything…”

“I spent seventy years as nothing more than whispers in the dark to scare the CIA cadets. Do you seriously think I left any brass or prints behind?”

Rhodes tilted his head back slightly, crossing his arms. “You got pretty bold when you took out Lukin. There’s only a handful of people alive who can pull off a shot like that.”

“Didn’t earn my codename for leavin’ footprints in the snow, Colonel. There’s a reason they call me the Ghost.”

“Just sayin’. Don’t get cocky, Barnes.” Rhodes’s eyes softened and his shoulders canted to the side as he shifted his weight. “They don’t have anywhere near enough to even think about moving forward, not yet. I’ve been working with Mickey and Pepper to build up a defense, just in case, but-”

Sighing, Bucky looked back down at his water bottle. “You can’t be involved publicly. I know.” It all boiled down to the same conflict of interest that kept him from testifying during the first trial. When he looked back up, Rhodes was leaning against his workbench and turning a screwdriver over in his hands.

“Realistically? I think it’s going to fizzle out. We really do need to pay attention to the media, and at some point, you’re going to need to publicly address the rumors about your actions overseas. There’s no way to get out of that one. But if you play your cards carefully, this could work in your favor.”
“What’re my options?”

Rhodes took a deep breath before answering. “Well, retiring from active duty is probably the most graceful, could be seen as an act of goodwill. Having you active on the team would be pretty valuable, but the only way that won’t turn into a shitshow is if we can get public opinion behind you again. It’s still pretty divided. Worst case, we disappear you to another safehouse.” The hidden meaning behind Rhodes’s words made Bucky’s stomach twist.

“I’d have to live out the rest of my life undercover.”

“As unlikely as that is, we have to prepare for every outcome.”

“So, not much chance of me being able to go back to college, is there?”

Rhodes blinked, surprised. “Well, it’s definitely a possibility provided we don’t fuck up too badly. Chances are you can test out of a lot of the classes anyway. You’ve already got a paper published under your name, so eventually word’s gonna get out that you’re good at more than hitting, stabbing, and shooting things. Why? Got anything specific in mind?”

“Nah, just startin’ to feel outclassed around all these PhDs,” Bucky drawled. “Was thinkin’ maybe biochem. Mickey and I make a good team down in Research. Probably have enough on Inhuman biology and their genome activation to publish a second dissertation in a few months.”

“She’s a smart cookie, that one.”

He couldn’t help but grin self-consciously. “She is. It’s amazing how resilient she is through everything.”

“Don’t let her get too low, Barnes.” Rhodes reached out and gave Bucky’s shoulder a squeeze. “Make sure you know when she’s putting up a façade. Natasha’s been training her for undercover work, so it might be harder for you to tell.”

“You forget that I trained Natasha,” he reminded Rhodes.

“Still. I worry about her. We all do. We all wanna see our guardian angel happy and healthy.”

“You know the promise I made her.”

Rhodes nodded and stepped back. “We’ll all do our best to keep it. We’re strongest when we’re together, and we need to stay that way now more than ever.”

“We’ll get through this, sir.” He rarely addressed Rhodes as ‘sir,’ and hoped that using the honorific would add weight to his words. “Just like Steve says. Everything we face, we face it together. Whether I’m active or not, I’ll still be here supporting the team. Same with Mickey. I’ll always have your six.”

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“Never have I ever been in handcuffs.”

Bucky groaned as he wheeled Mickey into the common area and everyone but Dr. Cho tossed back a shot. “Seriously, people?”

Steve lifted up a large decanter full of fluorescent purple liquid. “C’mon, Buck!”

“We’ll let you take Mickey’s shots,” Helena offered with a wink. Wanda looked away and
scratched at the base of her neck uncomfortably, avoiding Bucky’s eyes as he looked around the circle of decidedly tipsy superheroes. He glanced down at Mickey with an eyebrow raised and lips pressed into an unamused, flat frown.

She shrugged. “Eh, why not. Could learn something I can use to blackmail my way out of KP. Fetch me a bottle o’ pop, will you?”

And that was that.

It was Natasha’s turn next. “Never have I ever walked in on a member of my family getting nasty.” Pepper took her drink with a sigh and a roll of her eyes, and after a moment Jack grimaced as he lifted up his own shot glass..

“I’m never going to live that one down, am I.”

“Nooo!” Bucky shot him a cheeky grin.

It didn’t take many more rounds before it was emphatically reinforced that Captain America and Steve Rogers were two very, very different people.

Tony was probably the most startled out of any of them. “You’ve smoked weed, had a fist up your ass, shaved your balls, smuggled booze, cut class-

“Don’t forget the time he bent Peggy over a crate in a supply closet in the Netherlands. She was walkin’ weird for days an’ she had this dopey-ass smile on-”

“Buck!” A pillow smacked him firmly in the face as the team begged for more details.

Grinning shamelessly, Tony topped up the empty shot glasses. “It’s surprisingly refreshing to realize that you’re just as much of a punk as the rest of us.”

“’s what I been sayin’ for ninety fuckin’ -” Bucky didn’t get to finish his sentence though, before a small landmass of a human being slammed into him and tackled him off his beanbag chair. “Oi, get off me, you big lug!” Tripod lifted her head off her paws but simply watched the two men tussle with groggy, bored eyes.

Steve froze when water sprayed him in the side of the head, blinked a few times, stuck his pinkie in his ear to clear it, and turned toward the source of the water. “The shit, Wilson?”

Shrugging, Sam set the squirt bottle back on the coffee table. “Works for cats, figured it’d work for supersoldiers.”

“Oh my God, I need one of those,” Mickey squeaked. “I need one so bad.”

Bucky rolled his eyes and jabbed Steve under the ribs to get him to roll away. “Oh, piss off. I only love you for your cooking.”

Clint decided that was the moment to take his turn, postponed by the impromptu wrestling match. “Never have I ever called Barnes, ‘Fucky.’”

“That was- that was one time!” Indignant, Mickey flipped Clint off and took a swig of her soda. “One goddamn time, and-” Her eyes widened. “You voyeuristic asshole. You were in the vents, weren’t you?”

“When was this?” Bucky asked, feeling just as baffled as Clint looked.
Sinking lower into the couch, Mickey fiddled with the bottle cap. “I might’ve been trying to say ‘fuck’ and ‘Bucky’ and it just kind of… you know how it happens.”

“No, I don’t. Do enlighten me.” He couldn’t help but grin wolfishly as Mickey’s face turned red. Next to her, Jack covered his ears, rolled his eyes to the ceiling, and quietly whispered, *la la la, I can’t hear you.*

Clint coughed awkwardly. “Okay, I seriously wasn’t expecting that. Lucky guess, maybe?”

“Can we *not* talk about the sex life none of us actually expected me to have, please?”

“Whole point of the game, kiddo.” Tony wagged his eyebrows at Mickey. “Okay, we’ll let that one go. Never have I ever been tied up upside down and naked.”

Bucky choked on his water when he saw Steve take a drink. “*What? When?!*”

Buzzed past the point of caring, Steve gave him a dopey grin. “Sharon’s kinky. It’s kinda fun. She’s got this thing called a vacuum cube…”

“Oh god.” Dropping his head into his hands, Bucky peeked an eye out at Jack. “I am so sorry, I know exactly how you feel now.”

By the end of the night, Mickey was the only sober one among them, and they were all substantially better educated and armed when it came to embarrassing their fellow team members. Clint, Sam, and Wanda had all simply passed out under the watchful eye of Vision while the rest of them gradually stumbled back to their quarters.

Jack had an arm over Steve and Bucky’s shoulders, humming happily to himself.

“I’ll order up some coconut water for tomorrow morning,” Mickey said as she tapped away at her phone. “You two probably won’t be hungover, but Jack Jack Attack here’s going to have one whopper of a headache when he wakes up.”

“Thanks, sugar. Y’th’best.” Steve still had that silly smile on his face as he bent over and opened his eyes wide to scan them past the front door.

Reaching up a hand, Mickey brushed her thumb over Bucky’s knuckles where he gripped the handles of her wheelchair. “Just taking care of my boys. I could heal away his migraine, but…”

“You gon’ make me suffer through it.” Jack sighed, resigned to his fate while Steve half-carried him off to his room.

“Damn straight,” Bucky called after them before closing the door to the master suite behind him and locking it. “Whoooo boy, I ain’t been this soused in a while.”

Mickey rolled herself over to the bed and lurched onto it, sending the wheelchair rolling back to its place by the closet with a well-practiced kick. “I know. It’s kind of hilarious, actually.” She wiggled under the covers and smirked up at Bucky while he undressed. “You get a Russian accent when you’re stressed, a German accent when you’re disoriented, and holy hell does Brooklyn come out to play when you’re plastered.”

“Aw, fugg off.” Leaning forward, Bucky flopped facedown onto the bed and groaned into the pillow. “I’m on a marshmallow. Biiiiiiiig fluffy marshmallow.”

Tripod picked that moment to jump up on the bed, planting her prosthetic paw firmly in Bucky’s
kidney. He yelped, twitched oddly, and pressed one hand to his lower back while he clumsily batted Tripod away with the other.

“Chrissakes, dog, I’mma put a jingle bell on that collar’a yours…” A strange, unnatural sound drifted through the walls and Bucky swore into the pillow before dragging it over his head and pinning it down with his arms.

“What? Something wrong?”

“Stevie’s singing.”

Mickey snorted and chuckled at the pained sound Bucky made. “I can’t hear him. Besides, I thought he was good.”

“When he’s sober.”

“FRIDAY?”

There was a slight pause, and then a startled yelp echoed down the hallway.

“Thanks, sweetie.”

“Wha’d’you do?” Bucky eased out from under the pillow, blinking blearily at Mickey.

“Captain Rogers is in the shower. I may have reversed the temperature on him without warning.”

“Ireland, yer a saint.”

Mickey stifled her laughter with her hand and lifted up the covers so Bucky could worm his way underneath. She snuggled up to him and carded her fingers through his hair, making it stand up on end and fluff out in weird directions. He smiled, closed his eyes, and hummed happily.

“I didn’t know you could knit,” Mickey murmured, remembering one of Wanda’s turns during the game.

“’s why we had socks back then, Stevie ‘n’ me. Cheaper’n buyin’ ‘em from Macy’s, that’s I’damn sure.” Bucky pulled her closer and burrowed his face into the join between her neck and shoulder. “Came in handy durin’ the war when the care packages with woolies from home got delayed. Sold socks ‘n’ scarves to the boys in the 107th for a nickel a set.”

“Have I told you lately how wonderful you are?”

Bucky just held her tighter.

The constant fear of a second trial, the accountability debate looming over their heads…the public image of the Winter Soldier as a terrifying, ruthless killer…Mickey wished desperately that people could see the Bucky Barnes that she saw. The Bucky that said, ‘coffee shop’ funny, the Bucky that hated cantaloupe and milkshakes, the Bucky that spoiled his dog rotten without a second thought.

She wished there was some way she could share the soothing warmth of his pulse signature; he felt like gun oil, the crackling fireplace in Portland, cedarwood, and a fierce, terrifying loyalty that made her own heart swell. And even though cold, dark flecks still swirled their way around, they’d never drown out the powerful light at the core of him.

All that social media would see were pictures of him in tailored suits with his hair styled up, his combat uniform, or the occasional blurry paparazzi photo from a lucky vulture that managed to skirt
around Bucky’s situational awareness. They’d never get to see his bedhead, hear him whistle Andrews Sisters songs as he did the dishes with bright yellow gloves pulled up to his elbows, or see that shy, blushing smile whenever anyone complimented him.

They’d never get to watch his eyes light up as he, Tony, and Rhodes chattered at a mile a minute about some new gadget, or see that little frown of concentration he got when working with the latest Inhuman data from Daisy’s team. They’d never hear him swear colorfully after poking himself in the eye when he leaned too quickly into the microscope, or watch him throw popcorn and heckle the TV during baseball games. They’d never see that proud grin he got when one of his cadets finally mastered a technique, or watch him slowly, patiently demonstrate life-saving knots to seven sets of attentive eyes. They’d never see his own eyes, swollen and puffy, peer groggily at the coffee maker in the morning, or watch him chew on a pencil as he tried to fill in the Times crossword.

The more she thought about it, the more she was torn. Just like the rest of the Avengers, their public personae were nothing like their private personalities. Captain America was nothing like the sassy, snarky, apparently kinky, foul-mouthed Steve Rogers that Mickey had come to adore. The Winter Soldier was nothing like Bucky Barnes, and… Rescue was nothing like Mickey. They all had masks to wear.

She looked back at Bucky and huffed out a quiet laugh when she realized he’d fallen asleep as she ran her fingers through his hair, forehead pressed against her collarbone. Tripod nudged at her shoulder and whuffled at her, and Mickey rolled onto her back so she could wrap her other arm around the dog.

More of a cat than a dog in the way she snuggled up against people, Tripod let out a heavy sigh as she dropped her head onto Mickey’s shoulder.

“Me too, sweetie.” Mickey brushed her hand over Tripod’s ears a few times. “Good night.”

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The reluctance rolling off Mickey was palpable. “Bucky, I don’t have the spoons for this today.” They’d struggled to come up with a good metaphor to help her communicate her energy level at any particular time, and when Pepper stumbled across a blog post that used spoons as an arbitrary unit, the moniker stuck.

“Are you really out of spoons, or do you just not wanna do this?” Bucky tilted his head to look up at her as he laced up her skates for her. When Mickey’s face scrunched and she looked off to the side, Bucky rolled his eyes. “I guess that’s my answer, then. Come on.”

“I really don’t want to go out there.”

“I know.” Squaring himself in front of her wheelchair, Bucky settled into the balance of his own skates before hooking his hands under Mickey’s arms and supporting her while she stood.

“What if I fall and-”

He didn’t let her finish her sentence before he plopped a skateboarding helmet on her head and buckled the strap. Mickey let out a resigned sigh and closed her eyes. “Do I have to?”

“Look. You can sit in that wheelchair and woe-is-me for the rest of your life, or you can take charge of your recovery and get off your ass. I ain’t gonna let you settle, not when you’ve made so much progress already. You said you wanted to walk on your own last week, and if you really wanna make that happen, it’s time to square your shoulders and get the fuck on with it.”
He left her standing there as he stepped backward, shifting his posture slightly as the blades of his skates bit into the ice. “You asked me what I want for Christmas a few days ago.”

“And?” Mickey wobbled on her skates as she stepped over to the wall, clinging to it for dear life. “I’m hoping it isn’t watching me fall down for the next hour, but you’re probably going to get that anyway.”

Balling his hands into fists and resting them on his hips, Bucky scoffed and turned away, leaning into a smooth glide. “You out-stubborned a gunshot wound that cracked your pelvis, and you were on your feet and helping me train the cadets within a month. I find it hard to believe you can’t keep your skates under you. I mean, seriously.” He slid to a stop next to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “You’ve been skating at a pretty high level, from what Jack’s told me. You really want to give that up?”

“Bucky, I can barely stay upright.”

“So use the wall. I ain’t holdin’ your hand.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

Bucky narrowed his eyes and leaned down slightly. “I’m here to support you through recovery, not carry you through it. I can’t make your legs work again. Only you can do that, and only if you want to. So, what’s it gonna be?”

Glowering at where her hands rested on the thick plastic rink wall, Mickey thought for several seconds. When she spoke, her voice was rough. “You haven’t said what you wanted for Christmas.”

“Myshka…” He wrapped his arms around her from the back, closing his eyes as he pressed his cheek against the cold plastic helmet. “What I want? I wanna watch you walk across the common room to me with two cups of coffee in your hands again. I wanna hold you against me in the shower. I wanna run with you in the mornings again. I wanna skate with you, properly skate, the way I dance with Natasha. I wanna run my hands through your hair and smell oranges. I wanna hop on our bikes and ride over to that diner in Bed-Stuy that you like so much. I want it all just as much as you do, but…”

Turning her around by the shoulders, Bucky cupped her face in his hands and tilted her chin up. “I want this as much as you do, but I can’t do it for you. I’ll be here with you every step of the way, I just can’t take those steps for you. That’s something you have to do alone.”

Mickey’s eyelashes stuck together as she squeezed her eyes shut and nodded, wrapping her hands around Bucky’s wrists. “I’m scared. What if I never get it all back?”

“Always.” Bucky repeated as he leaned down to kiss her nose. “I got you. I won’t let you fall.”

Mickey ran out of energy less than ten minutes after they’d stepped out onto the ice, after two torturously slow laps where she shuffled her skates like a beginner. Hot, frustrated tears poured down her cheeks as Bucky helped her sit back down. She buried her face in her hands, unable to
watch as Bucky gently unlaced and removed her skates. Less than a month ago, she’d been gliding and spinning with a grace that she utterly lacked now.

“Hey.” A rough, calloused hand slid up under hers and Bucky’s thumb brushed over her cheek. “You did good.”

“I can’t fucking skate,” she choked. “You saw me!”

“And we’re gonna come back every other day, trade off with the pool, until you can. I know you can do this.”

Her vision blurred as she stared at those storm-gray eyes and she lurched forward, wrapping her arms around Bucky’s neck as the dam burst and all her anger, frustration, helplessness, and fear poured out at once.

***

It hadn’t been a surprise when Tony invited him to sing again at the Christmas party in the Tower. What had been a surprise, however, was Tony’s immediate acceptance when Bucky politely declined.

“We'll miss you, but I understand,” Tony said, giving Bucky a warm smile and a pat on the arm. “Take care of yourself, okay?”

“Thanks, Tony. Wish tonight was a people night for me. Sorry.”

The smaller man chuckled as he turned away. “No need to apologize. Only reason I’m going is because there’s an open bar and, you know, it’s kind of my party so I have to be there.”

Bucky rolled his eyes and turned to Pepper. “Make sure he doesn’t do anything stupid?”

“I’ll do my best,” she laughed, and gave Bucky a hug. “See you tomorrow.”

The Audi rumbled as they pulled out of the garage, and Bucky took a few minutes to tidy up the workbench behind his Mustang before heading back into the Compound.

“How’s Sandra?” Mickey asked when he made his way into the apartment. Steve was working with her on fine motor control, guiding her hand through basic brushstrokes on the large sheet of watercolor paper between them on the kitchen table.

Bucky crossed through to the kitchen and punched the button on the coffee machine to start up a cup of espresso. “She starts and runs. I’ll need to trailer her to a shop to get her aligned, though. There’s no telling what putting in those coilovers did and I don’t feel like chancing it.” Meandering over to the table, he leaned on the back of Mickey’s chair and rested his chin on her head. “You’re havin’ ‘er write in katakana?”

“Stroke control’s an essential part of it,” Steve answered, sketching out another upside-down character for Mickey to trace. “We’re just messing with the characters. Random symbols at this point, no actual words, just focusing on the shapes.”

Mickey’s tongue stuck out of the corner of her mouth ever so slightly as she wiggled the brush through a curve. “Makes me have a hell of a lot more respect for the Roman alphabet. How do they remember all of these?”

“Practice and repetition.” Bucky planted a kiss just to the left of the knurled scar on her scalp, and
gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze. “I’m gonna zip through the shower; we have the gift exchange in forty-five and I still gotta wrap up the presents. Mickey, are you comfortable with Steve helping you dress, or do you want to wait for me? They won’t mind if we’re a little late.”

Glancing up at the blond, Mickey hesitated for a few seconds, then nodded. “If Steve’s okay with it. I’ve got thermals on, so I’ll be fine.”

Bucky gave Steve a thankful smile as he turned, grabbed his espresso, and headed for the bathroom. When he finally emerged, degreased and squeaky clean, Mickey and Steve were waiting for him on the couch.

“Ready to go?” Bucky asked as he tugged a Darcy-made sweater over his head, then paused when Mickey gave him a shy smile. “Micks?”

Nudging her gently, Steve gave her an encouraging look. “Go on.”

She inhaled sharply, pressed her hands to either side of her legs on the couch cushions, and slowly, so slowly and carefully, stood.

Bucky held his breath, eyes wide as he watched Mickey take slow, deliberate steps over toward him, her arms half-raised for balance. It took forever for her to cross the ten feet between them.

Finally, she stood in front of him. Her eyes were bright and shining with tears as she gave him a watery smile, reaching up with her hands to lace her fingers behind his neck.

“You did it,” Bucky croaked, wrapping her up tightly in his arms and lifting her off her feet. “Oh my sweet girl, you did it.” He squeezed his eyes shut as he buried his face in her neck, rocking her gently from side to side.

“You know I love you, right?” Mickey murmured the words in his ear, so quietly that even Steve couldn’t hear her.

“Al- always.” Bucky’s voice was wet and cracked. “Always.”

Chapter End Notes

It’s one of my not-so-happy headcanons that the Winter Soldier was deployed in Vietnam and sent into situations that would have killed normal men, including regions with toxic levels of Agent Orange. He wouldn’t have been immune to the effects, they just wouldn’t have killed him or damaged him permanently.

Sandra, in Clint’s garage:
And after her repaint coming up in Book 2:
Bucky’s flashbacks in order of appearance, not necessarily chronological:
- 9/11: tasked with retrieving intel from an undercover HYDRA operative in the World Trade Center
- Chitauri invasion: even HYDRA doesn’t want aliens. Winter Soldier provided overwatch with strict instructions to not betray his presence. First sign of programming breaking down after he saw Steve and Nat again (this may become a One-Shot eventually, if enough people want it)
- Sand: deployed to the desert in the Middle East with an unspecified STRIKE team
- Lights in the sky: stunned by the aurora borealis
- Radio: driving a car from drop site to mission location through the middle of nowhere in America

The Spoon Theory is something that people (myself included) sometimes use to describe how energy is a finite resource, and different activities require different energy. Chronic illness decreases how many “spoons” you have to spend each day. More information: [But You Don't Look Sick](#)

Chronic illness, pain, or infirmity are very real and very scary for both those suffering from it and the caretakers. Caretaker fatigue is well-documented and just as debilitating. But while Mickey’s resilient and gets back on her feet quicker than most, she’s fighting with some pretty big issues and it’s bound to drag her down from time to time even with Bucky’s unwavering support. There are good days, yes, but there are also bad days and everything in between.

Book 2 - Valkyrie - will address it in detail, since traumatic injury of any type is never truly healed overnight. Her life has changed, and while she’s okay now, there’s a pretty big paradigm shift involved in learning to live with her symptoms and her new normal.
...okay, so I might have a chronic illness myself. It’s therapy writing, so sue me :P

Thank you all for your incredible support, comments, and kudos through Prizrak, and thank you for sticking around to the end! If you have any feedback, constructive criticism, anything, please let me know! You can reach out to me on tumblr (rivertam-art) if you’d rather do it that way.

Like I said, I’ll be back next week with the first chapter of Valkyrie. Can’t wait to see what you think of that one!

End Notes

Beta'd by the awesome TacticalTaylor.
I'm on Tumblr! @Rivertam-art

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!