The Three Stigmata of Bucky Barnes

by BuckRogersMD

Summary

The Three Stigmata of Bucky Barnes chronicles the emotional lives of superheroes.

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The Third Emotion

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By: Buck Rogers M.D.

Chapter 1 The Third Emotion

In The Past

She knew her name was Natalia. He did not know his name. He did not know who he was or what he was. He thought he was an animal of some kind or maybe a machine. He did have emotions, two emotions, fear and anger. She had only one, fear.

He understood his orders as he walked into the gallery. He noted the set up. One door across the room, no windows or other means of escape, and two surveillance cameras equipped with microphones. He saw nothing he could use as a weapon.

His stride slowed to a halt when he sensed her fear – animals can do that. He stood in the middle of the room, arms at his side, palms turned outward, providing reassurance that he concealed nothing in his hands. He did not try to make eye contact with her. He relaxed to appear as non-threatening as a large man wearing a harness, obedience collar and shackles could look. He prepared to stand all day and allow her to look him over. There was no moving forward if she was afraid. Occasionally, he shot a glance in her direction.

She sat on the floor inside her entrance door wrapped in her own arms. She was tiny – young – a child. She wore one long red braid down her back that touched the floor, the tip circled in a pool. The spiral of hair on the floor stirred some memory in him, a scribble of a memory, but he could not hold it. This elusive feeling melted away into nothing. Occasionally, she too, glanced at him and rushed her eyes away.

She knew him. She knew who he was by reputation – by legend. He was the American soldier. The one that lived. The only one that lived. She had even seen him before in person. She was forced to watch his 'procedures' and 'treatments'. Horrifying moments. Even though she was young she did not miss the meaning of these exercises: cooperate or this will be you.

Some time passed. Her glance became a stare until he glanced at her, and their eyes met briefly before she looked away. His eyes were intense. She felt a stab of fear but also an exhilaration. She knew she wanted another look.

A sudden rustle of movement by the door attracted their attention. His handlers entered and demanded he follow. He resisted. A short fight ensued. One handler, holding a device, sent an electric shock to the metal plates of the obedience collar over his carotid arteries. His reaction was immediate. His hands shot to the collar to pull it away from his neck, but that could not stop electricity. His back arched, his face grimaced, and he fell to the floor. He convulsed his way into unconsciousness. The sound of his screams were horrifying. The smell of electricity and singed flesh filled the air. His handlers drug his limp body out of the gallery. She raced to exit her door.

The next day she waited a long time. He staggered in holding his side. He walked to the center of the room and laid on the mat. She inched closer to him sliding along the floor. Curiosity overwhelmed her fear. Eventually, she slid close enough to discover he was in a deep sleep. Emboldened, she crawled in for a closer look. He laid with his hands on his side. His forehead was wrinkled by deep
creases. With his long hair back from his face she took a good look at him.

He looked new to manhood. The skin on his face was smooth and pale like that of a boy. A boy in the body of a man. He did not look much older than her, she thought. She could not remember the last time she had seen anyone this close to her age. She continued her inspection. He had cuts on both hands and a fresh cut on his forehead. His mouth and jaw were swollen into an odd shape. The skin around the metal plates on his neck screamed dark red, blue and black. On his wrist and ankles were heavy leather bands with metal rings to use with chains – she touched them.

She touched the harness, and ran her finger over the leather that crossed his chest by his heart. She closed in on him. Close enough to feel his breath and the warmth of his body. She touched his hair. She petted his hair. Her braid fell across his chest. She heard the handlers at his door and she skidded a respectable distance away. They drug him from the gallery by his harness. He did not wake. She felt afraid when his door slammed shut. She did not know why she felt fear. No one was doing anything to her.

The next day two handlers escorted him into the gallery. He stood in the middle of the room, spread his legs and raised his arms. The handlers removed his wrist and ankle cuffs, his harness and the collar of obedience. He drew in breath with a hiss, and his hands flew to the collar as it was removed. He placed his hands on his neck, folded over and breathed deep.

He wore a shirt and slacks, his feet bare. Again, he laid on the floor, on the mat, but this time he held himself up on one elbow. He spoke to her. His voice was a whisper. He touched his throat as he spoke. He said he was asked to play a game with her. He explained the game to her. With his body alone, he said, he would put her into a trap, and she must find a way out of the trap. He waited, with patience, for her decision.

She thought of every way a game like that could cause her harm. She was suspicious, but he said right off it was a trap. She started her training at age 10, so she thought she was a pretty shifty character and could get out of any trap he could spring. She was intrigued by the puzzle. She was intrigued by a game. She agreed.

She sat on the mat beside him. Before she could draw a second breath, she was in a grappling hold. He put her into a simple scissor hold. He told her what she was in was called the beartrap. His thighs were like bands of steel covered with silicone that melded to her form. She could not move and inch. She squirmed. She fought. She used her legs to flip them over. She hit him. She pinched and scratched. She feigned fainting, and sickness, but the bands around her held. She knew if she could hit him in the throat he would let her loose but she could not reach. She broke out in a sweat. She pulled his toes. She pulled the hair on his legs. She tried to hit him in the groin; he stopped her from that. She spit. She clawed. She screamed for help. She cried real tears, and still the bands of his legs held her. She fought in waves until her face was red and moist with perspiration.

He held his head in his hand with his elbow on the mat and rested with a look of encouragement on his face. She struggled until exhausted, rested, and tried again. Hours passed. His handlers entered, he rose, spread his legs, raised his arms, and he shut his eyes. The handlers cuffed him, replaced his harness and collar. With a long pole they hooked his harness and pushed him out of the gallery. She yelled after him: "What's the trick? What's the trick?"

In her room she thought of little else. What was the trick? The next day he entered with the handlers who unbound him, and he put her into a different hold she could not get out of.

Russians love wrestling. In his many years of confinement he had not been beaten. He was taken out of a cryonic sleep chamber for one purpose, to instruct her in his area of expertise, grappling and the silent kill with hands or knives. Considering her special natural qualities these skills were seen as
valuable and essential for their prize asset.

A week passed, only then did he begin to show her the escape routes. Every day a new hold and every day a secret way out of the hold. Every day he held her for hours in the hold. She lingered in the holds. She had no physical contact with anyone: that was a strict rule. She was comforted in some way by his body, his warm skin, his smell, his youth, the softness and strength of his musculature. But she was disturbed by a feeling, when she looked into his eyes there was no one home.

He felt he had caught a little bird he was forbidden to eat. She asked him his name. He looked away and did not answer. The intensity she had seen in his eyes melted into a sadness. She did not fear him. He looked to her like a large, sad baby that suffered a defect.

One day she did not struggle to get out of the submission hold he held her in. She laid peacefully, comfortably in his hold. She looked at him and she did not look away.

After some time he tensed. "Ummmm," he murmured. His breath quickened and his muscles contracted involuntarily in a rhythmic way. His face flushed with arousal. He changed his hold on her, but this one was too tight. He spread her legs with his thighs.

"Ummmm," she heard rumble out the back of his throat. His mouth opened wide but this time no sound emerged. He touched his mouth and pushed her aside. He paced around the room. All his muscles contracted and he held them taunt.

"Arrgh," he growled. Like a wave, he ran his hands down his sides, hips and thighs. He looked at her like he had never seen her before. His pace quickened. He glanced at her again with fear in his eyes. She moved to the wall.

"Grrrr," again he growled loud. His face flushed.

She felt he had lost his mind.

He stood in the middle of the room and let out a roar at the top of his lungs, winding it out at the end with his gaze fixed on the ceiling.

"Arrgghh," he screamed.

She covered her ears and backed into the corner.

The veins on his arms, face and neck distended blue and red and he fell to his knees.

She slid to the floor in the corner and shook her head.

His handlers rushed in. He fought them. His rage made him strong. He threw them around like rag dolls. He roughed them up. He bloodied them. But his rage also made him dumb. He left himself open for abuse that they gladly piled on him, and they drug him from the room.

She yelled after them, "you're killing him."

She screamed and stomped her feet and waved her tiny fists in the air.

"You're killing him just like you did the others. You're killing him. Soon you'll have no American left to spy for you."

Military operatives joined the ruckus, glad to have a target for their frustration. They beat him into his
cell, his cage and slammed the door. No light. No warmth. Just madness.

He paced in circles. He stood on one foot and then the other, over and over. He continued the vocalizations he started in the gallery: he moaned, he growled, he chirped in a high-pitched whine. He cried out. He shook the bars. He bit at the bars and growled. He paced the few steps of the cell and turned and paced back and forth, back and forth. He rubbed his hands up his neck, behind his ears and pulled at his hair. Soon his fingers were full of hair and he brushed that off and went back for more. This behavior continued for hours until, in exhaustion, he slid down the bars, rocked himself and moaned. With each rock he hit the back of his head on the bars, again and again until the scientists who watched him on camera saw blood and they ordered the guards to bring him to the laboratory where he was restrained and mercifully drugged.

The scientists found him to be emotionally unstable. He was confused in his associations, disoriented to time, place, and personal identity. He was paranoid. The military higher ups, who held the ultimate power in the facility, unhappy with his decompensation, called in an expert.

The military had a mess on their hands, and no one wanted to take responsibility. The facility did not want to face up to their treatment of the soldier. The scientists felt they had done nothing wrong. The prison guards were not to blame, they just followed orders, they said. The soldier's malfunction must be caused by the machine. Yes, of course, the machine. So they called in the scientist who designed the machine, Dr. Kodiak Vaterpezhekosma, an animal, and human behavior expert, to assess the situation, and reverse the downward spiral. The downward spiral all involved acknowledged would lead to the soldier's eminent death. If that happened the shit really would hit the fan.

The young scientist, Dr. Kodiak, as he preferred to be called, was bold, firm and thorough. He went all the way up the chain of command, and his recommendations became law. Dr. Kodiak explained the soldier had not simply been brainwashed, his mind had been emptied – erased. The machine was not to blame, per se, but the overuse of the machine was the cause of the soldier's regression. He had not regressed to an earlier stage of human function, he was regressed back beyond a child into an animal state, a distressed animal, a creature, back to the primordial. He did not know day from night, summer from winter, right from wrong, left from right. He had no identity. He had no point of reference.

Dr. Kodiak was adamant if the Russian military wanted their own super soldier program they must isolate the Hydra chemicals placed in this soldier's blood by the reluctant Nazi, Dr. Zola. They must discover why this particular soldier was stronger than every other soldier, and why this young man lived through what killed everyone else. When the Russian military have their own super soldiers they can throw them away when broken, treat them as deplorably as this soldier was treated, until then this soldier must be preserved. Treat a person like an animal, and an animal they will become. Take away the mind, and you have a monster. Strip away humanity and you have nothing.

The obedience collar was never to be used again, along with the Taser gun, cattle prod, shackles, the harness, and the jail cell. The collar was to be destroyed, and all research stopped. Research had been done for decades with similar collars on animals with well-documented conclusions. The obedience collar caused vasospasm, hypoxia and brain damage. Dr. Kodiak cautioned, given the severity of the soldier's condition, even if all his recommendations were followed to the letter the soldier may just be too far gone to come back. He may remain in the animal state he was in – permanently. Yes, the soldier could be disciplined but never tortured or brutalized. The soldier was not to be damaged. Damage to the soldier was punishable by death. The military powers that be granted this rule. The soldier was to be moved from the cell with no windows.

After four long days of fighting the restraints the soldier was calm. Under the precise direction of Dr. Kodiak, a barracks room was adapted for the soldier's needs with camera, security and safety
measures. The soldier slept his drugged sleep throughout the move and curled into the fetal position on the bed with limbs free at last. Dr. Kodiak slid the aluminum chair from the desk to the bedside and watched the soldier sleep.

Kodiak had examined his patient's body when in restraints, and took note of the young man's physique. He was tall with muscular development to the optimum. Dr. Kodiak could give an anatomy lesson on this body, and point out and name every muscle, every ligament, even veins and bones. If you desired to create a template for the perfect super soldier, this is what you would get. Kodiak looked at the soldier's hands and feet, now at rest. Again, every muscle, every ligament could be seen and they were of such pleasant proportion they could be used as an artist model. Leonardo da Vinci's sketches of the male body came into Kodiak's mind. Kodiak admired this body, he wished it was his, considering his short squat physique.

Yes, Kodiak did admired the soldiers body – a little too much. So much so, he defied even Soviet ethics. When he was alone in the laboratory with the soldier, with no witnesses, when the soldier was unconscious - he collected buccal swabs for DNA testing: blood, hair, skin, and fat cell samples - he even went as far as to collect bone marrow from the soldier's sternum. He carefully processed these samples and sent them on to the Red Herring Eugenics Department of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic in Moscow. This was not the first time the soldier had been violated in this way. The first thing Dr. Zola did in 1943, as soon as he had possession of the soldier's remarkable body, at his first opportunity, he collected specimens against the soldier's will and processed them carefully.

But this was the first good look Dr. Kodiak had of his patients face, not contorted, not yelling out or fighting the restraints. The soldier appeared just out of adolescence. His body was muscled like a man, but his face was soft like a boy, evenly featured with sparse facial hair. The hair on his head was thick, brunet and unruly with a relaxed wave. The ends of the hair looked ripped off, broken off, at different lengths all over his head and his hair fell on his face and onto his shoulders. His skin was pale, a white Dr. Kodiak did not see in humans that had any blood in them. There was not a mark on him, no scars or signs of abuse. The marks on his neck from the obedience collar had faded to nothing. Dr. Kodiak made a note to himself to run some extra tests. A few hours later the soldier opened his eyes, rubbed his wrists and glanced around the room.

"Oh, there you are," Kodiak said, "you're going to be alright." The scientist touched the soldier's arm reassuringly.

Reflex snapped the soldier away from the touch and he brushed his arm with his hand as if to wipe off the fingerprints. He scooted far from the scientist until he was stuck up against the headboard.

"I'm not going to hurt you. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The soldier lay mute.

"Can you hear me?" Kodiak said with some frustration in his voice.

The soldier moved his mouth, mimicking speech, but did not make a sound.

"Can you speak?"

Again the soldier moved his mouth like words but was silent.

"Oh brother. You're not all there, are you?"

The soldier's eyelids fluttered and he nodded off.

"That's a good idea. Lay down and go back to sleep."
Kodiak handed the soldier the blanket from the foot of the bed. The soldier accepted the blanket and folded and squeezed and kneaded the blanket between his fingers.

"It's your blanket. It's a blanket," the scientist explained.

The soldier pressed the blanket between his fingers crushing the material with increased intensity. He opened his mouth and moved to put the blanket in his mouth.

"That's not food! Oh God, what damage did they do to you?" Shocked, the scientist grabbed the blanket before it went into the soldier's mouth.

The soldier resited and held onto the blanket like it was his prize possession. His eyelids fluttered again, closed and sleep over took him. He held the blanket firmly in his hands. Kodiak placed his hand on the soldier's head and scanned his youthful face.

"I said you'd be okay and I'm going to see to it you are. I swear."

Kodiak listened to the clock tick on the desk and watched out the window the sun fade to dusk.

The soldier sat up in the bed, saw his visitor and shoved himself to the wall, as far from the scientist as he could get. The soldier's large eyes widened. Dr. Kodiak noted the expressiveness of his patient's eyes. The traumatic history of the man was written across the eyes, all the mystery and pain. The soldier avoided eye contact and shielded his eyes from view as if in shame to show the world the horror he knew was there. He looked away.

"It's okay. You're okay. You were injured. Can you understand?" There was no answer. "You were in an accident. You hurt your head."

The soldier felt his head with both hands.

"No. On the inside."

The soldier shrunk – hurt in the mind? Pain grimaced the soldier's face.

"You've lost your memory. You have amnesia."

The soldier clamped his eyes shut with all the muscles of his face, bared and gritted his teeth.

"You were in a bad accident but you'll be okay. . . . in time."

The soldier opened his mouth wide. The muscles of his body tensed and a growl scratched from his lips.

"Argh," he vocalized in a high pitch the whine.

"NO, NO, NO! You don't have to do that anymore."

The soldier stopped the racket.

"Look, my name is Kodiak. I am a doctor." He pointed to his ID badge. "I'm here to help you. I was called in especially for you. I'm not like the others. This is the room I got for you. Look here, you're on your bed, your very own bed." Kodiak shook the metal bed frame.

"See? Bed, pillow, blanket, the whole works. And here's your window. See, the sun is setting, see it?" Kodiak pointed to the window with a mesh screen on the inside and bars on the outside. The soldier glanced around at the window.
"And this is your desk and your clock." Kodiak pointed to the wind up clock on the desk.

"Look, it's 2100. You know what that is, right? And here's your watch." Kodiak held up a Swiss railroad watch.

"Do you want to wear this?"
The soldier's hand slid in the direction of the watch, his mouth opened and he stuck his tongue out.

"Ah, well maybe you could wear it in the morning." Kodiak placed the watch out of reach and out of sight. The mouth closed.

"And look here's your paper and pencil. See here's your books, your calendar, see it's May 6th. That's the date May 6th and here's your radio." Kodiak turned on the radio and music filled the room.

"Don't like that? Okay, I'll turn it off. And here's your bath, all yours." Kodiak flipped the light switch.

"See here, your locker."
The soldier relaxed and followed the tour.

"Look, your shirts, socks and your boots, everything."
The soldier sat on the side of the bed, his attention wandered around the room. He had his blanket in his hands and he pressed the blanket again between his fingers and brought it to his mouth and licked it. He looked at Kodiak.

"Stop, don't do that." Kodiak grabbed the blanket from the soldier's hands. The soldier let go and put the blanket down. They were communicating – in a way.

"Oh, look here. Here's the most important thing. Here is your schedule." Kodiak pointed out the schedule on the wall and the soldier's attention followed his finger.

"See? Here is the list of your activities and appointments. See here it's 2100. You can see by the clock, so on the schedule at 2100, room time, bath, reading or writing. And 2200 sleep, see you go to bed. You follow the schedule to the letter, and everything will be okay, guaranteed."
The soldier stood at the bedside unrestrained. He seemed to expand like an accordion that could not stop unfolding. He looked big. He looked strong. He looked nuts. He seemed to fill the room. Perspiration broke out on Kodiak's forehead, and he inched towards the door.

"Am I making any sense to you?"
The soldier made eye contact with Kodiak. His eyes were hot, mad.

"Great, I'll take that as a yes. Just look at your schedule, and follow what the schedule tells you to do and everything will be okay. Got it? See? Look – breakfast – 0700."

Kodiak placed his hand behind his back on the door knob. "I'll be back to get you at 0700, and, and see the schedule even tells you how to dress. Tomorrow brown fatigues. See?" Kodiak sailed out the door.

The soldier followed the scientist to the door. To his amazement the door was not locked. He opened the door and saw two armed security guards standing at attention on either side of the door. The soldier took a few steps into the hall and watched Kodiak jaunt away.
"Go back in and do what the schedule tells you to do." One guard said in a baritone, per his orders. The soldier went in, as instructed. He opened and closed the door five or six times.

"Look, you can lock the door from the inside," said the guard.

The soldier shut and locked the door. This really was his room. He tugged at the mesh on the window with all his strength; he was not getting out that way. He tried to touch the glass to open the window. He could not reach. He noticed an exhaust fan above the window and he flipped the switch. The sweet smell of summer night air filled the room, and the hum of the fan soothed the soldier. He watched the eastern colors and afterglow of the sunset. He heard the crickets, and frogs, and nocturnal animals. He made small clicks, and squeaks, and grunts to answer the calls of the night. He stretched his fingers through the metal mesh on the window to reach his friends. Soon, the sky was pitch black, and he turned back to the room. He tugged at the bed to move it closer to the window and saw the metal bed was bolted to the floor. So was the desk. The locker doors were removed and had no rod but shelves stocked with clothing, folded and stacked: shirts, slacks; T-shirts in white, hunter green and tawny brown; shorts, fatigue jacket, shoes, boots and a gray military sweater, all tucked into cubbyholes. The soldier ran his hand over the gray sweater.

A full bath was attached to the north wall of the room. The door was removed. The bath held the usual suspects but no shower curtain or rod there either. A cordless electric razor sat in its charger built into the wall. An aluminum cup by the sink held a toothbrush and paste with an empty medicine cabinet above. The cabinet's glass mirror had been removed, and a sheet of metal had been added that distorted the features of any viewer. The soldier scanned every inch of the metal to find a spot to see himself clearly. He found one smooth spot on the side where he lingered hoping to recognize something he saw, but he did not. What he did recognize was a man. A man with blue eyes. Blue eyes that shinned like marbles. Human eyes. He knew that much. He touched his face and eyes to make sure they were his. He ran his hand over the white towel that lay by the tub. He touched and smelled the soap.

He stopped by the desk and picked up the Swiss railroad watch. He took off his cyan blue scrub top, and squeezed the fluffy white pillow against his bare chest. He held the pillow in his arms, and laid on the bed. He laid with his head at the foot of the bed, looked out the dark window and watched the fan blades spin. The warm air circulated over his bare skin. He squeaked and chirped some responses to the ones outside, but it was the tick, tick, tick of the watch that lulled him to sleep: it sounded human.

The brilliant sun-stream through the window woke him. He stood with his arms outstretched, his fingers through the mesh, his chest pressed to the screen, and he watch the sunrise.

"Dr. Kodiak? Sir, you should see this. He hasn't moved for hours." said the lab tech who watched the soldier on the surveillance camera monitor. Kodiak joined him.

"Hum, I wonder . . . when was the last time he was exposed to sunlight?" Kodiak was nonchalant. "Anyone know the answer?" The room full of crew, medical, secretarial and military staff stood silent.

"Someone look it up." Kodiak was firm. "When was the last time this human being in your care saw the sun? And look at these lab tests. This person is malnourished and there is only one explanation. He has been deprived of FOOD. If it was up to me everyone in this room would be taken out and shot." Dr. Kodiak screamed and stomped from the room.

Kodiak flipped his body around and banged around in the hall. His chin quivered, and he fought his emotions successfully. He took action. He went to the computer center and did some research. After about 45 minutes of reading between the lines, he discover the truth. The soldier had been regressed.
on purpose as an experiment in mind control. The alarm sound on his watch warned him it was 0700.

Kodiak let himself in the soldier's room with his passkey. The soldier did not move from his place at the window or acknowledge Kodiak's presence. Kodiak stood by the side of the window and took in the sight. The soldier's bare chest smashed against the metal, his arms stretched over the mesh, his face bathed in sunlight. He leaned into the metal mesh, to move through it, to reach the light. If Kodiak lived 1000 years he would not forget the look on the soldier's face. He did not want to forget. He wanted to remember this moment anytime he was asked to come up with some other enhanced interrogation method.

The soldier slipped on his scrub top, and he followed Kodiak to the mess hall. All other dinners passed through at 0500. The soldier played around with his food seemingly unaware what the food was for or what to do with the food. Frustrated, Kodiak popped an orange wedge into the soldier's mouth.

The soldier held the slice in his mouth, made a face and pushed the piece out of his mouth with his tongue. He watched as the orange wedge hit the tray. He looked at Kodiak. He brushed his tongue with the fingertips of both hands a few times and played around with his tongue a bit. He wiped both hands on his upper chest. He rubbed one hand slowly across his chest.

"Ah . . . ah," he said.

His other hand wandered down his abdomen, pressing on himself. His hand slid under his waistband and disappeared between his legs. He arched his back. His eyes fluttered shut.

"Ah, ah, ah," he moaned.

"What? What are you doing? You can't do that in here – you're in public man! NO - STOP IT! " Kodiak yelled.

The soldier jerked to attention.

"Really son, you're not ready to be out." Kodiak walked the soldier back to his room.

"I'll be back at noon and we'll try again. Here, read your schedule. Do what's on the schedule, and everything will be okay." Kodiak's finger pecked on the schedule posted on the wall for emphasis.

The soldier spread his arms across the screen and faced the sun.

Dr. Kodiak shook his head and went back to the drawing board. He sent a nurse and a security guard with breakfast to hand feed the soldier. The nurse report read as follows:

'The patient is clearly responding to his own internal reality. He is however, pliable. If his head is lifted or his arm moved he will not resist. After four tries placing food in his mouth and simulating chewing he did chew, swallow and drink from a cup, albeit, highly distracted. After half the meal was consumed he anticipated the next bite of food and stayed on task until the bowl was empty. He made eye contact with each staff member. In fact, he lifted this nurses skirt and looked under the skirt and replaced the skirt as it was. My recommendation is short frequent reality-based interactions with gentle leading for grooming, dressing and other activities of daily living. Do not push. His mind is an open door with nothing inside. We, as Soviets, have an obligation and a responsibility to fill that mind properly. My prognosis is hopeful.'

Dr. Kodiak followed the nurse's advice. He sent the same nurse as much as possible, but the soldier was not coming along as fast as Kodiak hoped. After five days of a comfortable room, regular food,
and no drugs the soldier remained non-verbal. He vocalized his chirps and squeaks to the creatures he heard outside his window at night. He moaned, and rocked himself, and cried. He made a lot of noise at night, but he did not speak words. The sounds he made were not human.

His sleep was disturbed. He watched the moon at night through the mesh screen, and reached out to the world outside the window. At sunrise he fell asleep not on the bed, but under the bed on the floor pressed up against the wall where no one could reach him. Patience eluded Kodiak, and he considered trying an experimental drug to help the soldier integrate.

On the sixth night the soldier slept on the bed. When he woke, he looked at the schedule, 0600, bath, it read. He filled the bathtub with hot water, took off his clothing, and stepped into the bath. He dressed appropriately in fatigues and boots and strapped his Swiss railroad watch to his wrist. He stood by the window when Kodiak came for him at 0700.

"Well, look at you," Kodiak grinned.

The soldier pointed to the camera in the corner. "Watch out."

"No, that's me. That's me watching you . . . for your safety."

"Are you going to stop my heart?" The soldier spoke in Russian.

"Oh my God, of course not, no. We are not going to hurt you, I mean, I am not going to hurt you. Where did you get such a crazy idea?" Kodiak sounded innocent but he looked guilty. He knew damn well where the soldier got such a crazy idea, the scientists had, in fact, stopped his heart, in a well documented hypothermia experiment.

"Are you going to harvest my organs?" The soldier made direct eye contact with Dr. Kodiak, and the volume of his voice increased. "Are you going to take more from me?" He touched the center of his chest – still sore from the bone marrow extraction.

"No, never. I mean . . . all I'm going to do is take you to breakfast. Can you trust me that far? Can you trust me a little? Just breakfast?"

The soldier rested one hand on the mesh screen. His other hand held up his pants. He glanced at the problem.

"Oh, I see." Kodiak removed his belt with a metal buckle in the shape of a bear and handed the belt to the soldier who put it on.

Kodiak knew this was against the rules but he did it anyway.

The soldier sat in the mess hall and sipped his coffee and dipped his toast into his runny eggs. His denim blue eyes were clear and receptive. The indoctrination began. He needed an identity and an identity they would give, lies of course, but even lies have substance.

He was told his name was Soldier. He was told he was a Russian Army officer, a gentleman, who was injured and had amnesia. He was told his memory would return, maybe a little at a time or maybe all at once. He was told to write down every memory, every dream, daydream, and thought he had. Nothing was considered insignificant. He was told to turn in his writings every morning. He was told to follow the schedule, to concentrate on the schedule, and if he followed the schedule, everything would turn out okay. He was told he was being trained for an important task. He was told he was special. He was told he had unique skills, some natural, and some acquired by scientific manipulation. He was told he was important to the plan, essential even. He was told he was needed. He was told these things over and over again.
After three weeks, the change in Soldier was significant. So much so he was ordered to resume his training of her. Even this training session was strictly structure to the minute. Soldier followed the time schedule with his Swiss watch.

She radiated a big smile when she saw him dressed in fatigues, clean-shaven, bright eyed, without a mark of violence on his body. She ran to him. He greeted her formally. He took off his fatigue jacket, his boots, socks, and his belt with the bear buckle. He wore a brown T-shirt; the fabric was stretched by the muscles across his chest and upper arms. She projected a smile on to him, but he did not actually smile at her.

The schedule dictated a warm-up with Kendo sticks before grappling. He was formal, polite, and stuck strictly to the schedule.

She loved Kendo in which she was proficient. Unable to get out of his grappling hold, she love to beat him down to the ground with the stick. The day he yelled, 'STOP' was one of the best days of her young life. She knew he liked Kendo; he let them go overtime almost every day. He was not holding back, she was formidable, and frequently caught him off guard with her inventive moves, and whacked him hard. Kendo rules are in place for good reason. There are places on the body when hit with the stick are excruciatingly painful: even used in torture. Success here gave her a confidence boost that carried over to the grappling. There was a playfulness to their work with the sticks mixed with a brutality that left them with many large bruises. Neither saw any contradiction between the pleasure and painful aspects of this behavior.

After six full weeks of following the schedule he went off script and blurted out to her, with pride:
"My name is Soldier. I'm a Russian, like you. I have amnesia."

"Amnesia, amnesia? You've been brainwashed. I saw. You have to remember the machine. The Mind Crown?" she said.

She stabbed him with the words Mind Crown.

"That was real?" he shuttered. "No . . . no that couldn't have been real." After a long pause he admitted he thought he dreamed the machine – at night – alone – when he suffocated.

"And soldier is not a name. And you're not a Russian. You're an American."

"What's that?"

"You know. Land of the free? Home of the brave?"

He was confused. This mixed him up. He told her it could not be true, so she spoke to him in American English, and he answered in the same. He became suspicious of everything they told him. He did not sleep well that night. He looked at the spot on the mirror where he could see himself, to see his blue eyes. Land of the free – land of the free, ran through his mind as the shadows from the bars on his window fell across the room.

In his indoctrination session the next day he told them he was mixed up. Dr. Kodiak covered this discrepancy with yet another lie.

"The truth is we don't know who you are or where you come from. We assumed by your countenance that you were a Russian military officer. An officer and a gentleman."

"But I speak English." Soldier said in English.

Kodiak spoke to him in French and Soldier answered in French. Kodiak spoke to him in fluent
German and the soldier answered in German. He covered his eyes with his hands.

"Only an officer would have that kind of an education. Understand? You came here at the same time as a group of Americans. She doesn't know. She's a child," Kodiak explained. "Sure, we used the machine on you. We use the machine to try to jog your memory. But sadly, it did not work. Please, continue to write your thoughts, memories and dreams. You are doing well. You're making good progress, so please, follow the schedule to the letter. If you do this you will be less confused. Guaranteed."

He went on with his day. He thought he was okay, but at the end of the day he held her in a tight submission hold. He held her a long time. She struggled to escape. Even her screams did not prompt him to let her loose. Her handler entered and attempted to physically pry her from him. He let her loose and put her handler in the same hold. He roughed him up a bit and choked him, but not to death. The skirmish lasted only a few minutes, but it was enough for Soldier to spend the night in his old cell. He did not like that.

The next day he was instructed to ask for what he needs. So, he told them he needed no one to touch her. That was the rule. The handler had broken the rule. From then on her handler stood by the door and waited for him to completed his instruction.

Things proceeded smoothly for six weeks. Soldier's behavior continued to progress. Following the schedule to the letter did decrease his anxieties. He was physically in better health, psychologically more managed, and more manageable. He now had something to lose. He went to indoctrination sessions daily. He wrote every evening on his paper, whatever little thought, or feeling he managed to organize in his mind, he put to paper, and turned in.

They wanted him to write his memories. He had no memories. He thought of memories. He questioned what memories were. He didn't know what they were.

Kodiak, assessing his orientation, asked what language he wrote in. What language was there on the paper? The soldier said Russian. But what was on the paper was English.

He gave his blood samples freely to the scientist without the need of force by mechanical means or drugs which were uncontrolled variables that confounded their research in the past. The scientists were ecstatic. Now, they could isolate the super soldier serum and create a race of super soldiers of their own.

One morning they warmed up with Kendo. They played hard. They hit each other's stick with fierce abandon. He hit her in an unauthorized location. He stopped immediately and bowed a formal apology.

She felt heat rise in her abdomen. The heat streaked up her chest, and up both sides of her neck. She felt her face flush. When the red heat hit her brain she was furious. He turned to walk away. She swung her stick and hit him as hard as she could on the back of his knees, another unauthorized location, but she did not apologize. She caught him off balance, and with a verbal wince of pain, he buckled. She flew like lightening, and with the opposite end of the stick hit him across the face, yet another out of bounds area. His head whiplashed, and hit the floor before the rest of his body. This sounded similar to a bowling ball being rolled off the top of a 15 foot ladder. He did not stir. She pounded her stick on the floor, and resumed a defensive stance, ready for him to spring into action and fight her. Her chest rose and fell rapidly. Her anger unbalanced her.

"Get up you big sad baby," she yelled.

He did not move. She inched closer and saw blood on his face. She felt anger, experienced the
emotion and acted on it. She no longer felt defenseless. She stood breathing off the residue of her
outburst, feeling a moment of power. As with all strong emotions when you get one stirred up it's
easy to jump on to another. She did not mean to damage him. She dropped the stick and slid on her
knees to his side. There was too much blood on the tile floor. She felt all around his head, expecting
his head to be cracked open like a mellon. His skull was intact. She put an ear to his chest and heard
a beating heart. He bled from his forehead, bridge of his nose, his nose and his cheekbone where the
Kendo stick whacked him across his face. She cupped his face in her hands and cried: "Soldier,
Soldier." He did not move.

Things crossed her mind, like the camera that watched, the no harm rule, and what his response
would be when he regained consciousness. She laid over him and cried. She felt his shoulder move,
again she held his head and cried for him to wake. He opened his eyes and jerked back from her; the
look of caring on her face was foreign to him. Her face was so close to his he could feel her breath.

"Soldier, Soldier," she said softly and she shut her eyes and her tears fell on his face and lips. He
pressed his lips together, taking in the salty liquid. She held him firm and he softened under her gaze.
He touched his face and glanced at the blood on his fingers. She moved away and he violently pulled
her back, splattering his blood on her face and hair. He luxuriated in eye contact with her and he
wanted that contact back.

"Soldier . . . my soldier," she whispered.

She held him like the machine but where it emptied – she filled.

It hit them like a thermonuclear explosion, a brilliant flash of light followed by a slow roll out of
brightness that moved into them, through them and consumed them. The light filled the margins of
the room. They saw the universe in each other's eyes. They had never seen light before. They had
never heard sound, tasted sweetness or felt anything soft before that moment. Father time, turned and
glanced at their birth. The light filled the yard, burst the stratosphere and continues to this day, on a
path across the universe.

They sat on the mat facing each other when the handlers entered the room. He played with the coil of
her hair and slid it around on the floor with his finger.

"My sister has hair as long as yours," he looked at her with eyes like the blue lakes that had no
bottom.

"What's her name?" she asked.

He glanced around the room and return to her. He shook his head. He didn't know. Without breaking
eye contact with her, he went to the door, and bragged to the handlers about how well she was doing
in her training. So well she knocked him out cold. His body language was loose with the guards. He
pointed out his smashed up face, and asked for more time because he had been unconscious for so
long. He relaxed with the security, and they snickered like men do with their inside jokes. He noted
the time on his watch and checked the schedule.

"Hand to hand combat," he said to her and he took a defensive stance. They fought like robots never
breaking eye contact. When skin touched skin they lingered as if magnetized, attracted like static.
Their motions softened and slowed and flowed into a brutal ballet, a dance of survival.

The tie at the end of her braid slipped to the floor. The braid unraveled little by little, move by move,
flip by flip. The braid uncoiled, and blossomed into a million moving tentacles that sailed through the
air and entangled the hands and arms and body of Soldier. He tried to catch the red hair with his
hands only to have the hairs silky texture slide through his fingers like seagrass through a wave. Her
hair brushed past his face. He lost track of time.

Eventually, they were separated when the handlers insisted.

She did not sleep. She did what she had to do to learn where the dead spaces were on the gallery cameras. There were three. They could be alone for a moment without alarming suspicion.

In his room the moonlight, diffused by clouds, spread warmth to every corner. He touched everything that belong to him. His shirts, his watch, his papers on the desk he wrote upon. He pressed his face onto the soft white towel in the bathroom, his longing unbearable. He looked up from the towel and saw his face in the metal mirror. He knew what had to be done. He must intensify her training. She must become lethal. She must become feared. She must become so deadly no one in the world would dare touch her. Not one person in the whole world. Word would spread that she bested him. He would fuel that flame. He wanted her reputation to be one of the most deadly people on the planet. He wanted this be a reality. He was an animal in a world of animals, kill or be killed. This was his best shot to protect her, the only way she could be his. He feared he may never see her again. These thoughts kept him from sleep.

At the scheduled time he found her waiting by her door. They met in the middle of the gallery. She gripped his arm and shoved him into one of the dead spaces.

"The camera can't see us here," she said.

He scanned the room suspiciously. Boldly, she moved right into his personal space but since he had poor boundaries all he did was raise his hands. She put her arms around his waist and slid them up his back. She forced her body to his chest. He felt her warm body on his. The fragrance of her hair hit him like a drug. Slowly, he encircled her tiny body with his arms and he held her. She turned her face up to his and he gazed into her eyes. Her eyes shined like stars, like his. The room became bright. The world fell away. It was true what happened to them. It was real. He hugged her face to his chest and looked into her eyes again. He could not stand the moments their eyes were parted.

She held him tight and advanced to kiss him on the mouth. He jerked his face away.

"You're not anywhere near the age of consent."

"I've kissed boys before." Slid out of her mouth without her lips moving.

"You don't know what I am. I'm sure no boy, and you're a child."

She gripped him again, and headed for his mouth. He held her face.

"My love for you requires I protect you from that."

"Not from you."

"Especially from me."

Yet again, she pulled at him.

"Here's the kiss you get," and he kissed her on the forehead like an uncle. Her hair, her skin, her warmth, her scent, her eyes were all gateway drugs. Her mouth was the bomb. Her lips parted like a door opening to the other side, a place from which he knew if he entered he would never return. Her lips parted and they became the world. He kissed her again on the forehead but lingered – that was no uncle. He kissed her again all around, around her face, her cheeks, her neck. His face flushed red and warm. He felt things. Not anger or fear but other things, powerful things, things more powerful
than anger or fear.

He could not stop. Around her face he went again, avoiding her lips. He kissed her again and again right by her lips but not on her lips. How could he have misjudged the situation so, it was already too late. He slid his hand up her back, and held her body tight to his chest. He spread his fingers under the nape of her neck and held her head by her braid; his fingers firmly intertwined in her hair. He jerked her head back by her hair and kissed her neck. He opened his mouth wide and placed his teeth on the skin of her neck and applied pressure. He clamped his teeth until he felt her tense and try to pull away. Until he felt the skin give way. Until he tasted blood. He did not know why he did this – to scare her off him? But she did not let go of him. She saw him, she wanted him, she had him and she was not letting go of him.

They heard the handlers at the door. When the handlers could see, he threw her down to the ground by her braid. From the ground she scissor kicked his legs and he fell to one knee and the fight was on. She sprang to attention, side kicked him the rest of the way to the ground. She grabbed a Kendo stick, he disarmed her, she grabbed another. They put on a dramatic show for the handlers who laughed, and ooed and ahed, until they grew tired and wandered off.

The scent of the handlers had not left the room when the pair were back in the dead space. She laced her fingers around the back of his neck this time and drew him close to her. He resisted but soon saw she was headed for his ear. She drew him in and whispered the locations of each dead space in the room. They could disappear into these spaces for short periods to communicate verbally or by touch. They discussed what language their captors would have the most trouble deciphering. English was out, too much TV. French? Hardly anyone spoke French in Russia anymore, that was a possibility. German? The Russians hated the Germans. He nixed that, too much Hydra. Spanish? Esperanto? Klingon? He drew back from her and slowly signed to her in American sign language. She spelled out the letters BINGO in the same.

'We must escape,' she signed.

'Agreed,' he signed to her, 'but not until you can kill.'

'I can – I have.'

He erased what he signed by waving his hands in the air and re-signed:

'Not until you can kill – me.'

She was silent. She looked dubious. There were only a handful of people on the planet that stood and even chance against this particular soldier. He continued to convince.

'They will hunt us. They will hunt us,' he drew in the air with his finger the symbol for infinity and slowed on the second go around.

In no time they developed their own sign language, a crazy mixture of many languages that would be impossible for anyone to figure out. They could communicate anywhere in the room without fear.

He veered off the schedule. He taught her another area of his expertise, how to kill without making a sound, with hands, and specifically for her, knives. He showed her where on the body to cut arteries, carotid, femoral, vena cava. He taught blade sizes, the width to penetrate the rib cage. The length of knives needed to pierce the heart or lungs through layers of clothing, summer and winter. He taught her how to hold the body and wait for death: how death moved across the body; what signs to watch for to be sure it was completed; how to lay the body down silently, no matter the size. After this, she realized the seriousness of their situation.
The escalation of her training was exhaustive. He insisted on covering every conceivable scenario. He enlisted others. He demanded. He argued his point. He farmed her out to experts in diverse fields. Some of his demands did not seem rational. They humored him. They saw this behavior as a dramatic improvement. He took ownership of something, therefore, he had something to lose. They saw his behavior as hinting at working with them not against them. They saw in him movement that may herald their complete control over him. He continued to go to indoctrination sessions.

The training ended the day they pushed a mission on him, a raid, set for less than 24 hours. He would not cooperate. He had never cooperated. They always had to resort to the machine.

He paced in his room, into the bath, out to the bed and back into the bath. He paced this loop for hours. He could not concentrate. He could not follow a train of thought. He had a big problem. He had solved problems before. Facing reality was a good place to start. No matter how much he thought in a straight line, or what solutions he thought up, or what he did, or how much he paced in his room, dawn would break and they would come and drag him to the machine. He would be prepped for the mission. They would take his mind. They would wash his mind clean of any resistance and along with it any memory of her. There would not be a damn thing Dr. Kodiak could do about it.

Once he allowed himself to think of the reality of his situation, he became enraged. He noticed his rapid breath. He felt his heartbeat, it beat too fast. He could feel the pulse in his neck and hear a swish as the blood rushed past his ear drums.

Darkness crept into the room. Shadows and shapes in the corners took on sinister qualities. He turned on all the lights. He got a drink of water in his aluminum cup. He stood at his desk and touched his paper and pencils. He sat on his aluminum chair to write on his paper, to organize, but his hand shook, and he could not organize his thoughts.

The lights seemed too bright. He flipped them off. The fan sounded shrill, like a crazy screech. The shadow of the bars crossed the room. He backed into a corner. He jumped to the window and turned off the fan. The shadow of the bars crossed his face. He could see them on his body. He had been captive many years, but he had never felt this trapped. The bars penetrated him. He felt them pass through him for he could see them intact on the other wall. He knew it was a hallucination. He felt it was a hallucination. He hoped it was a hallucination. He questioned reality.

He hooked his fingers into the grid on the window and stared at the cloud covered moon. He heard the shriek of a nocturnal animal. A shutter passed through his body as he witnessed the kill. He saw the animal, with eyes like his, on fire; the animals burned with hunger, his burned with desire. He raged the kind of rage that could scorch the ground, that could turn the Earth into a burned out cinder. The kind of rage that consumed and caused good men to ruin themselves. He raged on into the night.

With the dawn came the bird songs. He understood their calls as clearly as if they were speaking English. He was calm. He knew what he had to do and it was far worse than destroy the earth or himself – he cooperated. They processed his body, they controlled his mind, and now they had his soul. His resistance was the last piece of himself, his last bit of identity.

He told them they did not need to use the machine and he would prove it. Not only would he cooperate he would help them. He gave them ideas, suggested improvements. He seemed strong and fierce in his convictions. He interrupted. He intruded on their personal space until they felt intimidated and backed up from him. He made direct eye contact until they looked away. He swaggered. He displayed complete confidence in his powers. How did they not see he was out of his mind? They ate it up. They loved it. They were Russian and they had won.
The mission was a disaster. He made mistakes. He could not concentrate. A young soldier surrendered to him, and he held his fire. He told them it was a misfire. Make no mistake, they would never accept that excuse again. He saw flashes of images he did not understand. That kind of thing can drive one mad. He was mad. He shook. He was told they needed to go again in the morning to fix the mess of that day. They said since he was cooperative she would go with them.

He knew they had one chance and that was to run. Pacing in his room, dreaming while awake, fighting to keep a single sentence from collapsing in his mind, he rationalized his decision. There was a river close to the staging area. If they could get to the river they would have a pretty good chance. As soon as they were armed, and yes, he would ask to be heavily armed, they would make their move. They had surprise on their side. The mission was destined for disaster. Complex operations took months to plan, not less than 24 hours. Signing to her on the staging platform sounded feasible, if not, he knew if he moved she would follow. She wanted to run months ago. His confidence grew, his plan simple: kill everyone.

In the morning he gave them the same malarkey as the day before with the same results. The day was gray with fog, mist and occasional drizzle. He could not have asked for better weather. He smiled. When he saw her, a calmness washed over him and he felt sane. Too bad the feeling did not last. He signed to her they would run to the river. She made one motion – a thumb up in the air. She asked for more ammunition. He smiled again. He could not take his eyes off her. She was majestic.

The moment they were armed they walked together, in the direction of the river. They walked as far as they could go until they heard a rustle of decent, followed by shouts to stop. They turned, and opened fire. He knelt on one knee in front of her, and she fired over his head, and they blanketed the 180° in front of them with bullets. The area cleared quick. They retreated towards the river, and fired bursts as they went. She was fierce. He was focused. They backed toward the river. Resistance was low. They increased their pace and confidence.

Another child soldier entered his gunsight. He hesitated a fraction of a second, a split-second only and the youth panicked and fired twice. He hit Soldier with both bullets.

The first shot hit him deep in his chest. The second shot spun him around 360° to his hands and knees. His rifle flew out of his hands and spun across the pavement, like a top gone berserk. The second bullet hit metal on his gun holster causing much less damage than the first. On his hands and knees he placed his hand to his chest. Bright red blood dripped a steady flow through his fingers onto the pavement. Her shock stopped her long enough to be grabbed from behind and subdued.

The field commander shouted 'cease-fire' and discharged a flare into the air as he marched towards the scene drawing his side arm. He approached the youth that fired, drew his pistol with flourish and pointed the gun at the youth. With his arm fully extended, feet wide apart, he fired, killing the youth execution style. Soldier watched the murder. Below him the pool of blood on the pavement expanded with each heartbeat. The words coup de grace entered Soldier's mind and he instinctively snapped a grenade off his belt. He held the grenade in his hand with his thumb in the clip and placed his hand over his heart. His arm failed him and he fell to his shoulder and hip. The field commander's deliberate approach froze when he saw the grenade. The commander shook his head and spoke to Soldier in English.

"You die, I die," he added, "let me look." The commander took the grenade from Soldier's hand and rolled it down the pavement. He helped Soldier to his back, a position of submission dreaded by every soldier since time began. Even so injured he could not tolerate this position and he bent his knees and put his booted feet firmly on the ground. He closed his eyes when he saw the look of horror on the commander's face after he witnessed the extent of the damage done.
A gentle rain fell on Soldier's face. He stared up into the raindrops and pressed his lips together, for a taste, as he had tasted her tears such a short time ago. He could smell the lingering residue of gun fire, but it was her screams that filled his senses. He cried out as loud as he could, 'let her come to me' but no sound passed his lips. He fought to bring air into his lungs but little entered. He judged he had only minutes before so much of his blood spilled on the pavement there would be no way back. If he died, if this was death, he had no regrets. If he died, he would die remembering her.

The medics were on him. The commander on his knees by his side. The raindrops sparkled like diamonds as they cut through the fog and her cry . . . or was that call the shrieks of the Valkyrie as they formed in the mist and fog above his head. He floated. He did not need breath or a heartbeat.

The commander urged on the medical team. They could pump his heart for him, force oxygen into his lungs, drip blood and fluids into his body but there was nothing to be done about the brain. When the brain died that was the end. The commander asked for a pupil check. The medic checked with his penlight and re-checked paused, and shook his head. The commander grabbed the medic by his shirt, pulled him close.

"He is dead, Sir." The medic was emphatic.

The commander held him tight and whispered to him in stern Russian, "treat him as if they react, treat him as if he were alive."

The medic lied to the team when he called out, 'pupils equal and react to light'. The medics continued the heroic rescue attempt.

Two helicopters approached the field and kicked up mist and rain sprays. She screamed and fought as they drug her to a helicopter. She cried and begged to be allowed to go to him. She said anything, she promised anything, to go to him for a moment. They forced her onto the helicopter. She pressed herself against the glass window and watched as Soldier was transferred to the medevac copter. She had seen dead bodies before and she knew in her heart she was seeing another; she knew he had bled to death on the pavement. His skin was grey and slate blue – a sickening color. He did not move, but they made him move and worked on him frantically. They attached him to a machine she did not recognize. The helicopters dusted off in unison and hovered for a time, together, above the scene.

She strained to identify any hopeful activity inside his helicopter. She moved from one seat to the other for a better view. The copters drifted apart. She felt a pull on her chest and she cried out in pain. She pounded her fists and her head on the glass window. The farther the medevac moved from her, the stronger the pull on her chest until she felt her rib cage was being pulled from the meat and flesh of her body. She yelled out in pain and held her hands over her chest to keep it in place. Blood broke out on her knuckles. Blood erupted on her forehead and trickled down her face. When his helicopter was out of sight she stopped. She stopped dead. She was dead. She turned from the window, sat motionless and stared straight ahead. She saw nothing. She felt nothing. Not fear of pain. Not fear of death. You cannot kill what is already dead. She remained in that state for the next 20 years.

As soon as they felt the procedure would not kill him they took his memory.

She was taken to a hospital that specialized in women's issues and was summarily sterilized. She was 14 years old.

The light from the flash that ignited their love made it's way across the universe.
Tony Stark was the master of the world. All that moved was relative to him. The world was a creation from his mind and moved by his design. There was little he did not have some control over: the tides of the ocean; the weather; the rising and setting of the sun. There was no movement of product, or building, or war, or flow of water through pipes that he did not have his hand in. There was no man on earth he could not manipulate and no woman he could not bed. He lived with the spoils and consequences of his labor. He was the richest, the smartest, and the most handsome man on the planet earth, or so he thought. He was just not the tallest. He cringed at men taller than himself. As a child playing in a field; he'd cut down any weed that grew over his head. If he was not the tallest in stature he wanted to be the biggest or tallest in some other way: a big heart, a mountainous spirit, the biggest contributor, the first in show. But, something held him back from the growth he desired. Something pulled at him, tasked him, and kept him locked in a self-perpetuating spiral of guilt, remorse, hatred and vengeance; negative feelings, bad feelings that consumed, and twisted rational thought. And all this over the one area in Tony's life he had no control – his parents death.

This subject, these feelings prompted Tony to do something he never did; he sat at his desk with his head in one hand and Steve's letter in the other, he stared out the window, and daydreamed. He daydreamed his old reliable daydream. He daydreamed about killing Bucky, and oh how he wanted to kill Bucky. The feeling came from the lowest part of his spine, lower than that, back to the primitive ooze that created life. He wanted to kill him. The video seared in his mind like a hot poker of a brand he could not remove. Bucky would be hard to kill but he could be tricked. Tony knew the weakest part of him was his mind. Tony let this scenario play out in the daydream.

He would kill Barnes without honor. He did not care, he would dismember him, burn him, eviscerate him. He would crush his skull and watch the aftermath. He would strangle, torture and disrespect the limp lifeless body. These feelings, these daydreams, ran their course and dissipated but right behind them – next up – was Steve's reaction. The look on Steve's face when he saw what Tony had done to his friend. And the look on Pepper's face, on Nat's face, Banner's face, Thor's face, and on, and on, and on. This issue was out of control and Tony wanted control. Tony shook off the fantasy, put down Steve's letter and paced around the room. It was all so complicated.

Tony knew Hydra was responsible for his parent's death. He knew Barnes was brainwashed. He saw him that way first hand. Tony had feelings of compassion even sympathy for someone so manipulated and anger at the abuser. Tony opened Steve's letter again. Then there was Steve's unwavering faith in the guy, faith and believe that there was a viable human in Barnes that was worth saving. Steve had faith even in Tony to do the right thing. All this intellectualizing did not negate the fact that even if a puppet; Tony wanted to smash that puppet into dust and watch it burn in hell for eternity. He wanted to kill with his bare hands and watch life leave the body to the last heartbeat. He wanted to stand over him and yell the Klingon death scream to herald Bucky's arrival into the afterlife. Tony spiraled down the rabbit hole again.

"NO MORE!" Tony said out loud, leaving his swirling mass of confused emotions behind. These bad, bad feelings ate his psyche like maggots and they pushed him into action, into immediate, decisive, conclusive action.

It took months for Tony to get to this place. Months alone rattling around the mansion. Months without his friends and coworkers. Months to distill his conflicting emotions down to the essence. The essence of which was, Steve Rogers, Captain America, his friendship, his leadership, the balance he gave to Tony's life, was not an option. Steve was essential. Only then, did the internal conflict become clear. The battle between Tony's two driving desires. Once identified and once Tony accepted these facts he was able to formulate a plan.
"Jarvis, open a new file titled Winter Soldier Investigation. Assemble all data on the Russian Winter Soldier Program starting with the S.H.I.E.L.D. files. Keyword search, the winter soldier, James Barnes, Bucky, or Bucky Barnes. Yeah, we will be hacking Russian computers. I know we all love to do that. We'll need operatives on the ground. The information I need goes back to 1943. I want all hardcopies. Microfilm. Surveillance video. Training videos. All scientific data. Experiments. Documents. I want every scrap of information possible. See what assets we have in this area. I'll need some help with the Russian hacking. See who's available. I'll do the CIA, FBI, and NSA from here. Top priority. Thoroughness has precedence over expediency please."

"Processing," Jarvis said in his overly polite, heavily accented metallic voice.

"When you get around to it – tell me how long you calculate this is gonna take?

"What is the purpose of the Winter Soldier Investigation?"

"To prove intrinsic culpability and to learn how the hell they brainwashed the guy."

"1.5 years to 2 years."

"Great. I thought you'd say 5 years."

Tony sighed with relief. Effervescence filled his head. Tony turned his back on his daydreaming window. Future focused, Tony did a little inventory of his own. He was in possession of a VHS cassette, analog video recording of a double homicide. No need to see that again. He had a red notebook with a star on the front; definitely on his reading list for bedtime. He had 20 assorted boxing crates full of Russian trash: he would go through that. He had a severed bionic arm that he will disassemble pronto and make a detailed report to himself. And he had a shield made of Vibranium that leaned on the side of his desk. He touched the top of the shield with his hand and ran his fingers over the scratches and dents on the front. He put his arm through the 75 year old leather straps his father added so long ago. The earthy smell of the leather filled his head. He wrapped his arm around the front of the shield and clutched the shield firmly to his body. His father made this shield. Tony's resolve burned in him as strong as Vibranium.

TWO YEARS LATER

Tony leaked to the press that he was going into seclusion. The press reported that he had become a recluse. He installed a hologram of himself that wandered around the mansion on a timer, for anyone who care to look. In reality, Tony resided in what he called his summer home or the basement. Located on the grounds of his wrecked Malibu home this massive underground structure, all five floors, had been maintained, restored, and upgraded to become a world-class residence/Research Center that was totally off grid and top secret. The southern face of the subterranean cliff structure overlooked an inlet – an estuary to be exact. The west side overlooked the grand Pacific ocean. The south and west walls were all windowed, with duck blind hologram. One could see out but no one could see in. Deep inside the cliff was the residence, research and work rooms. It was quite a hobbit hole. Above ground, up top, as Tony called it, from cliffside to cliffside sat 40 acres of solar panels. A 15 foot electric fence topped with barbed wire encircled the whole enclave. A large sign on the gate read in ornate letters SOLARIS and then in plain text Solar Power Research Facility. Private property. Keep out. Trespassers will be prosecuted. Smaller signs dotted the fence read in large print, electric fence, solar powered by Solaris. Solaris was in no way a MacGuffin of any type. Tony was off grid at Solaris and needed and used all the electricity he could generate for the secret underground facilities staggering power needs. Tony even drilled for his own water.
The gate lead to an unassuming ranch-house, nestled within the solar panels that served as a delivery center/cargo bay. Up top, north of the solar panels was an airstrip and hanger housing Tony's Learjet, a vintage Piper Cub and an experimental solar airplane. Tony Stark and Bruce Banner, accompanied by a fleet of Tony's personal robots and of course, Jarvis, had worked at Solaris for two years on the Winter Soldier Investigation and they were finally ready to send for Steve Rogers.

Escorted by one of Tony's personal robots, Rogers entered the living room of Solaris. The room was cozy, for Tony, with high ceilings and windows floor to ceiling on two sides. There were no curtains or blinds on the windows. Tony had developed a glass that, on a dimmer switch darkened, with a range from clear glass to pitch black – patent pending.

The Pacific ocean visually and sonically dominated the atmosphere of the room. Steve could hear it beating away out there as if to say, 'I'm the biggest, I'm the strongest, I'm relentless.' Although 40 feet above the beach it seemed they were sitting right on the beach.

Tony stood in front of a massive fireplace rearranging things on the mantle: a magnum of wine, two glasses, a statue that looked like an exact replica of the Maltese falcon, and an Oscar. One of the items Tony fiddled with was Steve's letter. Tony made brief eye contact with Steve.

"Thanks for coming."

Steve offered his hand. "It's good to see you, Tony."

The men shook hands and made a bit longer eye contact. Their expressions were sober.

Tony directed Steve to an uncharacteristically comfortable looking sofa. Tony's penchant for modernism over comfort was not seen in this home. Tony turned his back on Steve and continue to fool around with the things on the mantle. He held up Steve's letter so Steve could see and tapped it twice on the mantle and laid it down. The fire raged below him.

"I've come to realize," Tony pointed to Steve's letter. "That this is the issue that will define my life. I've asked you here to give me the information I need to do the right thing."

"I will if I can."

As Tony spoke he open the bottle of wine, looked the cork over, squeezed it between his fingers and did all the customary, blah, blah, blah to open the wine properly. Tony made a surprised happy face when he tasted the wine. He passed a glass to Steve who tasted and said, "Delicious." Tony continued:

"I need to know about James Barnes."

Steve choked on the wine.

"I mean, before all this. What kind of a guy was he? You knew him like a brother. Only you can tell me." There was a tentativeness about Tony that confused Steve.

"I'm really not understanding this."

"Indulge me, Steve, tell me what I need to know." Tony's voice did not ask. Steve liked this approach better. Tony sounded more like himself.

Steve hesitated but said, "Okay, fine. Like what? Like where? From the beginning?"

"Yeah," Tony said, "from the beginning."
Steve took a few gulps of the exceptionally good wine, relax a bit and started out.

"The beginning is, oh geez. Well, you know our mothers were good friends."

"I didn't know that."

"They were in high school together. I am pretty sure they both were still teenagers when we were born. Like 18 or 19. They had no idea what they were doing. They dressed us up and treated us like dolls. They tossed us together as infants as a convenience really. They'd do each other's hair or the parents would play cards and drink Rob Roys or Old Fashions and stay up half the night."

Steve drank the wine and poured another glass. "I don't have my own memories of any of that, just from stories or pictures. There were pictures of us together. There was one famous picture of Buck right after he was born. He was small, not even 5 pounds and his father held him in one hand. That picture was passed around every birthday. His dad would say, 'look at you, buck naked,' and he'd laugh. That's how he got his nickname."

"Not from Buchanan?"

"No, that's just his mother's maiden name. There was another crazy picture. I was a 9 pound newborn. We were born a few months apart and the mothers had us laid out on the kitchen table. Bucky's mother had so many blankets on him, trying to get him to look bigger. He was wrapped so tight he was shiny with sweat and had this distressed angry look on his face. It was a funny picture. I would love to see that picture again. Anyway, I don't really have my own memories, like I said, till I was eight, or so but one of my first clear memories was of Bucky and his father."

"I was afraid of Bucky's dad. He was career military. A big guy. Loud sonic boom of a voice. No nonsense type a guy. He had no sense of humor, none, whatsoever. He believed in corporal punishment and expected a lot out of even little people. He was yelling at Bucky, a common occurrence – Bucky – hit by his dad – another common occurrence. He was hit often and hit hard. He was the only boy and pressure was on him to live up to the dad standards. We couldn't have been seven or eight years old and this huge man in a uniform was yelling and swearing at him – I mean real verbal abuse and Buck stood there, like he had enough. He's practically toe to toe with the old man, with his hands on his hips and he looked at his dad straight in the eye, like five stories up and said, 'well, if you're gonna hit me just shut up and hit me already', Or something like that. At the time I thought it was the bravest thing I had ever seen."

"Did he get hit?"

"I don't remember. The dad was harsh on him around that time. He teased him calling him pretty boy, 'oh you're just a pretty boy', his dad would say. He made fun of Bucky's wavy hair. When Bucky was little, everybody thought he was a girl. This drove his dad nuts. But, Bucky had the same body type as his father. When he started getting muscular, which was early, no one said that anymore. He was always the tallest and mostly muscular kid in our class but his mother was a beautiful woman, I mean, movie star beautiful, and he got his looks from her. She was an artist, did sketches for newspapers and magazines, did portraits out of the home and had a big shed outback where she taught sculpting. This was the big conflict in the home. His mom taught him many forms of art as soon as he could hold a pencil or brush and the dad didn't insist she stop but instead he made fun of him and teased him. Looking back, I'd say he was the first bully I ever knew up close and personal." Steve chugaluged the wine and Tony was right there to fill the glass.

"The dad was not the type of man that could accept a beautiful boy with curly hair that was artistic. That was just not gonna happen. He also was not the type of man that would forbid his wife from teaching the kid anything. So, there was the rub. Buck's reaction to all this was interesting. My dad
had left my house around this time and my mother increased her drinking. I was at Buck's house, well, I live there, practically. Buck refused to get a haircut. I don't think he got a haircut for years."

Steve smiled, and spread his arms out on the back of the sofa as he remembered his friend and his own childhood.

"Oh yeah," Steve laughed. "He would make all these artistic creations, and give them to the dad, or he would draw pictures, and hang them up all over his parents bedroom. It was a real battle of wills. I can laugh now but it wasn't funny at the time. When Bucky became a wrestler and a baseball player and the trophies flew in the door the dad started to lighten up. There was an incident at the river that, now looking back, seemed a turning point."

Tony took it all in. He filled the wine glasses to grease the wheel.

"There was a river near our town, the Mad River, a narrow deep fast-moving river with steep banks and wooded all around. The town lost a kid to the river every year or so. The river was absolutely forbidden. The German residents of the town used the German word for forbidden, verboten, verboten, that was a couple steps up from just regular old forbidden. We were around 10 years old when Bucky's curiosity got the better of him and the river was the first place he wanted to go every time we left the house. I resisted but that was futile. Bucky had no fear and so we went.

"The river became our home away from home. That river was a boy's dream come true. All types of animals and insects, frogs, snakes, an abundance of flora we had never seen, all untouched by the population. We built structures all over the place, traps and forts. We'd fall into our own traps because we forgot where we put 'em. Buck collected everything, tiny trees, insects, tadpoles, cocoons. He would draw everything he'd collect and had it all in categories at home. We took the stuff to school. We took some cocoons to school and they hatched all over the place causing a minor riot. We had no idea what was gonna come out of any of them. There must've been 100 praying mantids in this one cocoon. We tried to raise them – they all died." Steve's face was soft, his eyes bright as he reminisced.

"Buck almost fell into the river, I don't know how many times. He flirted with it. He loved to slide down the bank, and see how close he could get to the rushing water. He'd pretend, and fall halfway down, and I'd have to perform a daring rescue." Steve paused, and touched his forehead. "Wow, I hadn't thought of these things in years. We'd play wagon train – a whole gang of kids – it was a big thing. I was always the Wagon Master. Buck the scout. He'd make sure the Indians always caught him. They'd tie him to a tree to burn him at the stake. We'd rescue him just in the time."

Steve rubbed his forehead again. He was surprised he felt emotional. He had not felt anything at all for a long time. He told himself it was the alcohol. He had found that if he drank a few swallows every four or five minutes it would relax him, never to the point of intoxication, but it did have an effect on him. Tony listened with focus and was not fidgeting, so Steve continued.

"Bucky's cousins from the Buchanan side came from out of state to visit that summer. We all put on our swimsuits and headed to the pool." Steve glanced at Tony and said, "You know where this is going? Yeah, Buck was compelled to show his cousins his river. It was the most exciting thing in our universe, besides the train tracks. One cousin was our age. The rest were younger. I said they were too young to go to the river. Buck said it was just for a look at the river. We would not to go all the way to the river and, well, he had a way of looking at you.

"There was one area you could see the river from a false bank. Then there was a large basin. We headed down to the basin toward the river. We were about halfway across the basin when we heard Bucky's dad yelling, and swearing at him from the top of the false bank. The dad ripped a branch off a small tree, and started after him ripping the leaves off as he came down the embankment. Bucky
dropped everything and took off running down the basin. The dad ran after him with his nice long switch. When the dad ran past us we took off after the dad. The dad couldn't quite catch Buck but the switch caught his legs and back and the dad whipped him and whipped him with that switch," Steve demonstrated.

"The dad was yelling and swearing at him to stop. He screamed at Bucky saying, 'I'm going to beat the holy shit out of you', or 'I'm gonna beat you with in an inch of your life, boy', and stuff like that. At the end of the basin before the woods there was a huge briar-patch. It was wide and deep and had to be over 7 foot tall. We didn't even go within 5 feet of this patch. If you picked up a briar it hurt like hell. You couldn't get it out all the way. The little pokey tip stayed in you and it always got infected. Well, when Bucky got to the patch he didn't stop he ran right in. The dad was right behind him and he stopped in his tracks and drop the switch."

Steve acted out the drama with his hands.

"The dad yelled, 'Buck stop, I put down the switch.' I was like, well what do you expect you asshole you're whipping him like he's on the HMS Bounty. Anyway, we all stopped. The only sound we could hear was Bucky still moving through the briars. The dad became frantic begging him to stop. Finally, there was silence. No one could even see Bucky. He had been consumed. It was like the Day of the Triffids." Steve could not believe he actually made a joke.

"Then we heard something unbelievable. We heard Buck cry. Now, this just didn't happen. He was everyone's brave hero. When I heard him crying, I started to cry. When I start crying all four cousins started crying. It was a real scene. The dad started into the briars, he made it about 2 feet and came out a bloody mess. That shocked some sense into the asshole and he told Bucky not to move that he would get him out. He ran back up the basin and retrieved gloves and boots and tools and neighbor's to help dig Bucky out.

"It took two hours to get that kid out of the briar patch. He was a real mess. His body was limp. He was as white as a ghost. None of us kids had ever seen that much blood. All he had on was a swimsuit. He even had big briars stuck up through his Keds. He had welts and little cuts all over his back and the back of his legs from being whipped and briars all over his front. We were all too shocked to cry. Buck had long since cried himself out. The only one crying when they brought the kid out was Bucky's dad. When Buck saw his dad cry that was it for him – he was devoted to the man the rest of his life. He told me later that until that day he thought his father hated him.

"The men took the whole briar patch out. Burned it down to the ground. I remember the fire burned long into the night. The women in the neighborhood laid Buck out on the kitchen table and worked on him for hours trying to get the briars out of him. The doctor came and gave Bucky a shot of penicillin and made the dad explain how the kid got in that shape.

"His dad was humiliated. Embarrassed enough to change. There was no more hitting. They were inseparable. If Buck had wrestling match the dad was there, ball game - dad there. He told the military, 'Sorry I'm going home to play catch with my son for three hours before his bedtime,' and then he'd to go back to the Base and finish his work after the kids were in bed. He took Buck to professional ball games. They went on fishing trips. I shouldn't say it like that, I went too, if I wasn't sick. He bought Buck a telescope and a microscope. Bucky dropped art flat. His mom didn't care, as soon as he put down the brush his sister picked it up. Buck got a haircut. They had five good years before the dad was killed in a freak accident piloting some experimental aircraft at Wright-Patterson.

"I actually grew to love Bucky's dad. From the whipping incident until his death he exposed us to a constant barrage of useful practical knowledge. Things you can use in the real world. He taught us to shoot. How to care for the weapon. How to respect the weapon. He didn't hunt but as a pilot he had been trained in survival skills and he passed this knowledge on to us. We learned how to survive in
the wilderness. How to make a knife out of practically anything and how do use it to get food and to defend ourselves. We ate that stuff up. He never let up for a moment. Back then you could go to ground school at 14 and you could get your private pilot's license at 16. Franklin, Buck's Dad, wanted him to fly so he paid my way too. Besides dinner at Bucky's every night ground school was the high point of my high school years. Franklin died before we could get our license but the school let us finish our flying time for free because of the way Buck's dad died. Buck had a license to pilot an airplane before he had a license to drive a car."

"And you?"

"Couldn't pass the vision test." Steve smiled.

"You know, we had no choice but to be friends as little kids. In grade school there wasn't a noticeable difference between us. In high school the difference between us was staggering. There was no way a guy like Buck would ever be friends with a sick dork like me, yet he stuck to me like glue. There he was a great all-around athlete. More handsome than William Holden. Everybody said so. All the most beautiful girls wanted to date him. He was popular. People were drawn to him. It was like he had this authentic magnetism. He was scouted by professional baseball clubs, effortless student, charming, great dancer, social, talkative, funny, and . . . he was nice, Tony . . . just nice . . . just considerate of others, always kindness and a smile for everyone. He would talk to anyone. He had a way of listening to you that made you feel like . . . Like what you were saying was the most . . . . Steve broke off.

"How could - " He broke off again. "How could they - " A shutter ran through Steve's body. He shut his eyes a moment and squirmed around on the sofa. He shook it off.

"It's hard to believe . . . Back then we called his type of personality happy go lucky. Now, I think it's called well-adjusted. And you know the strangest thing? He didn't seem to know there was anything special about him. He thought he was just an average Joe. Maybe he was – but not to me. It's probably hard for you to believe knowing me as I am now. I know I've always said Buck was my best friend, the truth is he was my only friend until I met you, Tony . . . I mean you guys.

"I, on the other hand, I almost didn't even graduate high school because I had so many sick days. A conservative figure is 20 trips to the hospital for asthma attacks over the four years of high school. I'd turn completely blue. Buck was always there. I'd say, 'I know you have something better to do than to sit here with me at the hospital', and he say something like, 'and miss watching you turn blue and die, no way'. He was 14 and he'd track down the doctors and make them explain things to 'em." Steve took a deep breath. He felt alert, elated, in some way. The more he talked the better he felt.

Tony sat on the edge of his seat; he hung on every word.

"Did I say undefeated in wrestling for the four years of high school?"

"No, really? I'm impressed." Tony was authentic with this statement. Things like titles and awards did impress him.

"Yeah, he was the first person to have that distinction. I tried not to miss any of his matches. They amazed everyone. He would fix that intense gaze on his opponent, you saw it?"

"Yeah, I saw it." Tony saw it and would never forget it.

"Well, he would capture his opponent, hell, they were more like his prey. He would capture them by that intense gaze. He would look at them like they were already pinned and he would make it happen. They were like birds hypnotized by a cobra. It was over. They were going down."
"And he still got dates?"

Both men laughed out loud and took big drinks of the wine.

"It's funny you should say that. He did do something similar to girls in high school. It seemed like charm, but later in the war his skills matured into what looked like seduction. You'd have to see it, his tone of voice, this low calm, his eyes, and the way he would look at them reminded me of the wrestling matches. In one sentence, I saw it, it took one or two sentences and they were fascinated. He'd whisk them away to the dance floor. In a few dances they'd be picking out baby names."

Steve and Tony laughed out loud again. It seems like old times – in a way.

"After I saw him in action a few times I thought he'd make a good spy and I used him as such," popped right out of Steve's mouth.

"He would do that for you?" Tony questioned. Spying is against the Geneva Convention.

"Without question. He would do anything I asked."

"Even the dirty work?"

"Especially the dirty work."

"Like what?"

"We had to shoot the prisoners. I shot prisoner," Steve mumbled without emotion.

"You shot prisoners?"

"I ordered him to shoot the prisoners." Steve said loud like a robot.

"I . . . " Tony could not hide his shock.

"I would have lost all my men otherwise, including him."

"Why? Why would he do that?" Tony leaned in close to Steve.

"It was war – some horrible things had to be done. It was a question of situational ethics." Steve tried to explain the unexplainable. He felt he was being pulled somewhere he really did not want to go but he felt compelled to keep answering Tony. "He did it because he didn't want me to have to do it."

Tony asked soft and gentle. "Why?"

"He didn't want me to be tarnished." Steve had an edge to his voice. Tony looked him in the eye.

"Why not?"

"Maybe things have changed a lot in 100 years or . . . " Steve studied Tony, "or you've never had a real friend. You haven't. Have you?"

Tony dropped his eyes. It was true he had not - not like Steve described.

"Okay, I'll explain it to you. Because he knew I'd never ask him to do anything like that without good reason, like no other way."

"And?"
"And? And he knew I'd get him out of any jam he got into because of it - with my life."

"So the bottom line would be?"

"Dammit, Tony I feel like I'm being peeled like an onion. He did it because he knew he could handle the fall out better than I could and he was right. I don't wear it well. I don't know what to do with these feelings."

"What feelings?"

"Okay, okay, I'll spell it out for you. If I wanted the prisoners shot I should've shot them myself. I used him. Not to save my own life or something noble. I used him to protect my image. I let him carry that horror for the rest of his life - not just the shooting but the fact I ordered him. Sure, they forced him with machines but I used our friendship. Seems worse . . . much worse."

"No . . ."

"He spoke to them in German before he shot them . . . I don't know what he was saying . . ." Steve looked at Tony with eyes like saucers.

Tony noted Steve's flushed face and the magnum of wine was empty. Tony sat quietly for a moment.

"I ,ah, really don't want any more wine. Would you like something else?"

Steve stretched and walked around the room.

"Yeah, okay. Something with ice. Scotch. Lots of Scotch with lots of ice." Steve swung his arms around.

As soon as Tony left the area Steve went to the mantle to look at the black bird statue. Other movie artifacts join the falcon on the fireplace. An Oscar. Steve picked it up, felt the weight of the thing and inspected the statuette head to foot. The number 1601 was embossed on the bottom. A few films scripts that looked original laid on the mantle. Steve was fascinated, anything, anything to distract him from where he just was.

But it was the pounding of the Pacific ocean that drew him out of his funk and to the window. The illusion that the sun touched the water, dazzled any viewer. Even the birds seemed to cock their heads to watch the hypnotic marriage of sun and sea. The sun blazed it's last hurrah, sank, and disappeared into the afterglow. It was breathtaking.

Steve stared at the ocean, deep in thought.

Tony touched his arm with the icy class of Scotch.

"Oh, thanks. What's that red sign on the beach? I can't read the lettering." Steve asked.

"The beaches are closed around here."

"Closed? Why?"

"Overgrowth of bacteria. Bacteria stuck to microplastic fibers. If you get that in your lungs the fibers shreds, the bacteria infects and your dead," Tony said.

"Good grief. What caused that?"

"Global warming," Tony said with attitude, "it's been on the news."
"I haven't been keeping up. I did hear in the cab coming over here that 95% of the population of the earth are breathing polluted air? How can that be possible?" Steve waxed nostalgic. "Too bad, too bad we didn't know about the possibility of this in the 40s."

"Yeah, to bad we can't go back in time and fix it." Tony stared out the window with Steve. "Well, should we get back to it?"

"I'm sure you're getting the idea."

"Yes, yes but let's go on. You guys graduate high school and - "

Steve took four or five big drinks of the icy diluted Scotch. It cleared the pallet after all the wine.

"My father was a drinker, Tony. He went on a bender. Wandered away somewhere, never to return but my mother was an alcoholic. The no food in the house kind of alcoholic. She'd disappear for days and the police would call me and say, 'come pick her up'. I was like 15 years old, going to the police station, well anyway . . . When my mother died Bucky wanted me to move in with him, his mom and the girls. Till this day I don't know why I didn't. I loved Bucky's home and the girls. The home was warm. Always music and laughter. There was always something cooking in the kitchen. Things I never had. I would've had a great time. They treated me like I was a prince or something. It would've been great . . .

"I had this fantasy . . . " Steve laughed, "that I would marry one of Buck's sisters and be part of a real family . . . Imagine that, I was 18. There was something wrong with me. I knew it. Even then I knew it. I thought I was cursed for something I'd done. I didn't know what I had done but I had the proof, and the proof was all my illnesses. I felt I didn't deserve a home like Bucky had. I thought I had to tough it out on my own. You know, stand on my own. Be a man. What a fool." Steve paused. Then added, "I am still doing it."

Tony brought some food with the drinks and he sat on the end of the sofa and ate, like he watched a good movie.

"Well, Buck accepted my decision. He didn't know what he wanted to do. He was playing minor league baseball as he had done the summer between junior and senior year. They had sent him up to the majors for a game, and back down to the minors. They did that a few times. I don't think they treated catchers very well back then. Or maybe they just wanted to see if these young ball players had nerves of steel. He went up not batting an eye, and came back not batting an eye. I think they would've signed him, and he would've gone. Rough life if you're good at everything, interested in everything, and had unlimited choices.

"I knew exactly what I wanted to do. I was going to the FBI. I knew I could never make the physical for a field agent, but I thought I could be an analyst. I enrolled at a local university, pre-law. I figured if I had a law degree they would have to take me. I laid this all out for Bucky hoping he would come along. We would have made a great team in the FBI. He said he didn't know about the FBI. He said if you can't make a decision it means you just need more information so he decided to come to the university and take whatever seemed interesting to him.

"Now, at college this is where we, as adults, started to differentiate from each other. I've always been a single subject type of guy and Buck was just the opposite. I remained reserved and conservative, and Buck collected an odd assortment of the weirdest people you can imagine. He had friends that were Marxist, existentiaslists, Freidians, a poet or two, a few feminists, an anarchist, I mean, he took the wildest classes. I was constantly asking him what he was going to do with any of this stuff.

"These weirdos would stay up half the night. Buck said they were discussing things. I went to some
of these soirées, sounded like arguing to me. No idea was too wild. And what was the over arcing topic of conversation, the dominant subject of all this talk? Adolf Hitler. The little corporal was criticized, demonized, politicized, psychoanalyzed, it went on and on.

"Buck did take all the languages the University had to offer, German, French and Spanish, I think. Before I could turn around twice he was speaking these languages with natives. His Dean said he was gifted and gave him contacts of professors and others who spoke these languages in their homes so he could speak with them beyond conversational. Students would gather at the professor's homes for discussions. He spent a lot of time speaking German and reading Nietzsche. I was like, who are you? We met Pookie Morita around this time.

"Pookie?" Tony said with a laugh.

"Yeah, Jim Morita. Back then, everybody had a nickname, Tony. If you didn't have an insulting nickname something was really wrong with you. We had Stinky Floro, Humpy Holland, Slick Becker, Shifty Williams, Snake Plisken, Doobie Mackie and of course Bucky Barnes."

"And you?"

"Peewee Rogers, what else. Everybody called me that. The teachers called me Peewee. My own mother called me Peewee, it was pervasive. I shouldn't say everybody. Bucky called me Steve. Oh, he'd call me Peewee if he wanted to motivate me. When Peewee came from him – I was motivated. Other than that I accepted it. Peewee was fine." Steve contemplated and took a gulp of Scotch.

"Well, Peewee wasn't as bad as . . . Bucky." This time both men laughed and it was like old times.

"You know Jim Morita, he was in the Howling Commando."

"Oh sure, I do know that name."

"He was a big influence on both of us. Jim was from Toledo but fluent in Japanese and Buck thought he'd take that on too. Morita introduced us to eastern philosophies and the martial arts. He studied in San Francisco and we all did T'ai Chi Ch'uan on Morita's balcony every morning. He introduced Bucky to masters in Judo and Karate and they went to classes. Buck was in top physical shape and had the ability to focus his mind so he was a quick study.

"About a year later Bucky told me he had fallen in love. The girl was from one of the language families whose parents were professors at the University. I think they were Basque or Cotillion. Her parents hosted these open communication free-for-alls he was so fond of. He said he knew what he wanted. He wanted to marry this girl have five or six children and work for the Forest Service."

"Well, he was a naturalist?" Tony surmised.

"He was. Yeah, he was an ambitious naturalist though. He wanted to work at some big forest like out west." Steve smiled. "Anyway, he asked her to marry him and she said no."

"What?" Tony gestured shock.

"Well, Buck is an atheist. To me atheism was just another idea he was trying on for size. He had a voracious appetite for ideas. He consumed ideas like a piranha, he would digest them, metabolize them and then drop them. But it was the end of the world to this girl. She said she could deal with any other religion but not that. He might as well have told them he was a Satanist. I don't know if he changed. You know what they say there's no atheists in the foxhole.

"It didn't matter anyway, a week later was Pearl Harbor. There was no question, everyone was going
to war. Buck talked to a recruiter who advised him to get a commission in the Air Corps, as it was
call then. He said he didn't think so. He said he was a trained fighter and shooter – he was
exceptional even before he was messed with – I think he classified as expert marksman right off. He
said let the boys who didn't have these skills fly. If he had to fight and kill, he would, another soldier
– mono a mono – not drop bombs on what had to be civilians. That seemed like the insanity to him.

"At the time I thought his decision may be reactionary, because of the girl, but his reasoning was
sound and logical, so I accepted his decision.

"He didn't feel the way most people felt about going to war. Sure, he felt Hitler needed to be
stopped, but he refused to vilify a whole race of people like most people were doing, with all the
propaganda. He had way too many German and Japanese friends to do that. He felt no 'people'
wanted war. Morita fought right by our side all the while his whole family were in internment
camps." Steve trailed off and shrugged his shoulders. "How innocent we were. How idealistic. How
naïve." Steve took a deep cleansing breath.

"So he went to war with the same attitude he lived his life. I carried a lot more baggage into the
theater of war than he did. When I walked beside him I knew he was the better man. And he was the
better man Tony, there was no doubt about that.

"We thought we would go over there. Fix it all right up. Come home, and pursue our dreams. His
dreams seemed so small. He wasn't really asking for anything at all.

"We had no way of knowing what tight spots were to come. What seeing death on a scale like war
was. What having to kill another man is like. How hard it is to actually do that. What losing friends
right beside you was like. Like almost losing your own life, by a fraction of a second, by a fraction of
an inch. See this scar on my ear? Gunshot. If my head had been cocked a fraction of an inch this
way, the bullet would've entered my eye and blown the back of my head off. And there's no Super
Soldier Serum that could prevent that.

"And you didn't learn those lesson just one time, you learned them over, and over, and over again.
We were held down by enemy fire for 72 hours, one time. The men called it the valley of death. It
was a bloodbath. Death at any moment, so much so everybody gets squirrelly. You crack. You crack
open. You crack wide open. No man can predict what they will do. And every man has his moment,
every man, including me, including Bucky. Buck had something memorized to chant to himself
when his moment, when the occasion presented itself, as it inevitably would. He told of his dream
future. Kind of a poem, a soliloquy, anyway it went like this:

'I wake in the morning with my five children jumping on me like I'm a trampoline. They pull at my
face, rearrange my cheeks, kiss me and call me Papa. They all want my attention. Their cheeks are
rose pink and cool to the touch and they all talk at once. Their voices tinkle and clatter in the air like
the voices of angels. I smell the coffee percolating and the bacon sizzling and hear my wife knocking
around in the kitchen. I go to work outside in the lush green, and crisp open air. I come home, the
good tired and head for the garden with huge red tomatoes. I eat one on the spot. I play ball with my
son on the front yard and go to my daughter's dance recital. I take a yellow rose from the garden to
the stage and hand it to her. At night, I hold my wife in a silky gown and her hair falls across my
face.'

"He told me that if he died to have no fear for him. That he would be thinking this – if they gave him
a second to think. I memorized it myself. A lot of the men did. I said it many times.

"Near the end of the 72 hours a mortar shell exploded about 10 feet from Bucky, he was blasted into
the air about 25 feet into a dirt wall. I pulled him into the foxhole. He was a bloody mess but he had
a heartbeat and was breathing. He was unconscious but all his reflexes were intact. He had shrapnel
all over. I searched his body and pulled most of them out. If he lived, I thought, the smaller ones would work themselves out over time. Luckily, he had no big pieces in him. The two soldiers by him were killed instantly – no I take that back, one lived about an hour and then died.

"I protected him as well as I could. He was unconscious such a long time. I was sure he had a brain concussion because he bled from both ears. There was nothing I could do for him. There was no help to be called. We had no supplies, no medicine, and only rain water, and very little of that. I couldn't even clean his wounds or get the blast powder off his face. During the night he was feverish and he trembled. I tried to keep him warm. I knew I had to sleep, I hadn't slept in 48 hours and I was hallucinating and I couldn't think straight, but I knew, I just knew in my heart, that his heart would stop beating as soon as I fell asleep. I know, I told you I wasn't thinking straight. So, I put my hand over his heart where I could feel it beating and I fell asleep.

"Bird calls woke me. He hadn't moved, but he was looking right at me. Well," Steve raised his hands, rolled his eyes and smiled. "Well, I couldn't feel his heart beat through all those clothes, so I had to worm my hand under his clothing, you know, to get to his chest. He looked at my hand there under his clothes, on his bare chest, and then back at my face. I was embarrassed that I was touching him like that. I tried to pull my hand away but he grabbed my wrist to keep my hand on his chest. Just that little exertion must've been too much for him because he passed right out. He never mentioned it to me – I thank God for that - but the story got around with the men, that my hand on his heart kept him alive. He told the story or someone saw, I don't know, but the next dying GI grabbed my hand and held my hand on his chest . . . he died anyway.

"There was a point where I gave up. I knew it was no use. I would never be, like . . . domesticated. I was ruined as a man . . . as a human. I knew I would never be the same, Tony, I knew I could never come back from where the war – from where the war pushed me. I knew I'd never stop killing. I knew I would never stop. After that I didn't care anymore. I mean . . . about whether I lived or I died. Because I knew I'd be no use to anyone – of no human value. I've talk to people – that happens a lot. These men, men like me, become mercenaries after wars. Paid by the highest bidder. Some misguided ones think they can go home, but they become alcoholics, drug addicts, go crazy, or just shoot themselves. I submitted to the fact that my life was over.

"But I didn't want that to happen to Bucky. He had remained so compassionate, so sweet and caring through all of it. I tried to get him sent home. I busted my ass to get him sent home, but in those days blast concussions didn't go home. They just weren't considered an injury if you couldn't see it on the outside. Well, that's one incident, I have like 50 more. Tony, I don't know how much longer I can do this. I think you know the rest anyway. You know I didn't agree at all with his decision to go back in - "

"Cryo?"

"Yes, and the more time that passes the less I like it. It's like he doesn't think he even deserves to breathe. I have to tell you I don't know how much longer I can continue to talk myself out of going to get’em. I don't know how much longer I can think of reasons not to go. I don't know how much longer I can stand it." Steve's eyeballs got big and his mouth made an O shape and he was shocked at himself and his inconsideration. What must this sound like from Tony's point of view.

"Tony, hey man I am so sorry. You don't deserve that kind of outburst but this escapes me. Maybe I've spent too much time alone the last two years. It's not just knowing someone from your own century. It's more than that. It's being known. Like a brother or a cousin you were raised with or a teacher who knew you through school or the milkman who watched you grow up. There's no one within 100 years that knows me. That's a new kind of alone. That short time he was with me, just like a moment, really. He didn't do anything. He didn't say anything. It was just his presence. It was
like just a split second – "Steve snapped his finger," – of belonging. I'd have that back under any conditions. I know it's selfish, but the most extreme conditions you can think of, and I'd say yes. Geez Tony, I apologize again. I sound like I'm begging you and it's so unfair. I don't know what's come over me. It's . . . it's inexcusable."

The state Steve was in moved Tony deeply. Tony thought the good war was different for some reason but here it was, even the good war diseased the psyche of this valiant man. Tony shuffled frequently in his seat, touched his face, and hair, and fidgeted.

"Now, I apologize, just a few more questions. When you guys were together what did you think of his mental state?"

"Oh, most of that time we were under a life or death situation. He was running on adrenaline or paranoia . . . he was still fighting to stay alive . . . if that's what you mean. Personally, he seemed like a ghost of his former self or like an animal version of himself. This cryo-decision to me was like he was being his own judge, jury and executioner. Sentencing himself to nonexistence. Which is what he thinks he deserves for his crimes."

"Did he say how he remembered his crimes?"

"His victims visit him each night – in dreams."

"He said that?"

"He did."

Tony raised his eyebrows and blew some air out of the corner of his mouth. "Wow, I have my own visitors." Tony mumbled then added loud and clear. "It may give you some comfort to know that you don't dream in cryogenic sleep."

"I . . . I didn't know that."

"In any case I'm prepared to deal with that."

"Prepared? Tony, when are you going to tell me what the hell is going on?"

"Okay . . . now. Come on. I've got something to show you in the lab."

The natural light, the available light, all canned light led the eye to the center of the room – to a shiny metallic object that laid on a table, a sleek, seamless metal arm.

Steve's jaw dropped and his head moved from side to side. "Is it weaponized?"

"It is, if the wearer desires. My first upgrade," Tony turned on the hologram feature. The arm took on a human look – human in every way: variation and skin tone, nails, blue veins, and hair.

"Can I touch it?"

"Sure."

"What's it made of? Is that Vibranium?"

"Sure."
"Where did you get the Vibranium?"

"Your shield."

"Poetic, Tony, poetic. But how? What happened to you?" Both men smiled broadly.

"Don't think I've changed all that much. I haven't moved from my position of wanting revenge. I want revenge, and I will have my revenge. I'm just not gonna to extract it from what was basically a drone sent on a kill mission. I'm going right to the source, HYDRA and Russia for my revenge feast. I'll tell you exactly how I'm gonna do it. What they broke – I fix. They gave him an arm – I give a 10 times better arm. What they damaged, I repair. What they split apart, I will put back together and make whole again. What they locked up, I'll set free. What they programmed, I will deprogram. And when the day comes when Barnes stands, probably right here in this room where we are right now, when he stands here whole, autonomous, healed, repaired and recovered from his atrocity – and what was done to him was an atrocity. The crowning glory of their achievement, their Winter Soldier, the pinnacle of a century of their efforts - when he stands here possessed with the one thing they fear the most, the one thing that makes us right and them wrong. When he stands here, a man with free will, that's when I get my reward. They did not break him, they did not take what belongs to us, our American soldier, and break him. They don't get to do that. They didn't beat him. They didn't win. We win. And that's when I win my revenge."

"Tony . . . Tony . . . Tony."

"I know, I missed you too."

Bruce Banner entered the lab, "sorry to interrupt – if I did."

"No, thank you. I need interrupting. I've gone places tonight I've never been. What was in that wine?" Steve said offhand.

"Cabernet Sauvignon, Schrader Celler – "

"If it's just wine why do I hear a choir singing?" Steve interrupted.

"What are they singing, Steve, hallelujah?" Bruce chimed.

"Yes, yes they're singing hallelujah." Everyone smiled.

"Tony, when do we go?"

"You and Banner are going."

"But . . . you?"

"Look, I had two years to process what happened in Siberia. To Barnes, it's last week. It may be – awkward."

"That's thoughtful and considerate of you," Steve said.

"And he may not wanna come," Tony added.

"Oh, he'll want to come." Steve turned to Banner, "okay, then when do WE leave?"

"The plane is ready, just call your little King friend," Tony said.
Steve smiled and looked at Banner who shrugged anytime and Steve pulled out his phone.
"You know Rodgers, you interrupted me a few minutes back. I need to finish my sentence. Cabernet Sauvignon, Schrader Cellars 1998 with truth serum added," Tony was compelled to say.

It took a moment for Tony statement to soak in; Steve was in such a high place. When he came down, he threw his arms up in the air and flailed them in front of Tony's face.

"What? You drugged me?"

"Just a little," Tony said with a smile.

"Tony," Steve said without a smile.

"Hey, I'm the one that's gonna mess around with another man's brain, his mind and maybe even his personality. Yeah, I need to know the truth. The factual truth yes, plus I need to know the emotional truth."

"You thought I wouldn't tell you the truth?" As soon as the statement was out in the air Steve he heard how lame it sounded.

"But Tony, you drank the wine too."

"So, now you know the factual truth and my emotional truth."

"Tony, you amaze me."

"Of course I do . . . Why are you standing here?" Tony said to Steve and Banner in his curt way.

Steve and Banner's movement rounding the corner activated the motion sensor on one of Tony's personal robots. As they approached it spoke, 'I will escort you to the airplane. Follow me.' The robot escorted them to a long hallway. The hallway reminded Steve of the hallways in the Pentagon. An electric golf cart waited to take them the mile trek to the ladder that led up to the hanger and on to the Learjet. Coastal winds battered their faces but it felt good.

"What's truth serum?" Steve mumbled.

"It's a compound Tony stumbled upon, tested extensively using a polygraph as a control. It's effectiveness was around 80%, which is unheard of. The FDA has it now, it will change the world, and that isn't even scratching the surface of its therapeutic applications." Banner explained.

"Therapeutic?"

"Yeah, you guys drank a shit load of that stuff tonight. How do you feel?"

"I've never talked that openly about my feelings, not even to myself. I feel great. I feel like 50 pounds has been removed from each shoulder." Steve moved his arms and shoulders playfully.

"That's therapeutic value," Bruce smiled.

The flight from Solaris to Wakanda was uneventful. Steve and Banner slept the whole trip. A Wakandan attendant escorted Steve and Bruce to the facility that housed Barnes. They examined Bucky. He looked shrunken. There was a mummified quality to his skin. On close inspection his skin looked reptilian and glistened with ice crystals. His hands were skeletal and discolored and he had dark circles under his eyes. His cheeks were sunken, and his lips parted in a grotesque manner. Steve hyperventilated.
"I don't think this is abnormal, Steve," explained Banner.

"How long does it take to get him out of this thing?" Steve said to the technician as he bounced his hands over the glass above Bucky's head.

"About two hours."

"How long before he can fly?"

"About three days."

"I am sure no one is ever been that kind," Steve said under his breath.

"Excuse the interruption. I'm Dr. Xhosa. I'm the doctor in charge of Sergeant Barnes. He'll be here more like seven days if you want his jaw fixed."

"Jaw? I didn't know anything about his jaw."

"Your friend's jaw is fractured in 12 places. It needs to be wired for proper healing."

"Yeah, it's a real mess," the technician said. "What happened to him? Get kicked in the face with a metal boot?"

Dr. Xhosa placed her hand gently on the technician's shoulder, "that's enough, Kayode, you can go to lunch now." Dr. Xhosa sat at the consul and brought up schematics on Sgt. James Barnes. She pointed out the 12 fractures. Steve studied intently.

"Didn't they heal over these two years?"

"No, no. All body functions are suspended. He'll come out just as he went in. We have methods to reinforce the fracture, and the bone around the fracture that will make the jaw virtually unbreakable. If you choose to take him – as is – and treat him in the states, their way, any further trauma to the jaw will result in shattering, 24 brakes – 48 brakes and so on." Doctor Xhosa noted Steve's surprise."Yes, our methods are that much more advanced."

"Well, in that case we'll stay and thank you, ma'am." Steve glanced around the room. "You're not by any chance using Vibranium as a reinforcement are you?"

Dr. Xhosa nodded affirmative, "Oh yes, King's pleasure."

"Wow, thank you again."

"I'll set up the specialist." Doctor Xhosa made arrangements on her computer.

With the fractured jaw x-rays still in Steve's mind he took another look at Bucky. The dim lights and soft hum of the machinery tranquilized Steve. He placed his hand on the glass. For a moment all his denial lifted and Steve saw clearly the reality of the life James Barnes.

The possibility entered Steve's mind, maybe Bucky wasn't ever going to be himself again. Buck looked completely destroyed – his body wrecked by decades of abuses - his mind a mass of confusion that may never be untangled. His spirit a tiny speck of an ember like the dim light on the machine that held him. And his soul? Steve questioned everything, and he mumbled out loud, "abandoned even by God are you?" The jaw was the last straw. Steve boiled over.

"What's going on? Are you okay?" Bruce touched Steve's arm.
"He's ruined, Bruce. How can anyone come back from this? He's damaged beyond repair."

"Don't despair. He has a strong will to live. Look at what he's been through already." Bruce pulled at Steve's shoulder. "Look at me. He's alive. If anyone can come back it's him. If anyone can bring him back. If anyone can repair him – it's the three of us."

With his hand on the glass and his eyes shut Steve made a vow, a vow to himself and to whom ever was listening – there will be no more abuse of his friend. If he was captured, arrested, incarcerated it would be over Steve's cold dead body. Tortured. Brainwashed. Experimented on. Fractured jaw. Blown off arm. Packed in ice. Whatever, anything ever again, it would be over Steve's cold dead body. Steve nodded his head. Yes, they will stay in Wakanda for the Vibranium jaw. Yes, he would feed that ember, that one speck of life left in his friend. He would fan that flame until it was a bloody blaze. Steve opened his eyes, and touch the warm light on the machine.

Steve looked out over the medical facility. His eye caught Dr. Xhosa as she worked at her computer. The good doctor Xhosa was a young, formidable, striking woman. Steve watched her as she approached the Cryo-genic apparatus and glanced at Bruce Banner for approval.

"Before I explain the details of the exit procedure. I would like to explain something to both of you. I do have to tell you that Sergeant Barnes has almost reached his lifetime limit of radiation exposure. Now, he can stay like he is indefinitely. The machine is heavily screened creating little exposure. The entrance and exit procedures are where exposure to radiation is received. If he is removed and has to go back in, that will put him over his limit and we won't take him back, in fact, no one on earth will take him. The risk would be too great. So, you have a big decision to make. Any questions?"

"Is this why he looks so shriveled? Radiation exposure?" Banner said.

"Yes, probably, but I'm not 100% sure at this time. No one has his numbers but that look is not permanent. I do admit he looks a bit freeze dried but once removed and hydrated he will puff right back up. His look will return to normal." Dr. Xhosa said with confidence.

"But we don't know how many times this has been done to him?" Steve asked.

"Oh, yes, I do, I have his numbers. And to get those numbers, he's had to be in and out approximately 50 times."

"Unbelievable," Steve replied.

"Discuss it between the two of you and let me know, no pressure." Dr. Xhosa return to her work.

Steve watched her as she walked away. She was kind and warm and easy to talk to. She was pretty, attractive. He found her very attractive. The more he looked at her the more attractive she became. Steve was having a hard time remembering the last time he felt like this, the last time he felt, period. He looked down at Bucky. 'What would you do?' Steve did not have to think long for an answer. Number one – Bucky would not be thinking a damned thing, or debating – he would be in action. Okay, low voice, soft eyes, confident body language but not too confident. Present your body to her like you are a candy bar and you know you are the best candy in the world. Next thing Steve knew he was at the doctor's console.

"Excuse me Dr. Xhosa. We are going to take some time to decide, at least overnight. We have some calls to make."

"Okay, fine."

"Could you meet me later tonight when you're done, for a drink or something to eat, to discuss
Dr. Xhosa picked up on the whole package being presented to her.

"Oh, I see." She took off her glasses and stood by the console. She softened. She glanced around on him. "Oh yes, I'd like that. Where are you staying?"

"The King gave us his suite here at the complex."

"Really? Well, there's a café right down the hall. 8 o'clock?"

"See you then." Steve slapped the side of Buck's tube as he passed, 'thanks buddy'. He was surprised again at his heightened emotions.

"How long do the effects, the therapeutic effects, last from that truth serum?"

Bruce Banner could only laugh. Steve and Bruce sat on a ledge by a breezeway by Bucky's cryotube overlooking the fog encrusted mountains and valleys of Wakanda.

"Well?" Bruce looked to Steve.

"My first thought is how sure is Tony that he can deprogram him? Bucky won't want out if he can't be debugged."

"Well, that's the problem. We don't know how he was programmed until we get him and test him. Tony has various probability scenarios and methods to do the job. But it is our least confident area."

"Did you talk about putting him back in if you couldn't break the program?"

"It was discussed."

"Let's call Tony."

Tony waxed confident that he could figure a way out of the program. He reminded Steve that they were under no time constraints. If it took a year, if it took five years, Tony was in for the duration. Tony reminded Steve that Barnes would be in a top secret facility controlled by three Avengers. His life would be immensely improved at Solaris over stasis. Tony also reminded Steve of his own words under truth serum 'under the most extreme conditions', Steve had said. Lastly, Tony asked Steve to give his best guess at what Barnes would say of the situation.

"I don't even have to think about that one. He would think his odds were great. He would trust your ability to get the job done."

"Then I suggest you do the same thing." Tony hung up.

Steve showed up at the café a little before eight. He ordered a coffee and a sandwich. He was hungry enough to eat twice. He watched Dr. Xhosa as she walked towards him. She had changed her clothing. She wore purple with gold trim. Her skin glowed against the silk dress. She was beautiful. How did he not notice? He watched her warm brown eyes and smiling face as she approached the table. He stood, bowed and pulled out her chair. She seemed regal.

"Dr. Xhosa."

"My first name is Xhosa. My last name is Ngokusetyenziswa. Hard for even Wakandans to
pronounce."

"It's common in America for female doctors to be called by their first names and male doctors are not."

"Yes, the patriarchy is alive and kicking here as well."

They ordered and Steve ate again. They talked and laughed and relaxed with each other. They discuss the business of the day, and yes, James Barnes would be removed from cryo-genic suspended animation, never to return.

He found she was a triathlete and had won a silver medal in the Olympics three years earlier for South Sudan, where her father is from. She was educated in Wakanda through a government program for gifted students. She was at the top of her field and traveled the world doing research on the long term effects of suspended animation on the human body. She was 34 years old, married but separated for one year. They had not divorced; he was a Royal. They sat for hours. Steve ate his way down the menu and back up again. His taste buds were enhanced. He explained his aberrant eating behavior by saying everything he ate was the best thing he had ever eaten. She gave him a tour of the facility and the adjacent grounds. They ended up at the door of the King's suite.

"Would you like to come in?"

"I'd love to see it, yes. But Dr. Banner is home? I don't want to disturb your friend."

"I'm sure he's around somewhere. There are many rooms. Let's see what he's doing."

Steve held the door for her. He touched her back – she touched his arm – they closed the door.

The next morning they woke Bucky. His first words were, 'how long?' He was not disturbed that the answer was two years. After all, it could have been 20, or 50, or 100 years. Steve asked him how he felt and Bucky said, 'got a parka?' No matter how wrecked Buck looked, after that lame joke, Steve knew things would be okay.

Buck slept 20 hours each of the first two days. Xhosa said that was normal. On the third day he was up and around a bit more. Xhosa asked him to join her research study. Buck consented and she tested him. Steve was happy to hear she would be coming to Solaris frequently. On the fourth day Bucky had his jaw fixed. He showed everyone his metal smile. His face was swollen and it hurt to talk so he slept that day away too.

Every night Xhosa stayed with Steve. This was something Steve never had in his life. He never had closeness like this day after day. He told himself his feelings were caused by the drug Tony gave him. He uncharacteristically let himself go with it.

Xhosa gave Bucky extensive instructions, and a yellow and white air filter to wear over his nose and mouth in the open atmosphere to keep out pollutants, and white goggles with orange lenses to wear in the direct sunlight. Direct sunlight would be murder on his eyes. He would simply not be able to see. The sun would be painful and blind him. He was to wear them outside for two weeks. Dressed in hospital white, goggles and air filter, he looked like an alien from another world. Dr. Xhosa was not worried about him following directions, she had seen Bucky retract and growl like an animal from painful situations. He also ate like his food was going to be taken away from him at any minute. She thought these regressed behaviors were left over from all his time in captivity. She shook her head, held her breath, and wished him the best of luck.

It was a sad departure. Steve and Xhosa held each other and kissed openly in front of Banner and
Barnes. Steve experienced physical pain when separating from her. The team boarded Tony's Learjet for the 20 hour flight back to Solaris.

The flight from Wakanda was long, seemed more like 40 hours. Bruce deplaned and made a straight path to Tony's office. Exhausted he flopped on the chair in front of Tony's desk and sighed. "Well, he's in the building."

Tony did not answer instead he closed his laptop and walked to the massive window by his desk. He placed his hands on the glass, fingers spread and he stared out over the ocean. Banner noted Tony's chest rise and fall dramatically. Tony's fingers slid from the glass with the squeak and balled into fists. He pushed off, lifting his shoulders and chest away from the window. He stared at his feet and hyperventilated.

"Tony? What's going on?" Bruce said.

Again, Tony did not answer. Bruce moved in for a closer look, he jerked away, shocked by what he saw.

"Good God man. Did you bring him here to kill him?"

Tony glanced at Bruce but did not answer.

"I will not be part of that – no – I won't be involved. I won't witness it." Bruce crossed the room opened the door of the office a crack and froze. His eyes headed down the hall where he yearned to run. He could not see. His eyes were unfocused – he shut them.

"I'll stop you Tony. I'll use everything in my power to stop you."

"Wait, damnit!" Tony demanded. "Can't you give me a minute. I didn't know what it would feel like to have him here."

Bruce did not move from his position at the door. He did not open his eyes, "what does it feel like?" Bruce waited a long time with his eyes shut for Tony's answer.

"It's like it just happened. It feels like the day they died."

Bruce shivered with a chill and pulled the door shut with a snap. He walked to the window and made Tony look at him.
"Do you believe? Do you believe in what you've planned to do here?"

"Whole heartedly," Tony answered but still no eye contact.

"Then I want you to listen to me. This man you brought here to help is not even a man. He's an animal. He's functioning on the level of an animal. This man is skeletal, he's ashen, he's malnourished, he's anemic," Bruce said slowly then sped up his cadence. "He's homeless. Penniless. Jobless. Hunted. He doesn't own a single piece of clothing, or even a comb, or a toothbrush."

"I don't want to feel sorry for him," Tony interrupted.

Bruce did not stop.

"He cannot speak. His jaw is wired shut. He has no arm."

"STOP," yelled Tony.
Bruce did not stop but yelled over Tony.

"This is reality – you only know some man you've thought about for two years – a fantasy. Come and see the reality. Come and see for yourself."

"I'm not gonna see him. I can see him on camera." Tony turned on his surveillance monitor. Tony took a double take.

"What the hell?"

Bruce rushed to look. They saw Steve in the anteroom waving his hands at the camera and Barnes pronated on a chair, unconscious. Tony and Bruce raced to the scene. When they arrived Steve held Bucky's head. He was arousing. He moaned through his clenched jaw.

"I think he fainted," Steve said.

"Oh . . . ah," Buck bared his metal encrusted teeth, choked and coughed, unable to clear his airway to breathe. His lips were blue. He bolted upright to move some air into his lungs.

"Let's get him to the lab. Put him on the scanner and find out what the hell is going on," ordered Dr. Bruce Banner.

Bruce shot a glance at Tony. Tony's face told him all he wanted to know. Tony got it, he understood, as he took in the full reality of his emaciated new 'project'.

Later that evening.

"Well, he's malnourished. He has an electrolyte imbalance and is dehydrated. Nothing more serious. Dehydration from the flight is probably the foremost reason he passed out. He stood a moment ago and almost blacked out again. The man is debilitated. It's going to take extraordinary effort to get him back to the human race. I don't know at this time why he has lost so much body mass. Dr. Xhosa is working on her end. Until then it's back to square one folks, actually, we're not even at square one – were in the negative. I have two IVs running, one with high nutrition and one with electrolytes. I'm giving him oxygen. He should perk up."

"What can we do?" Steve asked.

"Tony, can you make up a high protein vitamin rich liquid for him to drink. This nutrition problem is compounded by his jaw wired. A definite stroke of bad luck."

"There's good commercially available products weightlifters use. I don't know if there any good. They should be," said Steve.

"I'll look into it."

"And we're in some big trouble with this jaw. You saw how he choked. We're not going to be able to do anything we want to do with him until he gets that jaw unwired. He could've choked to death right in front of us, and there wasn't anything we could do about it." Bruce warned the crew.

"I agree," Tony stated.

"I have the special wire cutters for emergencies Dr. Xhosa gave me," Steve said.

"Little late – hand them over. I'll tape them to the bed. They must be with him at all times. Now let's everybody do their jobs. I have to rule out every known wasting syndrome."
Steve returned with the protein drink. He held the glass full of Tony's brown liquid concoction up to Buck.

"Here you go. Have a drink."

"What is it?"

"A protein drink. Have some."

"It looks funny." Buck mumbled through his clamped tight jaw.

"What difference does it make how it looks, it's highly nutritious. And, man oh man, you need some good nutrition. You look like a featherweight." He did, he looked like eyes on a stock.

Buck brought the glass to his mouth. "It smells bad."

"Well it's good for you. So what if it smells funny. Come on now drink it down."

"It's like sickening." Buck touched his nose and made a face.

Buck pushed the drink at Steve and Steve pushed the drink at Buck.

"Buck, you look like death." Steve got serious.

"That would be just punishment." Buck mumbled.

"What did you say?"

"Skip it."

"Alright then, hold your nose and drink."

"Later. Set it here. I'll drink it later."

"Good God, man. I've seen you eat ants out by the river. I'm not even going to bring up the stuff you ate in the army. Now, this is good for you. There's no doubt you need it. So drink it."

"I'm not hungry."

"You're what? You're not hungry? Am I hearing things? Can I believe my ears?" Cap struck the side of his head with his hand a few times. "Who do you think you're talking to? This is me, Steve Rogers. You're not hungry? That's impossible. I was at your house when you had strep throat and you ate like a horse. I remember when you had the mumps, you couldn't even swallow your own spit, and you ate like a horse. There's not been a moment in your life that you've not been hungry. I've seen you eat a full meal right after eating a full meal. I've seen you eat a dozen eggs in like seven minutes. So, don't tell me you're not hungry. If you're not hungry we need to call 911. We need to call an emergency specialist because there's something really wrong here. Now drink this."  

"I just need to sleep. I'll be better after I sleep." Buck's voice faded away.

Steve looked at the dark circles under Bucky's eyes and his disturbing gray skin color. He was fading away just like his voice. Frustrated, Steve carried Tony's masterpiece to Bruce.

"He won't drink this." Steve took a smelled and took a swallow. "Eeeuuu. That does taste bad, but that doesn't matter he's acting like an eight-year-old."
"It's common for someone in his physical shape, someone that has lost that much body fat to lose their appetite. But okay, okay, if he's regressed to an eight-year-old then will treat him like an eight-year-old. Order some organic oranges and make some fresh squeezed orange juice. Get some chocolate milk. Oh, and some strawberries, some organic whole milk, and bananas and some vanilla ice cream. We'll make smoothies."

Tony had a stock of organic oranges. Steve squeezed them by hand and took the juice in to Bucky. Buck took a sip and downed the juice.

"Bruce wants you to get up and walk around the room."

Buck got out of bed and fiddled with all his wires. He was a frightening sight, jaw wired shut, two IV tubes in the one arm he had, oxygen tube on his face, and he juggled them all with one arm. He stood by the bed.

"How do you feel?"

"Remember when Palsy Walsy had puppies and they tried to walk?" Bucky said with a smile, orange juice surging through his bloodstream.

"Yeah, I sure do," Steve laughed. "I never told you but that was the most traumatic part of my childhood – when we discovered Palsy Walsy wasn't a boy." When Steve's memories fought their way to the surface, when he thought of Bucky's dog, when the synapses fired, this was it, this was the elusive connection Steve sought – a living past. Steve felt big. He felt strong. He felt 12 foot tall. Even the modern world in all it's duplicity, in all it's endless shades of gray, in all it's cruel, rotting, ugliness would not be too much for him now.

The Winter Soldier Rehabilitation Program shut down temporarily over the next three weeks. Steve provided Bucky with inventive juices, soups, smoothies, and milkshakes. Bucky would not drink any black, brown or gray liquid at all. Steve tempted him with bright red, orange, yellow, pink and every shade of green liquid and soon Buck sucked down 5000 calories a day. Protein powder, raw eggs, ice cream, every vegetable known to man, everything went into his smoothies and soups. Barnes improved dramatically. By the time Dr. Xhosa came to remove the wire bands on his jaw the dark circles around his eyes were gone. Dr. Xhosa stayed three days with Steve and pronounced Bucky well enough to start Tony's rehabilitation program.

Bruce Banner introduced Bucky to his new arm.

"Tony was highly motivated to outdo your old arm," Bruce said.

"I can see that. Where is he?" Buck gawked with big eyes at his new arm, but he had not laid eyes on Tony since that first night.

"He'll be here for the installation. We estimate it will take between 14 and 20 hours."

"I'm out?"

"For most of it, yes. We need you awake for some. It's invasive. Especially removing the hardware. All this comes off," Bruce pointed to Bucky's stump.

Bruce continued the tour. "Well, it's waterproof, shockproof and fireproof. It has silent movement."

"Really? My Russian arm made all sorts of noises and always at the wrong time."
"It's made of titanium for lightness and Vibrainum for strength. It is virtually uncrushable."

"Vibrainum? Where'd you get the Vibrainum?"

"Steve's shield."

"What? Wow. You used the shield? You mean it's gone?" Bucky whispered, "Aha."

"It has some new features." Bruce noticed he had lost Bucky's attention so he paused.

"I . . . Oh . . . Why would he . . . What a shocker . . . If it's gone it's gone . . . Just go on, I guess."

"Sorry Barnes. That was Tony's decision. The arm has a taser feature. Not powerful enough to kill a human, maybe a small animal, but enough to produce a taser like effect. You could disrupt machinery for instance. It also has enough joules to defibrillate in CPR. It can definitely short out electrical equipment. It has a 5 foot force field you can activate for a few seconds about five times in a row before you're out of juice – handy little feature. This arm is stronger than the Russian arm by double. You could take off a car door with your Russian arm. With this arm you could flip a car."

"Why the big difference?"

"Where the appliance meets the bone. We are installing a metal that allows bone cells to grow into the metal on a cellular level. The Russians did not have that technology. It will take about six months to finish the process to be a true cybernetic arm. This arm is not coming off, Buck, ever, so the arm detaches below the shoulder, at the elbow, wrist, and some of the finger joints, for upgrades, replacement parts and other applications that you may only need to use one time." Banner took the arm apart as an illustration and put it back together.

"Damn."

"And now for the real dazzler. The arm has a hologram feature which I will activate now to impress the hell out of you." Banner smiled with pride. The metal arm became a human looking arm. Bucky laid his right arm next to the prosthesis – they looked identical.

"How is this even possible?" Buck looked at Banner with wide eyes.

"Well, it's a routine function of Tony suit to scan and identify any opponent, download the information and analyze the opponent for weaknesses. So we had precise information. You know, from Siberia? Also, this arm can read your human arm and will adjust the hologram's look as condition change. Say, weight gain or loss, sun tan or age related changes." Bruce beamed with pride.

"I . . . " Buck shook his head many times. A look of wonderment and overwhelming gratitude flowed across Buck's face.

"I'm going on. We assume you'll wear the arm with the human hologram feature on most of the time. The arm retains the metal feel – so if someone touches the arm the gig is up. You have to know that. When the human hologram is on, the arm is not full strength. The human hologram sucks power and takes all the strength from the arm. With the human hologram on the arm's strength is about equal to your human arm. When you need superstrength the human hologram will dissolve." Bruce turned off the hologram. "When you see this, a metal arm, you know you have full power. When the arm has the look of metal you have superstrength."

"What's the trigger?"
"Your endocrine system," Bruce paused to give Buck processing time.

"Including the pituitary?"

"Yes"

"How's that possible?"

"Third generation carbon nanotubules. About two weeks after installation you won't be able to tell the difference in reaction time from your left and right arm. You think, or more precisely you feel, and the arm responds. We use the fight or flight response for the trigger to deactivate the human hologram. If you feel threatened or anger or fear, your body chemistry will signal the human hologram to shut down instantly, without thinking about it, your arm will have super strength power."

"A higher brain control out of the limbic system would be nice."

"I agree, but we decided the time it would take a higher brain function to feel the threat, to admit there is a threat, to analyze the threat and to make a decision on a course of action, could be the seconds that could cost you. Using the endocrine system functions more like how the human body actually works. It knows first. Also, what you would like is theoretically possible only. Of course, there will be periodic upgrades. The arm is solar powered with back up 25 year lithium polymer battery the latest in battery storage for the size. Tony is working on an arc reactor for the arm but you know he has had problems with shielding."

"How much sun exposure for a full charge?"

"Around two hours of sunlight per 24 hour period, but that's only a prediction. We'll have to run tests with different atmospheric conditions to know exactly. You could always plug in."

Buck laughed, "I don't know what to say."

"Come on, we haven't had so much fun in years."

"When do we start?"

"As soon as you have had all your questions answered."

"You had me at waterproof."

"We have some testing to do today that will determine when you're physically ready. If the tests are good today we're a go for tomorrow."

"Wow."

"Just so you know, your old arm was bionic, yes, and very nice. But after your new arm is installed you will be, technically speaking cybernetic. A Cyborg. Bucky, you have to know the terminology. This is more advanced technology. The cybernetic arm is also artificial technology but it integrates with your body, it relies on some sort of feedback, in this case your artificial arm and your endocrine system."

"Sounds better than Frankenstein's monster which is what I felt like before."

"You think a Cyborg sounds better than a Frankenstein's monster?"

"Yeah . . . Well . . . It doesn't have monster in it."
Buck wandered to the display housing his arm and turned the hologram on and off, studying the arm's response. Bruce ordered up testing on his computer.

"I bet you saw the original Frankenstein movie in a real movie theater."

"More than once."

Steve entered the room all smiles. "Yeah. We were 14. It was at the Roxy."

"We were on a double date."

"Oh right," Steve said sarcastically to Bruce who continued to work while socializing. "A double date with this guy is, Buck two girls, Steve no girls."

"That girl was your date."

"She clearly wanted to be with you, pal."

"No," Bucky protested but gave up. "Steve, Steve you've got to see this." Bucky drug Steve to the metal arm and activated the hologram. He laid his organic arm next to the cybernetic arm and looked at Steve for his reaction. His large eyes bright as newly minted coins.

"Holy smokes," Steve exclaimed, "you can't tell 'em apart."

Banner glowed with pride. Steve drank in the expression on Bucky's face – he looked like he was 14 again. Steve appeared to float. That sense of belonging he had felt so briefly washed over him. He was buoyant. He was home.

Tony Stark watched from his screen laden control room. Everything had become elevated. Tony had a house full of friends, a job, and an important mission. His whole world, the whole world had just moved up about five notches on the happiness scale. There was nothing like it in the world, nothing like doing for another.

It took 27 hours to get that arm on James Barnes correctly. Two anesthesiologist, two surgical teams, a wide array of assorted specialist from many disciplines worked a day and then some. They had to bring Bucky up multiple times. No one can be under anesthesia that long without catastrophic side effects. He handled the surgery well. With his cybernetic arm in a sling for two weeks he had little to do, but play with Steve, go on the Internet, watch black-and-white movies, and eat.

Bucky did not complain of pain, instead he complained about the elaborate sling he had to wear at all times. The sling fastened with Velcro to his chest by a tight shrug that fit over his right arm, chest and his whole new cybernetic arm. The sling fixed his cybernetic hand, with fingers spread out, plastered across his chest. The whole thing could not be removed for two weeks. After the two weeks there was a less elaborate sling for six weeks and then just at night for three months. After that, Bucky could start physical rehabilitation.

Tony and Bruce had planned months of medical, physical and psychological testing for Buck to complete. No one had ever been through what he had and there was probably a Pulitzer in there somewhere for anyone who cared to document it all. Tony's reasoning for such extensive testing was simple, 'anything else broken? It's getting fixed.'

Buck's first test was a plain CAT scan. He was in a large room with what looked like an MRI machine that was also the CAT scan and PET scan. Tony and Bruce sat at the control board outside the room and watched as the test results came up on their screen.
"What the hell?" Banner yelled.

"What?" Tony said.

"What's this?" Banner tapped his pen on the screen at the area in question. The suspicious object looked like a nickel, a common coin, buried under the dermis layer of the skin on Bucky's right hip. They called him out.

"Does this look familiar?"

"Da . . . " Buck said with a puzzled look on his face.

"Da yes or da no?" Tony was condescending.

"Da . . . I don't know." Buck smiled. "See, look, there's nothing there." Barnes showed the crew his hip area in question. There was no scar, nothing could be felt on the area. He had no memory of an incident but his memory carried no weight with the scientists.

"My guess is . . . it's a tracer, he's being tracked," Tony exclaimed. "We need to get it out and destroy it. Quick."

With a local, a small incision and two stitches the foreign object was out. The three men hung over the desk and inspected the device.

"This makes sense," Buck said.

"Why?" Tony asked.

"I escaped many times and they always tracked me down."

"Get Steve down here."

The four men delved deeper into the object. Darkness fell over Bucky's face, his brow wrinkled, his eyes darkened and a shadow crept over his heart. This was all too good to be true. His attempt to make amends had put everyone's safety at Solaris in danger. He had exposed the whole compound. These thoughts showed on his face.

"Steady boy, no one thought any of this would be a cakewalk."

Tony scanned the object.

"Doesn't this look familiar?" Steve questioned Bucky. "Don't you know what this is?"

"Beats me."

"Well, we better figure it out damn quick. Looks like we woke it up, it's emitting a UHF radio pulse. It's probably a bio compatible microchip implant – a radio frequency identifier. Dammit all to hell," Tony railed.

"Any idea how long it's been there, by the tissue or scar?" Steve directed this question to Bruce.

"I'd say a very long time. Maybe the duration of his captivity but there is no scar or scar tissue around it which is very odd, in fact, I find no scars on Barnes anywhere. Odd for someone that was a POW for 70+ years."

"Oh, he has scars. Buck show the doctor your cleat scar."
"What?"

"You know the huge 20+ stitches scar from baseball?"

They all looked at Bucky's leg – no scar.

"It was there," Steve said.

"Are you sure this is him?" Tony sounded serious.

Barnes, not having a solid identity in place appeared to be on the verge of panic.

"Joke," Tony said slyly and continued. "This has to be beyond Nazi or even Russian technology." Tony considered this tech may be beyond even current technology but he was not ready to say.

The team tried to neutralize the transmitter with various waves, x-rays, radio waves, etc. They tried neutralizing it with BARF waves and it worked.

"It's dead, let's go ahead with the deep scan," Dr. Banner said.

"Yeah, I'm not up for any more surprises," Buck added.

"Let's do it," Tony voted.

With the deep scan, a band of what looked like a laser beam crossed the patient horizontally, then vertically taking about one hour's travel time each pass.

"Barnes," Bruce said. "You must lay perfectly still for two hours, therefore, you need sedation."

Bucky laid on the gurney and Bruce started an IV and drew up 5 cc's of Kentahadrenal, street name Tranquility, not an unpleasant sedation. Bruce moved on to calibrate the machine.

To Bucky's surprise Tony entered the room.

"You said you escaped a few times. Can you fill me in on the details."

"Escape? Yeah sure, if I had any thoughts they were how to get out. I did escape many times. I fought my way out, I snuck out, I killed, I lied, anything. When they had enough of my antics they'd put me on a machine, and I wouldn't think of anything for a long time. But each time I escaped, six times I have good recall of, the last being, now, as far as they're concerned my status is . . . escaped. But each time it took them longer to find me. Since they had the resources of the KGB, the Russian police and the Russian military, I assumed that I was just getting better. To me, at the time, this ruled out the possibility that I was tagged."

"Maybe they didn't know --" Tony was cut off by Banner who yelled from the other room:

"Can you give him 1 cc? I'm about ready."

Tony picked up the syringe with the 5 cc's of Tranquility and stepped over to the bedside.

"It's only a matter of time before they find me . . . " Buck laid comfortably stretched out on the gurney, his cybernetic arm strapped tight to his chest by the sling, and his human arm rested on top. Tony turned Buck's hand over exposing his IV port. Tony held his hand. He did not mean for his reaction to happen. He did not want to think about it at all, but there it was all rotten and exposed. This was the hand – not the idea of the hand, not a picture of the hand, not a movie image of the hand, but the real hand.
Buck followed the movement of Tony's hand across his chest. His gaze rested on the port in his arm and Tony's hand on the port. He scanned up Tony's arm to his face where he saw an explosion of emotion. But that was just confirmation. Buck felt it before he saw it. His heart sank through his chest, through the gurney, through Solaris. His heart sank like a nuclear meltdown, like the China syndrome, way down to the center of the earth, to the earth's molten core. All Tony's elaborate plans had been an intellectual exercise. Tony was not over anything. Tony had not risen above anything – how could he? Buck was not over it himself and never would be. At that moment Buck knew the impossibility of this wild endeavor. Buck was damned; he knew his dark destiny. All this was just delaying the inevitable.

"Oh No. Just cut it off, Tony. Just take off my other arm." Buck's liquid eyes implored Tony.

Tony's hands shook. His face flushed crimson red.

Bucky had no reserves – no bank to draw from. He had used everything. He had spent it all to get this far. He was empty. He had no way to cope with what was written all over Tony's face.

Buck saw the syringe in Tony's hand and he got an idea. The arm would not have been enough anyway.

"Give it all to me," he begged Tony, "you have every right. No one will blame you. Not even me. End it here. End it now. This is the right way. Go ahead, do it. Give me all the drug. I want you to kill me."

Buck watched as Tony push the plunger on the syringe. He watched the drug, as the lavender liquid sped through the tubing.

Tony's eyes glazed.

Buck held his breath. Then he panted. His eyes darted from Tony's hands to Tony's face back to Tony's hands again. His pupils dilated – he felt it. His cybernetic hand scrunched into a fist inside the tight sling. It was the fight or flight reaction. He fought to keep that arm in check. He fought to not grab Tony by the throat and squeeze the life out of him – to crush the bones in his neck. That was in his mind. He used all his will power to control. His whole body lean towards that one spot. The spot where the needle lay in the vein. This was the level where he functioned. This was the place he had spent most of his life: primal, basic, life or death, kill, or be killed. His body screamed to grab Tony's hand.

"Argghh," Buck growled.

Tony push the plunger on.

Buck felt a warmth in his chest that expanded and spread up both sides of his neck. His rapid respirations ceased. He breathed easy. His head fell back onto the gurney, his eyes closed and he wimpered, "Oh . . . " as the air left his lungs.

Tony's body shook, red rimmed his eyes and still he pushed the plunger forward.

Buck wanted it over but he was weakened by the drug to control the arm. His cyber arm broke free of the sling that held it and grabbed Tony's arm but it was too late. Buck looked out the glass at Steve who looked in.

"Steve?" Buck whispered so slight Steve would never hear it and he shut his eyes. His body relaxed into the blackness, into the sweet oblivion.
Steve's brow furrowed at the odd expression on Bucky's face. He headed in.

Tony's hands shook as he removed the syringe from the port. He yanked his arm out of the Cyborg's grip. Tony backed into the medical tray, staggered, shaken. The tray slid across the floor with a metal screech. Tony's gaze never left Bucky and what he had done. Blindly, he reached behind him and put the syringe on the tray.

Tony met Steve at the door.

"What's going on?" Steve asked.

"Not a thing," Tony said fully composed. He called out to Banner, "He's out," Tony walked on to Banner's side.

Steve touched Buck on his head and bent down to see his face. Bucky slept. He looked over his human arm, and the IV port. Odd, his cybernetic arm had escaped the sling, it's hand fisted. Steve return the arm to the sling, opened the fist to place the hand back into the sling, and found a button held in the hand. A button still attached to a piece of cloth. Steve pocketed the evidence. He checked out Buck's vital signs on the monitor: all in the green. Steve turned to walk out and saw the metal tray all haywire. He picked up the syringe and noted 4cc's of the purple liquid. He laid the syringe on top of the tray. He straighten the tray and left the room. Steve saw the rip in Tony's jacket where a button had been.

"Something going on I should know about?" Steve handed Tony the button.

"He got restless right before he went out." Tony handed Steve the goggles they all had to wear to watch the scan.

With a buzz, the beam started at the top of Bucky's head. It was not long before the team freaked out again. As they saw an object form on the screen deep in the brain of James Barnes. They watched on the monitor as the object took shape. It was located by the thalamus gland north of the sphenoid sinuses and looked identical to the tracker found under Buck's skin.

"How can we possibly get that out?" Tony said.

"How'd it get in there?" Steve asked.

"Maybe through the roof of the mouth," Banner suggested.

When the object was seen on the screen in its entirety an eardrum rumbling hum was heard followed by a static flash and the whole machine shut down with a long winded whine. Steve and Tony hurried to the bedside. Bruce checked the machine and called to them.

"I think it was an overload," he headed in to look Barnes over. "Well, he seems unaffected. We're shut down here. It'll take hours to run a diagnostic."

Suddenly, Buck opened his eyes wide. His back arched. His mouth opened and he levitated off the gurney as if being pulled by his chest by a giant unseen hand.

"Grab him!" Bruce yelled, "restrain him!" Banner threw himself over Barnes. All three men quickly placed heavy restraints on Barnes: wide bands across his chest, waist, and thighs. His eyes were open, but he could not see. His body pulled at the restraints. His back bowed.

"What's happening?" Steve's hand on Buck's chest held him down.
"What was that noise we heard right before the shutdown?" Tony questioned.

"I don't know, but here it is again."

They heard the hum, saw the flash of static, and a figure materialized in the corner of the room. A small human form pointed to Barnes and said, "This is my specimen I will take it."

"And who the hell are you?" Tony yelled.

"My name is Dandalo. I'm a surveyor. This is my specimen. I will take it."

Tony glanced at Steve and Bruce.

"This is my specimen, and he's not going anywhere," Tony out shouted his visitor.

"He's not a specimen," Steve snapped back. "Could you please relax your pull on him. Look!" Steve pointed at Bucky who fought the restraints with his back arched as if he was being electrocuted.

"Oh, I apologize," the creature touched a band on its wrist and Barnes relaxed into his drugged sleep.

Dandalo moved to Bucky's side, marking it's territory.

"It was you who disabled my tracking device by some unknown method," the creature added sarcasm to the tirade. "This alerted me that something was afoul with my specimen. When you scanned my control chip, I was forced to come here in an immediate, unconventional and rude manner to protect my property." Dandalo's eyes flashed big and the voice rose loud, and firm on the last three words, 'protect my property.' The creature placed it's hands on Buck's shoulder and wrist, and stared across the gurney at Tony, baring sharp little teeth.

Tony was livid. He placed his hand on Bucky's cybernetic shoulder by his neck and his other hand on Bucky's thigh and stared back at Dandalo.

"Control chip? Control Chip! Your control chip enabled evil doers on this planet to capture, torture, brainwash, and force this individual human (Tony emphasize the word individual human) to commit heinous acts of murder, essentially mass murder, assassinations, and mayhem. This person has been damaged. He may be damaged beyond repair. We are trying to repair, but . . . "

Dandalo's eyes grew sad and changed color from cool green to golds and pinks. The corners of it's mouth dropped as Tony spoke. It gasped. "Oh, this is extreme. It is against all rules, laws and morals of my people. It is against my personal ethics to do harm to others. Our whole society is based on the tenant, do no harm. I am in sorrow and I will never leave sorrow for the rest of my existence."

"Well, okay then," Tony mumbled. This was obviously a very emotional creature.

Dandalo swore with hands raised. "From this moment forth, my only function will be to use whatever is in my power to help restore the specimen to his original functioning."

"Including removal of the control chip?" Tony snapped back.

"I will remove the control chip . . . after I collect the survey data from the specimen."

"Survey data? Survey data!" Tony barked. He leaned in over Barnes and pushed the gurney toward Dandalo. Dandalo followed suit, leaned in and stopped the gurney's movement.

"My study is longitudinal." Dandalo pushed the gurney back at Tony.
"Is that supposed to mean something to me?" Tony stopped the gurney.

"The specimen is unique among all other specimens we have collected from this planet and maybe beyond. I need the survey data."

Tony glared at Dandalo.

Dandalo leaned in, their faces inches apart over Barnes. Dandalo whispered to Tony, "I am saying this specimen may be singular in the universe."

"All people here are genetically unique."

The heads of Steve and Bruce bounced back and forth like ping-pong ball as they followed the negotiation.

"The act of completing the survey will do no harm to the specimen."

"Now, that's an empty promise."

"You could personally supervise all the data collection."

"I really could care less."

Dandalo's large eyes scanned the room. "I will share with you all the data collected."

"Deal," Tony said without a second's hesitation, "how do we proceed?"

Dandalo raised it's graceful arms and waived it's hands over Barnes multiple times.

"It seems my specimen is unconscious and restrained." The aliens arms flew a few more times over Barnes.

"You can prepare the specimen for transport. We will all go to the ship."

Dandalo backed away from the gurney.

Tony did the same. He motioned Dandalo to the door and out of the room. He turned to Steve and Bruce, waved his hands frantically, imitating Dandalo and said, "well, prepare the specimen."

Tony and Dandalo strolled down the hall a few feet. Dandalo stopped with a jerk in front of the BARF machine.

"I am noticing this interesting machine I can not identify."

"Oh yeah, this is what neutralized your tracker."

"I am intrigued. We rarely make one to one contact outside of the specimens we collect, but when we do, we have been open to the possibility of the exchange of technology. We find this is a profitable enterprise for both parties, is culturally significant in advancing both parties, and reduces conflict."

An incredulous Tony, who dreamed of alien technology, readily, openly, explained the BARF machine to Dandalo.

As they talked, Tony got his first sustained look at his alien visitor. The creature stood under 5 feet tall, very much a humanoid with large eyes, emerald in color with flakes of chartreuse that moved
and sparked around the iris. The skin was caramél colored with a not unpleasant hint of lime. The hair
rich mahogany brown that curled around the head, forehead and down the neck and gave the
impression of vines. The fabric of the alien’s clothing was textured with patterns that looked similar
to tree bark or the veins of leaves. The whole package look edible, thought the carnivore, Tony Stark
– like something in an Asian salad. This individual conveyed the highest order of androgyny, almost
prepubescent, strong and graceful, supple and hard as nails. Male? Female? This was anyone’s guess.
Tony could not remember the last time he was so impressed. He made a snap decision.

"I would like to go to your ship with you, make a safety check, and then send for the others."

"A reasonable and acceptable request."

Before Tony could regret what he just said he was standing in front of a large bay window
overlooking the Earth 500 miles away. To say he was disoriented was an understatement. Dandalo
stood by his side, "Do you want more safety assessment, or can I bring the others up?"

"You can bring them up, thank you," Tony did not look up from the sight of the earth below him.

Things moved fast the next few hours. Tradition with Dandalo’s race was to think fast, talk fast and
act without hesitation. Barnes who had a good hour left of his knockout drops was surveyed. Tony
was in attendance. As Dandalo promised the procedure was moderately invasive, but acceptable.

Bucky went on to a surgery suite for the removal of the control chip. It had been, as conjectured,
placed in the brain through the roof of the mouth, and that is just how they removed the chip. The
surgical suite was literally out of this world. They used what they called a molecular separator to
remove the chip. Tony placed that on his wish list for future trades.

The last stop was what was called the recovery room. It looked more like a spa to Tony: pleasant
objects, relax lighting, warm colors, good air circulation. Tony was told recovery would take 45
minutes. Tony shook his head – recovery from brain surgery in 45 minutes? He was asked to join
Steve and Bruce in the lounge. Barnes would join them when released. Tony did not protest. He had
a lot he wanted to drink over.

Steve, Bruce and Tony sat in the bar/lounge of Dandalo’s ship. The bar was somewhat like any other
bar, dim lights, and music. The music of Earth. When the team commented on the music playing, the
bartender made the most astonishing statement. In all the ship’s travels, Earth was the only
civilization to create music. Tony went on and on about how every musician on earth needed an
immediate pay raise. They laughed, relaxed and drank an intoxicating beverage – already intoxicated
by the mind blowing last two hours. The mood was celebratory.

Two hours later, Bucky appeared in the doorway. He had not only been debugged but coffered and
manicured, clean-shaven, clear eyed and dressed in the white of the medical department. He took the
last seat at the table.

"How are you?" Bruce said.

"I must be dead, I feel so fantastic," Buck flexed his muscles like a shiver, and looked around
suspiciously, "am I not dead, Tony?"

They all laughed except Tony.

Bucky continued in all seriousness, "this could be heaven, but I know I'd never go there."
They all laughed louder.

"No, you're not dead, Buck." Steve pointed his index fingers to where Bucky could not see. Time slowed. In slow motion Bucky followed Steve's finger to the huge bay window. His mouth fell open and he glided to the window. He placed his human hand on the glass for balance and stared at Earth in the distance. He did not turn around but said:

"Will someone please tell me what the hell's going on?"

Major laughter erupted.

"Go get your buddy a drink," Tony said to Steve. He joined Bruce and Bucky at the window to explain the last few hours.

Steve stood with his back to the bar with his elbows on the bar, one foot on the footrest. He stared at his friends at the window with Earth back lighting them. Music of Earth filled the room. Tony related the whole unbelievable story to Bucky. Buck shook his head, stood on one foot then the other and ran his hand through his hair a few times. Tony convinced Bucky that he had been successfully, permanently, deprogrammed. Bucky smiled. There were handshakes, backslaps, congratulations, thanks, and hugs all around; immediately followed by merciless teasing. Banner joked that no one had seen Barnes smile in 75 years. Tony said he didn't even know Bucky had teeth and on, and on. Bucky felt the smile would never leave him. It was an elated moment. Steve watched his friends. There was a nobility to them at this moment that touched Steve deeply. There was a beauty in their attempts to move beyond their pain and suffering, to move beyond stoic acceptance. Steve swore he heard that choir singing again. The drinks arrived.

After some time, Dandalo and two medical staff came into the lounge.

"Greetings. As part of recovery, Sergeant Barnes will sleep now. The brain must sleep. I will give the rest a tour of my ship."

Buck wanted the tour and said to Dandalo, "the brain feels like it just woke up." He wanted to be with his friends. He wanted to learn the details of what happened this day. Tony injected him with the drug and the next thing he knew, he was standing in the doorway of a lounge on an alien spacecraft. He felt uneasy and unsure. He was not 100% sure, what he was experiencing was reality. He did not want to be alone.

"You will sleep." Commanded Dandalo.

The medical attendants took Buck to a sleep cubicle. The room was small but had good air circulation. The room was quiet, dark and cool. He laid in the dark and felt the cool air across his skin. His thoughts were of the words. To really be convinced he wanted the words to be spoken over him and see what happened. He could not rest with this issue open. He spoke out loud to himself in Russian:

"Longing," he tried to feel a reaction to the word.
"Rusted," he took a breath.
"Furnace," he listened to it hang in the air.
"Daybreak," he felt an increase in breathing.
"Seventeen," he began to feel nervous in his stomach.
"Benign," his voice cracked.
"Nine," his cybernetic fingers pressed the sling.
"Homecoming," he let it out.
"One," he said in a whisper. Nothing happened. He thought this was probably a worthless experiment. He nodded off for a second. The brain was half asleep. He needed the words to be read
over him, read to him.

He said out loud. "Computer?"

The ship's computer answered. 'Operational.'

"Translator."

'Yes'

"Translate the following into the earth language Russian."

"Longing, rusted, furnace . . ."

'Zhelaniye, rzhavyy, semnadtsat . . .'

Buck went out again and woke with a start. He told himself to relax, to get over this obsession with the words.

"Stop program," he said.

The computer said 'stop program' in Russian.

"No," said Barnes, "discontinue."

The computer said 'no' and 'discontinue' in Russian.

"Ah, to hell with it."

'To hell with it,' the computer said in Russian.

Barnes chuckled. He shut his eyes and felt the friendly air move across his skin, around his chest, his face, his neck, and his arms. He spread out on the bed. His lips trembled and he pressed them together. He felt an itchy heat around his eyes. He breathed in the cool air. The air touched him like a caress. This was the only love he was going to get. It was easy to imagine a soft hand brushing his hair, or stroking his brow. His hair blew like delicate feathers and tickled his lips and cheeks; tickled like the feathers of a sweet little bird that danced on his face. He heard words in the air, in the birds soft embrace, 'I'm here', 'you're not alone', 'I touch you', 'you feel good', 'you can do good', 'you are good', 'don't give up', 'I'm here with you', the air spoke to him.

"Please . . . " he prayed to the little bird. He fell asleep.

Dandalo started the tour with a review of it's most prized possession; all of the technology the ship had collected in their travels. Always a person of swift pragmatism, Dandalo guided Tony to possible items of interest that would be of equal trade for Tony's BARF machine – something Dandalo wanted badly. Tony's eyes lit up when Dandalo said the words Time Machine.

"Oh yes, the Time Machine. This is how we collect our specimens," Dandalo said. "Your friend is a perfect example. It was seen on our scanners that he was falling from a great height." Banner and Tony glanced at Steve. "Probability of death was 99.9%. Before impact we picked him up. We did the survey, tagged him, and used the time portal to put him safely on the ground where, and when he would have fallen. Our scanner showed other humans in the vicinity, so we left him. Many of your stories of miraculous survival are due to our interference, no doubt."

"No doubt." Tony's mind reeled.
"And his arm was damaged . . . How?" Steve asked.

"Not by us. Of course, I was not there personally but he was 100% intact. We have detailed records. Added the two chips. Nothing beyond cell samples was subtracted."

"Wow."

The conversation ran on to the details of the time portal. Yes, it was for trade.

"Be alerted," Dandalo said. "Time travel is tricky business. The 44 Rules of Time Travel must be adhered to in every detail, precisely, or unimaginable negative consequences can and have happened. But, if this is your choice and you sign the intergalactic contract to follow the 44 Rules of Time Travel, the deal is done."

"This is my choice. I would like to see the 44 rules, the specs, and the contract. What would be the point of having the machine if I couldn't use it." Tony flipped his hand.

As Tony stared into the fascinating orbs Dandalo used for eyes he realized his feelings for Dandalo were complex. Since first contact, over the battleground of Buck's body, Tony had wanted to win, to dominate, to ravage Dandalo in some way. Even Dandalo's smell intoxicated him. He wanted to get closer to Dandalo, to touch, to taste, to squeeze, or something. The pull was strong. Tony would find away. The very next work cycle Dandalo sent for Tony.

"Greetings."

Tony nodded politely.

"In keeping with my commitment to restore your friend Barnes, I would like you to see this," Dandalo started the monitor footage of Buck asleep.

"We, of course, monitor for complications after surgery like he had. He saw none. But we saw this," Dandalo reset to show what looked like Bucky having some kind of sleep disturbance. Tony watched in horror.

"Is this a sign of the damage you were talking about?"

"Yes it is."

"Very distressing. Can you fix? We cannot. We do not have this."

"It's a human condition I think I can eliminate. Thank you. When will Barnes be released by your medical staff?"

"He is released."

"I want to send him back now to start treatment right away. There's no reason he should have to go through another night like that."

"Well done, sir. Will you send the good doctor too?"

"All three will go," Tony continued. "When we first talked, you mentioned, Barnes being unique in someway. What did you mean?"

Dandalo fooled with the computer a second and an image formed.

"Can you identify?"
As the image was being built by the computer, Tony thought, snowflake, crystal, magnesium and then he said, "Lithium . . . but?"

"Yes, lithium, but not exactly lithium. This element is in your friends blood," Dandalo said.

"You discovered this on initial contact?"

"Yes we did. The element is in an inert state. We have isolated the element. Many worlds have tried to activate it in all ways known to us. It's function and purpose remain a mystery. There are many theories. Dominant theory is the element is some kind of power source. How the element could be used is highly debated, but consensus of opinion states it's something complex, like teleportation or regeneration, a weapon, a catalyst or initiator in a larger structure. If ever activated, we will crack it in a moment."

"Have you named this element?"

"ILLUMINE."

Bucky Barnes had been at Solaris under two months and already he was armed and deprogrammed, way ahead of schedule. Tony had nothing to complain about and nothing to worry about, he thought. Tony wished Dandalo had not used the word weapon, for it planted a seed in his mind. Did Tony really have full awareness of what he was getting into with his Winter Soldier project? Who really knew the extent of what Hydra was into, or what the Russians were into when they had Barnes. Who really knew who else he was passed to, or if the rumor was true that the Winter Soldier was sold to the highest bidder, multiple times, to do whatever the payer wanted done. To hell with it, Tony thought. He was in and he was staying in. No primordial element was going to get him to balk.

"ILLUMINE, nice name, but creating a new element seems way beyond the capability of a 1940s earth super soldier program." Tony stared at the new element floating in 3D on the monitor.

"Unless stumble upon, or created by accident. I will send all the data when we find an interface with your computer system," Dandalo said.

Tony stood as close to Dandalo as he had ever stood. As he thought of the word interface a small smile moved over his face.

"You know a lot about humans form Earth. Don't you?"

"Yes, we have surveyed your world 100+ years."

"Yet, I know very little about you. I don't even know the name of your planet."

"Torn, we are Torns from the planet Torn."

"Thank you. What is your main food source?"

Dandalo stared at Tony. "I'm sure you know the answer to that by my jaw and tooth structure. Now, what do you really want to know?" Dandalo beamed those search light eyes on to Tony. The creature continued to blow Tony's his mind. He was thrilled. Thrilled beyond words.

"Are you male or female?"

Dandalo gave a jerk to it's head and a half smile – a smile that shows the tip of the sharp teeth.

"Ah ha, if you are asking do I have an appendage that can impregnate? Yes, we all have that. And
can I be impregnated? Yes, we all can. We are Androgyns."

Not breaking eye contact from Dandalo's powerful gaze, Tony said, "How do you choose?"

"We look in the eyes for a time."

"Like we are doing now?"

"Not exactly. We look in the eyes for a period of time and whatever happens or doesn't happen is considered right."

"No judgment?"

"On this subject there is none."

"Can you show me?" Tony sounded braver then he really was.

"Ah ha," Dandalo said, again with the head tilt, small smile with teeth, "I have to say, when I first saw you. I could imagine you roasting on one of our barbecues. You looked delicious to me. Now, I see you are too good to roast." Dandalo thought for a split second. "Yes, I will show you. When the work cycle is done, come to my cubit."

Dandalo invaded Tony's personal space, looked directly into Tony's eyes and took a deep inhaled smell of him, around his chest and shoulders. A flash of yellow raced across Dandalo's irises as pheromones surged it's alien brain.

"Good day." Dandalo went out the door.

Tony felt his heart race. He sat to regain his composure. A few deep breaths later he called in Rogers, Banner and Barnes. He showed them the film.

Tony started the playback with Buck sound asleep. He stretched the neck of his shirt to pull it away from his windpipe. He yelled out. His heels slid up and down in the bed like he was running somewhere. He struggled for breath. He kicked at the bed and pulled at his neck with one hand like someone was strangling him. He yelled 'stop' in Russian. He gulped for air. He put his chin down on his chest and hissed air in and out rapidly. He hit at something above him that no one could see. He pushed himself into the corner of the bed. He kicked and pushed whatever it was away from him. His heart beat so fast it seemed his whole body was pulsating. He gasped for air. He batted something away from his face. His eyes were huge and black with pupil dilation. His legs jerked towards the foot of the bed and his hand flew in front of his chest. He kicked and pushed so violently he fell off the bed onto the floor.

He quickly backed himself up against the wall. He winced and put his hand over his ear, yelled out, and shook all over his body. He laid flat on the floor and shook so violently it was as if a seizure overtook him. He hit the wall multiple times with his cybernetic elbow, causing extensive damage to the wall, even-though, the arm remained stuck in the sling. Who knows what damage could have been done if the cybernetic arm had escaped the sling.

He rolled onto his hand and knees, on all fours like a dog. He gasped for air. He coughed violently many times over and over. His body made rhythmic regurgitation movements. He gagged and spit and threw up on the floor trying to clear his airway. He laid with his face on the floor and sucked at the liquid that was there.

Moans and groans were heard from the watchers. "Oh my God." Banner said.
But it was not over, Buck shook his head like a dog and yelled 'stop', he yelled 'no'. He threw himself against the wall and kicked himself down the wall to the corner of the room. There he sat with his arm around his knees, his head on his arm and he wept. He wept like a child. Occasionally, he brushed something out of his hair or kicked at something that was not there. The whole episode lasted around five minutes.

By the end of the film it was hard to tell what viewer was most upset, Steve, Bucky or Dr. Banner.

"I'm sorry," Buck whispered.

"Don't," Steve whispered back.

"Does any of this look familiar?" Tony questioned.

"I woke up in a corner like that many times. I never knew why – till now."

"Dr. Banner?"

"Looks like PTSD sleep terror to me . . . my first impression."

"You want to see it again?" Tony chided.

"NO!" Yelled Steve, Buck and Banner simultaneously.

Tony was angry. This was a common diagnosis with combatants. If we have our soldiers crippled in this way and we can not fix them, we need to rethink armed conflict.

Tony made eye contact with Bucky. Buck bristled. Tony entered Bucky's personal space. Buck jerked back.

"What da ya think I'm gonna hit ya? Relax." Tony placed both hands on Bucky's metal arm. "Relax!" He removed the arm from the sling. He moved the joints gently, and examined every inch of the arm, shoulder, wrist, Bucky's chest and fingers for damage. He took his time.

Buck forced himself to relax but the emotion over this act played out on his face as he witnessed Tony's caretaking behavior. Buck was cognizant that Tony was just looking after his property but that's not how it felt. His eyelids fluttered and he looked away. Tony jerked his human arm and Bucky looked at him again.

"There's not going to be a repeat performance of any of this, tonight, or any other night. Are you reading me? It's over. I can eradicate that shit from your mind and I will do so, starting now. Are we communicating?"

Bucky could not answer but shook his head.

"You know I can do what I say."

"I'm betting my life on it."

"Okay then, you guys are going back . . . now." Tony's statement was followed by a shocked hesitation.

Buck regrouped instantly. He focused his steel blue gaze on Tony and spoke authoritatively.

"And leave you without security or communication on an alien space craft?"
"Protest noted."

"You might as well save your breath, Buck, his mind is made up," Steve said.

"Allow me to explain. Dandalo and I are having trouble finding an interface." The crew understood Tony's interest in Dandalo and they razzed him with their body language.

"Computer interface. This is first contact, people. First contact has to be done with care. I would like to not have the exorcist here on my mind, or any of you, really. Look, I have to wrap things up with the tech trade. I have a ton of specs, contracts, and rules to read. I repeat. We do not have a computer interface with this technology. This is history being written. Dandaló is going to do a huge data dump to me." Again, snickers from the crew. "The best thing you all can do is to go back and assure me there will be no repeat of what we just witnessed on the screen. Captain America take charge. Banner, everything is on the computer."

"Yes. I know. I put it there." Bruce quipped.

"Sorry Bruce. And you," Tony said to Bucky, "relax, here," and Tony slapped down one of Dandalo's communicators into Bucky's hand. "Now goodbye – two days – three at the most. Get lost."

Alone on an alien spacecraft. Barnes was right – this enterprise was foolhardy. The whole episode reminded Tony of his one experience mountain climbing. Not far from the summit, Tony saw what he thought was a better way to the top than the guide's choice, so he took it. It was crazy to do, but he will never forget the feeling he had when the guide, and the group disappeared from view. It was irresponsible, but he stood alone on the mountaintop. It was a moment he will never forget. A moment like . . . now.

Later that evening a bespectacled Tony sat in front of a computer rolling off complex technical data when his ship communicator signaled and he heard the distinctive lilt in the voice of James Barnes.

"Hey, testing 1 2 3 4."

"Barnes, you still have that communicator?"

"I won't give it to 'em."

"Oh, I see."

"Are you okay?" Buck said.

"Yes, but you sound funny."

"Banner DRUGGED me."

"That's nice."

"They want me to go to sleep."

"That's a good idea. Go ahead."

"Okay. Good night, Tony."

"Good night, Bucky."

Tony glanced at the communicator in his hand. It was a strange, and complex life. Tony wanted to
restore Barnes. He was 100% invested. He could now tolerate looking at him in person. He could even touch him if necessary. But he was not ready to like the guy, even though Barnes had charisma and was immensely likable. Tony was not ready to go there. Good night Bucky, indeed. Tony vowed to never be that familiar again, never again to call him by his name. He had to watch it. Tony turned to Dandalo.

Captain America was one happy son of a bitch to be back on planet earth. He found the whole outer space experience, as short as it was, totally disorienting. There are no days. There is no time really. There is no gravity. There is no running water, no north or south. There is oxygen but there is no air or breeze. He found it damned unpleasant.

Steve was eager to get back to his original assignment from Tony, what amounted to being the personal trainer for the cybernetic arm, and of course, the Cyborg attached to it. The arm must adhere to a strict training schedule of increased intensity over the next three months. Too light of training, and the nanotechnology string would stop; too heavy, the strings would get over excited and migrate where they were not wanted. Progress could be tracked by periodic PET scan. The prospect of getting to do something tangible for his friend, and spend the lion's share of the day in what looked like play, sounded like heaven on earth.

People always say they are so happy to be on the ground they could throw themselves down and kiss the earth beneath their feet. How many people actually do it? Steve thought. Steve was on his way down the five stories underground to the beach level of Solaris and out the back door. He planned to throw himself on the sand and kiss it. He wanted to take Buck and Bruce with him as witnesses.

Banner was not at the monitor panel. Steve checked out the huge monitor that flashed some 20 lines of data on each of five or six panels. All lines clicked and beeped and churned on their way. Yellow desk chairs dotted the field. Steve's gaze wandered into the exam room. All rooms were decked out with Tony's new glass from ceiling to the half wall. Beneath the class, within the half walls, held all the complex electronic circuitry. The windows could blacken, but they were not at this time. Steve glanced into the BARF room. The BARF machine loomed across the whole south wall as mysterious as the monolith from 2001 A Space Odyssey.

Even in the dim light Steve saw clearly – Buck laid on the gurney, and Bruce sat beside him on a stool. Steve headed in, but stopped when he saw something intimate going on between them.

Banner held Buck's human arm with the underside exposed. Both Bruce and Barnes focused on a spot on Bucky's arm and Bruce injected something directly into Buck's vein. Both men concentrated on the needle and watched as the lavender tinged liquid slowly disappeared into Buck's body. Banner held Bucky's arm and they watched each other's eyes as the drug over took the patient. Buck's mouth slacked opened, his back arched in a strange way and he breathed in short choppy breaths. His gaze fixed on Bruce. His eyelids fluttered. His eyes rolled back in his head. His muscles relaxed. "Ah . . . ah," Barnes said. His eyes closed. All the air escaped from his lungs in a big whoosh. His head wobbled before relaxing on his shoulder. Banner slowly removed the needle and put a pad over the hole. He leaned over Buck. He touched his face and forehead. He opened Buck's eyes and shined his pen light in with a flicking motion. Banner checked the room monitor. He put a circle Band-Aid over the hole he made in Buck's arm.

Steve made his presence known.

"Hey," Bruce said without movement. "Sorry, Steve. I know no one wants Barnes drugged, but I'm not going to be powered up here for at least 12 hours. When I got him on the monitor I could see the extent of cerebral edema and irritability. Given what happened last night I really had no choice but to
put him out of his misery. I hope you don't mind. He needed Tranquility and I gave him Tranquility."

"You don't have to justify yourself to me. I can see the shape he's in and I don't need an EEG machine." Steve thought for a moment, "Oh, Tranquility? You mean the drug Tranquility?"

"Yes, the drug."

"I thought that was addictive."

"Yes, it's a very addictive. This is the second time he's had it and he DID NOT protest."

"Geez, then don't give it to him again."

"I don't foresee a need – after I start the BARF treatment."

"I wouldn't question your methods . . . but it did look odd the way you looked at him."

"By his reactions I can tell how much drug to give. What's the point in using something like Tranquility if he doesn't get 8 to 10 good hours of sleep out of it. I think we're right on the money." Bruce turned his attention to the monitor. "And look at the brain now, look at those beautiful theta waves. There will be no horse play tonight."

"Good. Then can you come out to the beach with me?" Steve gave Bruce a broad smile.

"I will be ready in two minutes." Bruce took out his iPad, "Oh, look the tide is out, clear sky, 61° and a full moon." Banner talked as he worked. "I'll put him on remote – we'll take him with us. I have to watch for delta waves. If he stays in non-REM sleep too long I'll have to run back and wake him. That's always when that nonsense of last night occurs." Bruce pecked around on his iPad. "Just let me split the screen, monitor room, vitals board, done, let's go."

They went down the elevator the five stories and out the back door. The night was magical: gentle breeze, calm sea, starry night. A bright moon glow shimmered on the water. The sand felt warm from the heat of the day. The mighty Pacific ocean was at rest that night with a gentle soothing beat of the waves. The calls of the night birds going about their business, called out, 'I'm home, I'm home,' to the humans from earth. Steve laid himself out and kissed the sand. Uncharacteristically, he rolled over on the sand, interlaced his fingers behind his head, crossed his legs at the ankles and gazed at the stars.

"God, I love this place."

Bruce sat beside him in lotus and propped up his iPad on a little sandbar.

Steve waxed on. "How did you feel up there?" Steve waited a second for an answer but continued without one. "I've never seen dark like that Bruce . . . the blackness. How much of it is there? I mean, it's most of the universe, isn't it?"

"Most of the universe is empty . . . so they say."

"It freaked me out." Steve shuttered over his whole body.

"It's hard to grasp even for scientists."

"And looking down on the earth . . . like the shine of the earth with that thin layer of atmosphere . . . "

"That struck me too. All life depending on that few miles of something so fragile, something almost
incredible, you can't even see it."

"You look into the darkness and back at the earth. The earth looked like heaven to me. I think it is heaven. I think we're living in heaven right now and we don't know it." Steve glanced at Bruce.

Banner switched from lotus to cobra and faced the iPad with the ocean in the background. He cupped his face in his hands. "If people believed that . . . it would change everything."

The next day they did not recall how long they laid on the beach. Steve did not get much sleep. He spent much of the night with Bruce watching Bucky – ready to wake him at any sign of craziness. The night passed without incident.

When he woke, Barnes said the same thing he said the last time he took Tranquility. "I feel fantastic."

"That's good. Enjoy it. You won't feel fantastic when I tell you what you have to do today," Bruce said.

"Shoot."

"Good news first, as you slept I finish the scan that Dandalo interrupted. No surprising results you'll be glad to know."

"Great idea, thank you."

"The second good news is I only need you for two hours today,"

"Are you building up to something here?" Bucky said.

"Last night you were monitored by the external electrodes. Today we place the internal electrodes. These 1 mm silicone-based electrodes are injected in a liquid medium into the dermis layer of the skin." Bruce held up one with a tweezer.

"No problem." Bucky expanded his chest to its limit.

"The electrodes are injected over 50 places under your scalp."

"50?"

"It's not a comfortable procedure but once in, they never have to be removed, and will give an unprecedented coverage of brainwave activity plus it's a two way street; BARF waves in, brain waves out. If that doesn't convince you, 100% of the time the external electrodes interfere with R.E.M. sleep."

"I'm not going to refuse anything you want done. Let's get it over with."

"Do you want sedation?"

"I quit feeling pain around 1973. Guess I reached my life time limit by then." Bucky said in all seriousness, then he laughed.

"You know that isn't funny." Steve said.

"Try one. I may not feel a thing."

Banner injected the electrode. Buck yelled loud, but did not move his head. "That hurt like hell . . .
it's still stinging. Damn! Oh . . . Oh, just go ahead."

Steve used distraction techniques by showing Bucky his spreadsheet for the cybernetic arms rehabilitation program. Steve loved that stuff; like Steve's attention to Bucky's liquid diet when his jaw was wired shut.

"This schedule is impressive. Beach everyday. Yeah." said Bucky.

"Beach? No beach." Said the doctor. "No sun today."


"No saline on the head today."

"Boxing, wrestling, great."

"Hell no, not today."

"Weight room?"

"Tomorrow."

"Games?"

"Yes, do that." Banner gave that much.

Bucky read the full schedule.

"Look at that, three meals a day. Can you imagine, three meals a day." Buck rubbed his hand across his forehead.

Steve and Bruce glanced at each other. These occasional glimpses into Bucky's former life in captivity tugged at the heartstring of the most macho of men.

After 20 injections, many of which bled, Buck was irritable. Bruce decided to give him some nitrous oxide for the remaining injections. Steve chose to wait outside so Bucky could concentrate on the next needle going into his scalp. When it was over, Buck looked roughed up a bit. Banner relented and said they could go outside if Barnes wore a hoodie.

"Do what's essential for the arm but take the day off guys. Goof around. Lay around. Eat. Watch movies. You know, Barnes, movies would be the best document for you to get a real feel for the seven decades that you've missed."

Barnes and Rogers brightened at the thought of movies. Movies were a way of life for kids in the 1930s and 1940s. Kids played until exhausted then went to the movies. Everyone went two or three times a week. Theaters were always full.

"Great idea, Bruce. We can start where we left off in 1942. Anything you want to see before I get that project together? You know Tony is a classic Hollywood addict. He has hardcopies of practically everything four stars and over."

"Yeah, I want to see the Manchurian Candidate and the Exorcist." Both movies the benefactor of it all, Tony Stark, had referenced in Bucky's presence. Steve was not surprised Barnes remembered and would want to know what the hell Tony was talking about.

Tony's love for classic Hollywood was well documented. Artifacts of his addiction could be found
sprinkled here and there around Solaris. He even went as far as installing yellow brick laminate in all work area hallways. He put a lot of time, money and effort into his prize area, what he called his screening room. His Cinema room was as beautiful as the old movie palaces it emulated – all Art Deco. The movie screen was made of glass; Tony's newly developed glass, same as the windows. Tony found his glass gave an unparalleled movie viewing experience. Sofas and chairs were set up along the sides of the room with a square coffee table in the middle of the room, metal with ornate art deco legs. The table looked original. The sofas and chairs were modern reproductions of Art Deco designs. In the back of the room sat tables and chairs and a full service bar.

Buck took a sofa and laid himself out and stuck his bare feet over the back. Steve sat in the chair by the sofa and picked up a control tablet. Bruce, the eternal hippy sat on the floor. Bucky drug the hoodie over his head and snuggled in, waiting and hoping, to be carried away to some far off land that had nothing to do with reality: Tarzan, Pirates, Flash Gordon, Cowboys and Indians.

Steve hesitated to set his drink on the table. "This table must be worth a fortune."

"You have good taste. I think it did cost a cool million."

"Bruce, do you know anything about these two movies?" Steve said.

"Yeah, I think the Exorcist is about a demonic possession and the Manchurian Candidate . . . must be about karate or kung fu."

"A whole movie about Karate? Wow!" Steve fiddled with the tablet. "What's first?"

"Demonic possession? Not tonight." said Bucky.

"Okay, The Manchurian Candidate, 1950 Black-and-white. Five stars, almost 5 stars. The point on one stars missing. Even after all these years - 98 and 90 and Rotten Tomatoes. That's impressive."

There were many tense, uncomfortable and shocking scenes in the movie. There was a karate fight scene but other than that, no one in the room had any idea what the movie was about. If they had, they would have made another choice. After they read the end credit, Buck sat on the end of the sofa faced Steve, "I would never have bet two cents on Sinatra ever being that good of an actor."

"Oh, me either." Steve said.

"Who was the director?"

"Are you guys going to ignore the themes of this movie?" Bruce said.

Steve and Buck said in unison, "Yes."

"You're not going to talk about the brainwashed assassin?"

Bucky and Steve, "NO."

"You guys are so 1940s. We talk about things like suicide and incest out in the open now. We brought these dark things to light. See how it's done. Bucky, what do you think of his solution?"

Buck froze, his face became a mask. Steve sat on the edge of his chair and looked at Bucky like he was going to pop open like a seed pod from Invasion of the Body Snatchers.

"Bucky?"
"Bruce. Not now." Steve said.

"I want to answer you but that's a dark subject. I try not to dwell on the dark subjects. What happened to me I thought was beyond anyone's imagination. Now, here it was in a movie. But it wasn't like you get brainwashed and you have a nice clean brain. They don't just erase your memory they take everything, they empty your mind. I couldn't imagine what that would be like. I can't describe it to you. It's like you exist but you don't exist. I couldn't judge the passing of time. To this day I still can't. Seems like three or four years since I was first captured . . . and sometimes it seems like 1000 years. I forgot myself."

"Buck, please, you don't have to . . ."

"No, Steve I wanna answer. The machine empties your mind, anything, anything they put back in was like the rising sun. I should've thought of it. If I ever realized what they were using me for, a real man would've done it just to stop 'em. I guess you have to be human to think of suicide. I didn't know much. But one thing I did know, I was no longer human. Whatever it means to be human, they took that from me."

"Bucky, please stop, please no more, no more tonight," Steve moved to the sofa and sat beside Buck. He placed his hand on the back of the sofa. Buck looked at Steve's face and nodded to him.

"Okay, so, no I didn't think of it. When I saw this twerp," Bucky pointed to Steve with his thumb like he was hitchhiking. "And I knew him. I knew a human. A big bright spot appeared in my mind and everything changed. So, I just keep looking at that ridiculous face. Go into the dark on purpose? I don't do that."

"You mean there is darkness now in your mind?"

"Yeah, like all of it. I feel like I'm attached to reality by the most fragile transparent thread."

Steve rubbed his forehead and imagined the emptiness he had seen in space and the bright circle of light that was the Earth. Steve paced around the room in anticipation of what more gut wrenching details Bucky was about to reveal.

"If my mind wanders into the dark areas, which it frequently does, I just look at Steve. If he's not around, I pictured him in my mind and I feel better. He's a pretty bright character. Don't you think?"

"So you've found that shining a light on the darkness dissolves it somewhat?"

"I wouldn't take it that far-- it could, I guess, but what are you getting at?"

Steve relaxed and glanced at Bruce.

Bruce continued, "There is another way, so they say, that may be worth a try. You could let the dark out of your mouth via words. Once out in the light it may dissolve or decrease."

"Really? I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy."

"He has big shoulders and I can take it." Bruce said.

"Are you leading me into a trap?"

"If you feel trapped, there he is, look at him."

"I'm cornered." Bucky put his fist over his mouth like he was about to suck something out of his
Bruce registered the meaning of Bucky's body language. Nothing more would be coming out of his mouth tonight. He had shut down. Bruce felt this was an opportunity he did not want to miss so he tried a more indirect approach.

"What was the worst part of the movie for you?"
Bucky animated instantly.

"Oh, Sinatra was almost his friend. He could have so easily been his friend. He could have stood up for the poor slob but he chose to use him for his own purposes like everyone else. If that poor sod had thought he had one friend he wouldn't have taken that way out."

"Do you think that could happen here? You could be used?"

"That is my dominant thought, being recaptured. It's constantly in my mind. I am on guard every moment."

"No, used by us?"

"Used by you? Well, I can't say that hasn't entered my mind. The temptation would be great. Wouldn't it? I'm alerted to that, but I'm not so user-friendly anymore because I have a friend. Maybe a few friends. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes it does. Thank you. It sure does."

"And Doc? What you suggested, you know, talking. I'll think about it. Steve, you need to add music to the schedule. We could use some music in here."

Steve, anxious to do anything physical, anything to get off the emotional roller coaster, entered music into his tablet.

"Done, first thing you have to hear is the Beatles . . . Let's go out for some fresh air before we call it a day."

Bucky jumped to the door.

"Great."
Bruce said. "Clear night, 56° full moon."

So ended the first 24 hours at Solaris without Tony Stark.

By the third day they had settled into a routine. Morning arrived when Barnes woke naturally. They ate when Bucky was hungry. They talked when Barnes started a conversation and were silent when he was contemplative. They rested when he was tired and they called it a day when he fell asleep at night.

Banner conducted Bucky's tests first thing each morning, leaving Steve free for the four or five hours he needed to do a thorough work out. When Bruce went to bed, usually around noon, Steve picked up Buck, and drove him through his paces for another four or five hours. When both men were exhausted they joined Bruce, who was just waking up around 9 PM for a movie, food and drinks. After, Bruce watch Bucky sleep all night on the Polysomnograph Sleep Lab monitor. And what a horror show it was.

Barnes did not joke, or exaggerate when he said his victims visited him each night. Bruce declared Barnes a seven on the Richter scale of disturbed sleep with at least one, wake up in a cold sweat, screaming nightmare per night. He experienced intermittent sleep terrors, not for the for five minutes like on Dandalo's ship, but for two, or three minutes of bizarre physical behavior he did not remember the next day. He stayed in REM sleep only a few seconds before some disturbance.
He frequently went into REM sleep during the day. He nodded off between lifts in the weight room, and blanked out, stared off into space, and experienced visual hallucinations, essentially dreaming while awake. Dr. Banner's assessment; Bucky Barnes was sleep deprived. Bruce did not know how he function as well as he did. Dr. Bruce Banner's first order of business was to correct this. Sleep is the foundation of all functional human behavior and nothing was going to improve for Barnes until he could sleep.

There was tension around Solaris. Things were clearly not normal and they would not be normal until Tony returned. Being on an alien spacecraft was not like flying off to New York for a speaking engagement. Buck had not called him again.

"His judgement is better than mine. I'm sure he's fine." Were Bucky's statements, during waking hours, that is.

Steve was up half the third night after Bruce woke him unable to control the Cyborg Super Soldier he had helped create. When Steve arrived, the sensory room was messed up, the whole place turned upside down. Destroyed equipment at every corner. A 400 pound green hulk was on the floor in the corner of the room with Barnes fast asleep in his arms. Bucky had a night terror and called out to Tony saying, 'they will hurt you man, Tony don't cut it. Give me your hand', he pushed through the room with the shoulder of his cyborg arm and turned over furniture. He reached for a Tony that wasn't there. Barnes landed in the corner of the room yelling, 'I've seen enough, no more, Tony don't look at that. DON'T TOUCH IT." Then he cried, begged for mercy, and fell asleep. Banner shrugged and they settled Barnes.

"Where did you get this baby Hulk?" Steve asked.

"He just happened. I call him Petite Hulk, the helper, the saver, the rescuer. He's come out a few times to do good." Bruce Banner explained as well as he could explain something he did not really understand himself.

Bruce took the opportunity to dump some complaints on Steve. Seems Bruce had argued forcefully to arm Barnes only after the brain work was completed. Tony insisted Buck get the arm as soon as possible, giving weak excuses, and poor evidence on which he based his opinion. They argued right up to the point of blows. Banner, baffled to this day by Tony's position.

When Bucky gave up trying to sleep on the fourth morning he begged for the drug Tranquility. Banner wanted to give it to him after the second night. It was decided Tony would have to get by with three days of baseline data on Buck's sleep pattern. Bruce would start the BARF wave treatment that night. If Bucky did not show great improvement by 2 AM, Bruce would give him the drug.

As if he knew something was up, Tony materialized late in the afternoon of the fourth day.

As soon as Tony arrived at Solaris he asked to see Dr. Banner alone in one of the exam rooms.

"I need you to take a look at something."

Tony activated the privacy glass to black, shut the door and took off his shirt and slacks. He left on his cobalt blue Under Armour boxers. Tony had little sharp teeth bite marks all over.

"What the hell?" Bruce yelled. "Are these bites? How did you get these?"

"Oh, playing with Dandalo."

"WHAT?" Banners face was red with anger. "You let an Alien bite you?"
"No! No! Of course not. I bit back."

"Have you lost your mind?" Shocked, Banner donned an isolation gown, gloves and mask. "You are in quarantine."

"This is my building!" Tony jumped from the exam table.

"Shut up and sit down, NOW. Until I get cultures and analysis you are in quarantine. You could expose the whole planet to an alien virus. Some of these look infected." Banner collected the cultures. "What were you thinking, man?"

"Well . . . It was a cultural exchange."

"Looks more like an exchange of body fluids to me."

"Now. You don't know that." Tony snapped back and jumped up.

"Oh My God! Now I do! Tony, Tony this isn't a press conference. I'm your doctor, man. You've got to come clean with me."

"Alright. Alright." Tony gave up. He shut up and he sat down.

Bruce rubbed the culture swab on the bites that looked infected first. Tony winced. Banner continued his work.

"This is the most irresponsible thing you have ever done." Banner finished with the cultures, and looked his patient over.

"Oh, No! What's under that Under Armour?" Bruce pointed to Tony's boxers.

Tony scrunched up his face and shrugged.

Banner threw up his hands stomped around the room and yelled: "TAKE 'EM OFF! TAKE THEM OFF."

THREE MONTHS ASSESSMENT
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Tony had no alien virus. The bacteria found in the bites was easily killed by good old penicillin. Tony received his data dump from Dandalo and built the Time Machine in six weeks. Dandalo visited at three weeks with a team of experts and again at the end to assist Tony. The machine, the time portal, sat by the back door to the beach. Tony fabricated a cover story, just in case, he said. The time machine was really a fancy high tech shower. When you came off the beach and stood in it spread eagle, naked, it would remove every bit of sand from even the tiniest crevice of your body in 37 seconds flat.

Bucky got his wish to have the words read over him. He reacted with anticipatory anxiety only. It was true. He was free. He breathed a sigh of relief; a relief he was convinced he would never experience. This exercise was significant to the scientists when it was discovered that Barnes had never heard the word freight car. This marked the exact moment his memory loss started. A short celebration ensued.

James Barnes made good progress in other areas. Steve set high goals for Barnes physically. He
knew him. He saw him in top physical condition and what he picked up out of the deep-freeze was a shadow of his former self. Steve was obsessed with his own muscle mass and this carried over to Bucky's body. Every physical exercise, every activity, every food choice was designed for one purpose only: to build muscle mass. Barnes gained a significant amount of muscle bulk. He had a superb muscle definition of his calves and thighs, his glutes, his abs, his pecs, his arms, his lats – everything. His stamina improved. He was limber and had a grace of movement that Steve admired. Buck's movements had a buoyancy that seemed to defy gravity.

Steve acknowledged selfish reasons for all this fuss – for pushing Barnes so hard. Bucky was one of the few people on earth that could possibly keep up with Steve. Steve wanted someone to play with, on his level. One hour of basketball with Bucky was a lot more fun than jumping rope alone for an hour. And frankly, Steve loved the guy. With Barnes there was always an element of danger. There always had been. He always had an edge, an unpredictability, even more, after all the mess. With Bucky it was not just one hour of basketball, it was one hour of roughneck basketball. It was not just soccer, it was soccer until someone bled. Now that Bucky was near full capacity he pushed back; something he had never been able to do with Steve and Buck loved to push back.

Steve told himself, you box with this guy you better be prepared to be so alert that you cannot sleep the night before because this guy will kill you in the ring. He may look all cute and smooth and smiley but he is a killer. Wrestling? Sure they tried wrestling, but Bucky with his cyborg arm out of the sling and with his skill, Steve was pinned in a matter of seconds. They didn't even try anymore. Steve made himself a new rule of thumb: NEVER WRESTLE WITH A CYBORG, YOU WILL BE KILLED. In unarmed combat, in a hand-to-hand combat situation, Steve would match his creation with anyone in the world.

Along with the physical, Barnes showed improved emotional stamina as well. He fully recovered his sense of humor. He could still be impulsive and overreact to things. He was a bit easily frustrated and when frustrated he could spin out emotionally, but not as often. He was labile in his mood, but not angry, never angry. He was full of strong emotions and had poor ability to regulate them. He covered all of this with a pleasant pliability. He thought very little of himself and was plagued with pessimism. He felt the whole rehab program was doomed for failure. But none of this took the spring out of his step or the gratitude out of his smile.

Of course, all Solaris was set up to not frustrate Bucky. Right or wrong, everything was carefully architected by Tony for smooth running. Even the rehabilitation room Tony designed and created for Barnes reeked of homeostasis.

The room was located on the south wall, three stories up from the beach, overlooking the inlet. Tony picked the inlet side of Solaris for calmness and for the many unique animals, birds, insects and flora that cohabitated the estuary. The room had a large southern facing balcony from which both the rising and setting sun could be seen each day just by moving a chair. The balcony was decorated with indigenous plants, grasses, and flowering plants harvested directly from the inlet. A few bird-feeders and a hummingbird feeder were decorative accents. Tony brought this nature feast into the room itself. He crafted an exotic curved room divider fish tank floor to ceiling. The room held so many potted plants, an earthy smell covered the otherwise new car smell of the room. Nature heals, everyone knows, nature heals.

Again, Tony's newly patented glass stood for the whole south wall including the bath/spa with glass French door in the middle of the room that led to the balcony. The glass projected the same cliffside hologram found in the rest of Solaris. The domed ceiling projected a blue sky, a cloudy sky, a starry night and many different sunsets. The lighting system glowed blue or lavender or purple. The west wall also projected forests, waterfalls or desert landscapes. Each sky and earth motif had its own soundscape program including thunderstorms.
The bed sat on a one step up platform, had Egyptian cotton sheets and linens and a headboard with shelves and soft lighting. The bathroom/spa on the east wall was ultramodern. Everything in the room was high tech including the fish tank, except the desk, dresser, tables, chairs, and sofa. In this area Tony went vintage from the 1930s and 1940s. All the furniture in the room, Barnes could have had in his own home growing up. The dressers and closets were stacked full of everything Under Armour made, including watches, hats, shoes and bags. Tony went so far as to pick only certain colors for Bucky's clothing. He picked blues, grays, white and light yellow, some orange. He avoiding black, and definitely, no brown.

The colors of the room were earth tones, blues and greens, yellow and oranges, with very little brown and certainly no Russian red or Nazi red and black.

The signs that were posted every few feet on all Solaris hallways, and in all Solaris rooms that read, THESE PREMICES ARE UNDER VIDEO AND AUDIO SURVEILLANCE, were missing from this room. Tony made a distinct effort to inform Barnes on multiple occasions, that there was no recording equipment in his room, and never would be. Still, Barnes read the signs every time he passed one in the hall, every time he entered a room he read the sign. He looked almost every day and search his therapeutic room in every corner for a camera or audio recording equipment. Yes, it was a process, one that inched upward.

The cybernetic arm was Steve's crowning glory. Not yet at full strength, the arm was awe inspiring. Every week the arm became more fluid and graceful in it's movements, more like the human arm. As Bucky gained muscle mass the amazing human hologram feature of the cybernetic arm also looked more muscular and retained the appearance of his human arm even with the changes. Bucky held his breath that someday he might be mistaken for normal.

Cap was positive here was no way an unenhanced person could ever wield such an arm. A normal humans body tissues would be ripped to shreds. Buck, with the cybernetic arm, was immensely powerful.

Tony had been right, Bucky felt no pain around the arm. There were no scars around the metal, and no scars remained of the surgery to remove the alien tracking device. Dr. Banner was hot on the trail to find out why, and he delved deep into the study of the ILLUMINE.

There was, and always would be a need for Barnes to practice fine motor skills for the cybernetic arm. Buck played cards and games or simply used the keyboard instead of voice activating the computer. Tony had a piano. Barnes did not play. He read music, so he thought he could teach himself to play. It sounded awful, but no one cared; it was good exercise. Buck's great achievement at fine motor skills and balance came from ridding a skateboard around Solaris while juggling three balls. He made S shaped figures, or figure eights with the skateboard, and juggled. He did this fascinating balancing act at least two hours a day. No one ever grew tired of watching this amazing feat. Even Tony watched and filmed him.

Even after Banner was done with all Bucky's testing, he'd stop by each day to talk for an hour or two. Some dark things popped out of him, but the talks were future focused. They worked on visualization of achievable relief states, posttraumatic growth, and acceptance coping. They played around with counter conditioning. Bucky said his talks with Banner gave him perspective and a place to grieve, but what really made the most difference was the time spent with the Doctor. This time together created another bright spot in the dark interior landscape of Bucky Barnes and he considered Bruce a trusted friend.

Tony continued to avoid Barnes. Bucky continued to twist himself inside out for approval. Buck laughed at Tony's insults and would hop to it, with each request from Tony or even a hint that Tony
needed him for something – just like he was one of Tony's personal robots. Tony showed up for a movie, occasionally. He sat in the back at the tables, usually with two devices going. He would spout some historical fact about whatever was on the screen and drifted away after about 45 minutes. Frequently, Tony sat with Banner at the BARF monitor and watched Buck sleep. Tony disappeared for days or even weeks at a time, flying away without notice.

The BARF machine work magic on Buck's sleep disturbance. After three months he was staying in REM sleep. He received no Tranquility, or any other drugs. There was a dramatic reduction in both nightmares and night terrors. Around the same time Steve noticed that this guy, the one he hung with for months, was the real James Buchanan Barnes. Steve had never been happier in his life than he was at this time of his life.

Tony sent a message to Bruce to gather everyone at the BARF machine for an important announcement. Bruce waited at the monitor. He didn't know where the guys were. Tony showed up with five personal robots plus a lot of equipment.

Banner noticed a change in Tony's fleet of personal robots. They had obviously been upgraded and they looked strangely like Dandalo in a way Bruce could not readily identify. Bruce sat on a yellow desk chair by the monitor board. He could not control the sly smile that crept over his face.

"What? Where's Barnes?" Tony glanced around impatient.

"They didn't respond to my call. They must be out. Probably running the beach to San Francisco and back. What's all this?"

"An upgrade."

"Upgrade of what?"

"BARF. You'll see."

Dr. Banner frowned at Tony's unscientific response.

"No, really. You won't believe me until you see. So just help me. Hell, it may not even work."

The five robots, Bruce, Tony and Jarvis worked about one hour. Banner identified the object as a sophisticated video monitor, but for what?

Tony talked to Banner as he calibrated. "Would you say Barnes dreams more than the next person?"

"Yes, I have stats to prove that. He has an extremely active and imaginative mind and dreams almost every sleep cycle."

"I need him here. Will you go out and see what you can see?"

Soon Barnes stood next to Tony. He was dressed in Under Armour workout clothing, was wet with perspiration and mist from the ocean. He had sprays of sand all over his clothing, face and hair.

"Hey, I haven't seen you for six weeks," he said.

Tony did not look up at Barnes but spoke, "can you do something for me without questions?"

This is exactly the kind of statement Bucky wanted to hear. "Sure Tony, anything."
"Go do your normal routine, whatever you do before sleep. Shower, dress in what you sleep in, eat whatever, any little thing that you do, and come back as soon as possible?"

"And bring my Teddy? What's this about?"

"Okay, now, that was two questions."

"Alright I'll go."

Steve arrived in the same shape as Bucky.

"What's all this?"

"You have time to shower." Tony did not look at Steve either.

Barnes returned clean. His hair wet from the shower. He was dressed in athlete recovery sleepwear: a grey v-neck long sleeved top, darker grey pajama pants by UA, no shoes, no Teddy. He smelled like soap. Tony glanced at him. Their eyes met. Injected with purpose Bucky scrambled to attention and brushed the hair out of his face. His eyes were wide, bright and glossy. Tony looked at him again and even lingered a bit and studied his face. Tony scanned up-and-down. The look on Bucky's face was so anticipatory, so eager to please that Tony thought he looked like a boy, a boy that could use a Teddy. Bucky gave Tony his half smile.

"Have you done whatever you do before sleep?"

"Yeah, I ate turkey. What's up?"

"Do you think you can go in the sensory room and fall asleep?"

"I don't know. It's the middle of the day – I'll try."

"Good, good, go on then – hustle in," Tony suddenly sensitive to Bucky patted him on the shoulder to hurry him along.

"Jarvis, dim the lights, all the way down in this area." They dimmed but not enough. "Jarvis, activate all outside window glass on this floor to black." That did the trick. The whole area fell into a soft glow of light from the machinery only.

"Jarvis, 64° in here, please," Bucky stretched out on the gurney with his head on the sensor pad, his brain waves clipped across the monitor board in the other room. "How the hell am I going to put myself to sleep?"

"Do passive relaxation, count sheep, take deep breaths - "

"Thank you Jarvis," Buck laughed.

In the army. In the war. In the field. Out there for days upon days with no end in sight, he trained himself to get 40 winks whenever the opportunity presented itself. It was a matter of survival. He shut his eyes, relaxed his body and did the deep breathing Jarvis suggested.

"Can you up the air circulation in here?"

Jarvis turned on the ceiling fan. Buck felt the air move across his body. He rubbed his forehead softly. He imagined his mother holding him and stroking his hair. He saw her face in his mind's eye. He heard her voice singing to him as she had done so many times to put him to sleep. 'Morning star lights the way, restless dreams - all done, shadows gone, break of day, it's not far, just close by,
through an open door, I'm going home, I'm going home, I'm just going home.'

Bruce tapped the monitor screen to highlight Bucky's brain waves.

"Damn. He's asleep."

"Good boy," Tony raised his fist in victory.

"What the hell is all the mystery?" Steve stood with his legs spread and his arms crossed over his chest.

"Oh, sit down." Tony demanded but Steve did not sit down. Tony turned on his new video monitor. The screen lit up with a magenta glow.

"How long before we could possibly see a dream?"

"See a what?" Steve's eyes flashed open.

"Well, let's see, a nap in the middle of the day maybe 20 minutes," Bruce waved his hand around in the air.

"Are you telling me we're going to see Bucky's dream?" Bruce said and Steve took a seat on that, "that's not possible."

The three men sat in silence for about 20 minutes. Bucky's brain waves changed on his EEG.

"I'm seeing brain activity common before a dream," Bruce touched the tip of his pen to the screen.

The magenta color on the monitor screen faded to gray. The gray formed into patterns, black and white. There was movement in the center of the screen. A film formed in the middle. A pattern that looked like a test pattern to Steve; the static pattern after all the television stations signed off, way, way back in the day. There were swirling shapes in the middle and some thicker areas of light and shadow on the rim, continually changing. The three human minds tried to make sense of nonsense – to make sense of the scramble. Unrecognizable, but an image of more definition, on the edge out of reach of identification, floated on the screen – moved into another form and back again.

"Are we seeing his brain activity? What is this?" Steve asked. No one answered.

Some very bright areas appeared in the darkness, in the darkest area of the screen and morphed into some change, then sparkled into an image. The three brains did not believe their eyes. They focused, blinked, and focused again. Unclear, was this an optical illusion?

Tony backed from the screen and rubbed his eyes.

"Steve, can you recognize that?"

Steve leaned over the monitor and peered into the center of the image – into the center of the continually changing image.

"Oh my God. Oh my God. It's the river flowing. It's the Mad River."

Tony jumped to attention. "Holy shit. It works. It works."

Steve glanced at Bucky who slept and back at the screen.

"It's the river." Along the side of the river, in a form that floated and changed by the flowing water in
the river another brighter image formed. Shimmered around. Very bright in the center. They squinted. A small child by the river, out by the river. The image floated, the head looked and moved, the eyes sparkled with life; with soul. Tony grabbed Steve with both arms.

"Is that you? Is that you as a child?"
Steve shook his head, yes. A shiver raced through his body. The image was so alive this could not be believed.

"I need a bigger monitor," Tony stomped around the room.
The image on the screen did not change, it morphed, it reconstructed into a swirly mass, into another image of a face with eyes that sparkled and danced, eyes that were alive, with hair that moved and swirled. The image was hypnotic.

"God in heaven. It's his mother. Tony, it's his mother. What is this?"
The image changed again. Bucky's brain waves changed. A small inarticulate vocalization was heard from the sensor room, a sob, a whine, or a moan. The image on the screen darkened and swirled. An image took form, a tree lined road, a figure in a uniform . . .

"Tony?" Steve shook Tony's shoulder as if to wake him from the trance, from the unbelievable dimension they were pulled into.

"Wake him," Tony barked.
Steve let all the air out of his lungs in a rush. His relief was premature for Tony mumbled, "If he sleeps too long now, he won't sleep tonight." Steve shrugged that off and went in to shake Buck awake.

"BUCK – wake up." Buck woke with a start. This little scene happened many times in the war. Bucky pushed up on one elbow. Tony was at the foot of the gurney.

"Do you remember what you just dreamed?" Tony said sweetly to Bucky.

"No, I . . ." a smile crossed Bucky's face and he glanced at Steve, "the river."

Tony flipped his head back, joyous at the confirmation. He stomped around, raised his fist and jerked it down and mimed the word 'yes'.

"I dreamed of the river and you," Bucky glance again at Steve. "You were so scrawny," Buck laughed.

"Do you remember anymore?"

"I . . ." he did remember something else. "Uh . . . my mother singing to me."

"Anything else?"

"I don't recall – I don't think so – no – that's all I remember."

"Sure?"

"Nothing."

"Last chance. Are you sure?"
"No, Tony I'm never sure." Bucky slid off the gurney, his bare feet hit the cold tile floor. He let Tony get a good long look at his eyes when they were the most intense. Not until after the stare down was Tony sure that Buck was hiding something.

The four men congregated in front of the video screen that buzzed with static.

"Jarvis, play back James Barnes dream video one," Tony added bragging, "the first image of a dream seen by man in the history of mankind."

The dream sequence played. Floored, Buck watched in amazement. He gasped when he saw his mother on the screen, her eyes a blaze, her mouth moved, her hair shimmered, her eyes danced on the screen like a spirit, her spirit. Buck took the controls manually and played it again and again, he gasped each time. After about the 10th time Steve intervened.

"Buck, come on, that's enough." Steve pulled Bucky's hand away from the controls and Bucky held Steve's arm.

"She was left alone, Steve. She was left alone with my three sisters. First my dad, then me. I didn't come home. I left and I never came home. She lived with that. She lived with me being missing in action all those years. She died never knowing what happened to me." Buck looked up at Steve.

"Come on man. Come away from there. Come away for just a while."

"Yeah, yeah," Buck said, but he did not move.

Steve shook his head doubting everything.
"I'm sure no scientist, but we need to sit down and have a serious discussion about this."

"For what purpose?" Tony snapped.

"To learn how you did this and what do you think it can be used for? Tony, why did you do this?"

"Because I could."

"I would've helped you," Bruce stood in front of Tony to get his attention.

"You've been working night shift full-time for four months. It was a lark. Alright. You know what? Let's do it. Let's sit down and talk. I'll explain."

LATER THAT DAY

In the small meeting room Tony and Bruce worked on devices. Steve entered, and Tony shut his laptop.

"Where's Barnes?"

"He said he had something to look up before the meeting."

"Go get 'em – I'm busy."

"I have a few questions first. He told me he signed a release of information with all of our names and any other Avenger with a needed to know, for his treatment. And that he signed a consent to be monitored and recorded audio and video 24–7 correct?"
Tony nodded affirmative.

"Did he sign to have his dreams public knowledge? That technology was not even created."

"And you said you didn't make it to law school?"

"Dammit, Tony. I'm trying to understand this craziness. I am, well, Buck and I we are essentially
time travelers from another century – walk me through this, this, dream catcher," Steve eyes were
large, liquid, and convincing.

"Great name, thanks . . . Look, Barnes has been here 4 months doing what he's told. So what's the
big deal?"

"Come on, Tony. Beyond being brainwashed. Beyond being programmed. You know he's been
'conditioned' to do what he's told. You can't take advantage of that. If you haven't noticed he can't
say no. He can't say no especially to you. So I'm saying NO."

"You're speaking for him?"

"Until he has the functioning mind of his own – YES. What's your goal? What's the purpose of all
this?"

"I don't know the purpose. I stumbled upon it really, when building the time portal. The time
machine was not built by Dandalo's people. They got it in a trade, so I'm adapting from an adaption.
There was a configuration used in the Matter Excelerator I'd never seen before and, well, the big
white light went on, you know, the big light bulb - you get the picture. I goofed around with the idea,
and the idea worked."

"Could someone else be the guinea pig?"

"I don't want to bump Barnes off his treatment. He's the logical person. He has the electrodes
implanted. He's made to order."

Tony opened his laptop.

"That's what I'm afraid of. It's just added stress on him in a program whose mission statement is to
de-stress. Hell, Tony, everything I do is to de-stress the guy and now you're adding this?" Steve
glanced around the room and thought about it. "Well, you could ask him what he thinks. Were all
watching his mother, for God's sake, and he didn't know it. It seems so unnatural, such an invasion
of privacy. What if he dreamed about . . ." Steve cut himself off.

"What if what?" Tony closed the laptop. Steve had his attention now.

"I don't know. Just something personal."

Tony was on that like a piranha, on any hint or suspicion that Barnes could be withholding
information or have collaborated with the enemy or was complicit in any of the missions, even
though, Tony had reams of data, one year's work of data, that said otherwise. Why was Steve
making such a big deal about this?

"What's he hiding?" Tony did not move and gave Steve a prolonged stare.

"I don't know that he's hiding anything." Steve stammered.

"Bruce, you talk to him a lot." Tony did not look away from Steve.
"Yes. He seems guarded at times. He has secrets. Definitely."

"Steve. Don't do this. Don't . . . not again. Tell me what you know."

"Alright. I feel he's evasive on occasion. Like he's hiding something. Yes."

"What is it?" Tony held his breath.

"I really don't know and that's the God's honest truth. It could be a lot of things. A lot of things he doesn't want to talk about. Whatever it is . . . it's something big."

James Barnes was always forthcoming and open with great recall of his dreams, giving detailed accounts of his dreams yet he does not remember a dream that causes him to wake up in a cold sweat.

"The least you can do is ask him." Steve said.

Buck appeared out of thin air in the door way.

Steve jumped and said, "how do you do that?"

"I don't know. Ask me what?"

Tony rolled his eyes and spoke to Barnes in the sweetest voice he had. "I'd like to record your dreams for a period of a time with the purpose of collecting data on the Dreamcatcher. Thank Steve for that name. This collection will not interfere with your treatment of the last few disturbing dreams to continue to have. You could sign a rider to your contract, agreed?"

"I'd like to do this."

"Will you sign a rider?"

"Will I have access to my dreams?"

"Absolutely, of course."

"I'll sign. That image of my mother was clearer on the screen then when I dreamed it. This has knocked my socks off. I'm fascinated. I want to see more."

"Steve? Satisfied?"

"Tony? Satisfied?"

Tony definitely wanted to see more. He wanted to see every single dream Barnes had.

"Now, Tony," Buck said, "I can call in sick tonight and you can see what the machine is like first hand. We can watch YOUR dreams. Isn't that what you mad scientists do? Experiment on yourselves."

Tony laughed out loud and said to Steve, "I liked your friend better when he didn't have a sense of humor."

"Doesn't feel comfortable does it?" Steve said.

Tony was uncomfortable. There was no way in hell he would make his dreams public. Tony and Bruce headed down the hall.
Steve blocked Tony's exit. "You won't do it, will you? This is voyeurism at it's most ghoulish and you know it."

"Why don't you two smart asses go run to Mexico." Tony flipped his body around, but said to Barnes, "Same time tonight?"

"Sure Tony."

The first night the three men watched the dreams they were so excited no one slept. The second night the three men had headaches, but could not take their eyes off the field of dreams. The third night Tony, Steve and Bruce sat again at the monitor and watched the dance of light and shadow. The swirling gray condensed to black and white with sharp edges. They anticipated an image, an insignia or emblem – a swastika on a uniform.

"What is it?" Tony asked.

"It's a Nazi uniform," Steve answered.

Buck called out in his sleep.

"Do you know what this is?" asked Tony.

"Not yet, no, could be a lot of things."

Again, Barnes called out in his sleep, he moaned and mumbled some words.

"Is he awake?" Tony asked. Bruce checked the monitor.

"No, he's asleep. He's talking in his sleep."

"What's he saying?" Tony asked.

"I don't know he's speaking in another language," Bruce said.

"It's German," Steve said.

"Jarvis translate."

Jarvis translated, "I work in the lush green', undistinguishable, undistinguishable, 'I take a yellow Rose', undistinguishable."

"It's his soliloquy, stop him. Tony, stop him. Bruce wake him up he's dreaming about the prisoners."

Tony and Banner did not move.

Jarvis translated, "I play ball with my son on the front yard'."

"Don't wake him. Let's just neutralize the dream." Tony said.

Jarvis translated, "'and her hair falls across my face'."

"No, I've got to stop him." Steve rushed the door. Tony and Bruce held each of Steve's arms with all their unaided force. Steve shook them off like a bear shakes off flies. They fell to the ground.

"Ouch!" Tony said as he hit.

"Oh shit." Bruce said as he landed and skidded across the floor.
Steve did not turn around or look at the two friends he knocked down.

"Don't wake him! We can neutralize it and he'll never have it again," Bruce yelled from the floor.

"I can't let him shoot them again." Steve shook Buck awake.

On the fourth night Steve Rogers did not show up to watch the dreams. Banner and Stark were transfixed on the screen of dreams. Disoriented by the mass of light and dark that swirled before an image formed, the men could not evert their gaze, eye pain, headaches and even nausea did not stop them, the reward was so great when an image did appear. The shimmering eyes and shining faces of the spirit world dominated their waking hours. In sleep they dreamed of his dreams, a look into the unconscious. It would take many scientists, from many nations, many decades to grasp the implications of what Tony Stark stumbled upon in his laboratory at Solaris, a lab that somehow, now, seemed inadequate to the task at hand.

On the seventh night of dreamcatching Banner sat alone at the monitor with his arms crossed over his chest, his feet on the desk, he watched Barnes sleep. It was too early for dreams. Banner nodded off.

Natalia Romanova, the Back Widow in all her regalia stood behind him. Banner twisted in his chair, his eyes blink open when he saw her shadow. He jerked his body and involuntarily hit the monitor board with his arm and flipped open the intercom into the BARF room where Buck slept.

"How did - Tony didn't notify - " Bruce stopped when he realized by Natalia's expression that Tony had no idea she was in the building. "Jesus, you scared the shit out of me."

Nat shrugged.
"I hear you have physical possession of the soldier."

Bruce laughed, "yeah, we have custody the of the body."

"And that you have successfully debugged him?"

"I am happy to say that is true as well."

"What's all this?"

"His brain waves."

"He's here – NOW?"

"Yeah, he's in there," Bruce pointed to the dark adjacent room.

"Can I look in?" Nat's footing stumbled.

"He signed for all Avengers to have full access, so yeah, go ahead."

Natalia entered the dark sensor room. The BARF machine loomed like an entity, consumed the whole back wall. Light and shadow bounced around the room from machine activity. Barnes laid on the gurney. His head rested on an odd wedge shaped pillow with a mesh pattern. Dressed in white cotton, he slept. Her body stood still as she looked at him but her mind raced. She walked past his bare feet, one stacked upon the other. She recognized them. A memory like a taste. Her hands reached out to touch his feet. She stopped herself, but her hands hovered over them. Her gaze and her hands wandered up his calves, his knees, and the thighs she knew so well. Her hands reach out
but did not touch. Her hand passed over the curve of his hip, his waist, his chest. Air rushed into her and rushed out.

"Oh," she murmured, but she did not mean to make a sound. She saw his chest rise and fall calmly, gracefully with each breath. He leaned toward his metal arm that stretched over the gurney. The metal fingers closed tight in a fist. His human arm circled over his head and ended with his hand by his cheek. His face was flushed even though the room was cool. She felt his body heat rising like a furnace as she hovered her hands an inch from his face. She leaned in close to him and felt his breath on her hands. His face was unchanged: his smooth alabaster skin, his pink, pink lips. With her face an inch from his, her desire spread its wings. Her mind raced. In her mind she begged, in her dreams, in her longing, she begged for the dark heavy lashes to open. 'Let me see you, let me see your eyes.' She screamed in her mind. His lips parted. He jerked his foot. With a twitch of his face, she jumped. His human arm fell across his chest.

She touched his shoulder and ran her hand down his metal arm. She felt the ridges and shapes of the cold metal; the only part of him she could touch. At the hand she opened the fingers, one by one, and smoothed his hand out over the sheet. She backed to the door of the room. She stared at the machine behind him. To think he could be cured. To think he could be restored. To think he could remember her. Again, she screamed in her mind, 'open your eyes and remember me'. She backed into Bruce at the panel. He noted her expression and body language. She did not try to hide.

"Do you know him?"

She ignored the question.

"What's this?" She asked as she touched the dream catcher monitor that glowed magenta and purple.

"This is Tony's latest upgrade. A video image of the dreams."

"WHAT?"

"In all seriousness."

"Oh Tony," she said, "what's this on the screen now?"

Banner explained the various brain waves and vital signs of the Poysomnograph monitor and the static on the dream catcher's screen.

"He simply is not dreaming at this time. We identify the dream. Prior to the video, of course, we woke him to ID the dream. Once a dream is identified as a menace, we neutralized it with BARF waves. Enough times and the nightmare is gone."

"And that works?"

"Yes. There are certain patterns the brain makes in reoccurring dreams. The BARF waves disrupt this. He's gone from wake up in a cold sweat nightmare each sleep cycle to one remaining nightmare that we have not seen yet. We think this is the core dream. He can't remember but we'll get it."

"Why is he having these dreams?"

"Depends on who you talk to: PTSD, leaks from his brainwashing, psychic self punishment for his crimes - you name it."

Natalia's voice softened. She backed from Bruce a step. "Does he have any good dreams? Like pleasant memories? Like dreams about a girl?"
"Actually, yes, a girl he can't identify. He said they erased her. We haven't had a clear image. Jarvis? Play the dream titled the girl. Number one will do."

Three clicks were heard, like a microphone been tapped. Banner's voice was heard on the audio playback, 'Are you awake?'
'Ah... ' Bucky said in a sleepy voice. 'You were dreaming, what were you dreaming, do you remember?'
'It was her. The one. The one I love. I love her', then in a whisper. 'I love her. 'Okay, got it, you can go back to sleep', and the mic clicked off.

"Jarvis? How many dreams titled 'the girl'?"

"147."

Nat was silent – a long silence. Bruce glanced at her. Her eyes were filled with tears.

"Oh my God Natalia. It's him? He's the one?" Bruce felt shock then sorrow. This guy was marred. He was spoiled. He was damaged goods. A moment later it made sense, all the mystery about her, for she was damaged too. "This could be the girl dream now as we speak."

There was nothing from the image on the screen that was identifiable except Nat recognized the pattern of her braid. The braid her younger self wore down her back. Natalia's tears brimmed over.

"I've got this." Nat entered the sensory room again. Her eyes filled again. She could barely see him. Warm and peaceful; he dreamed of the girl he loves. Her throat and neck spasmed as she held back an outburst of emotion but she didn't hesitate. She laid beside him, close to him. She broke the barrier between them and touched his skin. She laid her head on his metal arm. She felt his heartbeat. Still in the dream, his human arm pulled her close to him. She touched his neck. She left her hands on him, gently pressing the soft skin by his jaw and behind his ears. She gazed into his sleeping face. "Still fighting?" She whispered at the sight of a fresh cut on his lip. He nuzzled his face into her hand, content with his dream lover.

He opened his eyes. His body tensed. She held him firmly and whispered in Russian, "Soldier, Soldier." He removed her hands. He pushed her away to focus on her. He scanned her in disbelief: her hair, her eyes, her hands he held, her mouth, her scent. It was her scent. He took a deep breath of her.

"You're here?" he said in Russian.

"I'm here to stay," she answered in the same.

Banner stayed at the monitor a long time. He could see Barnes was awake by the silent waves of the EEG in front of him. So, he sat a while longer. He was tired, the kind of tired that wears a headache right between the eyes. He glanced in. Bucky laid on his side with Natalia beside him, they looked into each other's eyes. Bruce walk to the monitor and shut the whole thing down. He walked down the hall towards his room. A bright light flooded the space behind him. He did not look back. They had turned on the light for some reason, he surmised. He walked on to the tall window in the hall that framed the breaking dawn? At 3 AM? Too tired to follow that train of thought, he went to bed and slept.

In Bucky's recovery room they stood in front of the panoramic glass that overlooked the still waters of the inlet side of Solaris. She tried to kiss him and bumped the cut on his lip.
"OUCH!" He said with a smile, jerked away from her and touched his lip. He slid his metal arm up her back to her neck and snagged her hair.

"OUCH!" she snapped her head back, removed her hair from the metal fingers and laughed. They laughed together as they realized they were each in love with a pretty dangerous character.

He guided her to a seat and knelt in front of her. He took a tissue to brush away the make up from her face. She felt emotions rise in her. Emotion at this act. She knew exactly what he was doing. He was trying to find the girl he dreamed about. He wanted to see the girl he knew. With each brush of makeup removed – he removed her layers. With each brush a lie left her, her duplicity, the false fronts she presented to the world - 20 years of covering. All her covers were brushed away. He wiped the makeup from her eyes and her cheeks. Layer after layer came off. Layer after layer of deceit so thick she questioned who she really was. Did the girl who shut down so many years ago even exist? She was stripped. He wiped the lipstick off her lips. She felt exposed. She felt vulnerable. The emotional cascade continued. All at once she gasped for air. She felt free. She felt clean. She felt liberated. She experienced her authentic self.

When he saw the change he smiled. They stood by the dresser. He stepped back from her. He took off his shirt and laid it at her feet. His face was soft, his mouth slacked open, his eyes wide and they never left hers. He removed not only his clothing, but all the elaborate costumes he had ever worn. The person he was to the world. In mime, he took off the collar of obedience and laid it at her feet, the harness he wore came off. Each layer he removed, the ridiculous trappings of the roles he had played. The ornate uniforms. The tapestries that dazzle us all into accepting the unacceptable horrors of war. The holster. The heavy fabrics of weighted identities. The weapons he wore. The madness of fighting. The guns. The rifles. He threw an imaginary knife into the pile. He removed all his clothing and laid them at her feet. She looked at him – naked. Himself made vulnerable. He breathed deeply through his mouth.

She kicked the pile of clothing in front of her away like any other garbage in her path. She took a step forward, stopped and looked him over.

"How beautiful you are," she said to him and he was magnificent.

He glanced away at the idea of it. His gaze fell to his cybernetic arm. He rubbed his human hand over it, and cradled it in his human arm. There it was, the symbol of the damage done, the mindless killer, the monster made, the hideous reminder of the horror that remained within – the thing that can not be taken off and laid at her feet. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

She took the final step to him and laid her hand on the cold metal wrist of his cyber arm. "Yes, even that."

She stood close to him, right in front of him.

He felt every muscle in his body come to attention. He felt each hair on his body as if they were electrified.

She touched her body to his bare chest and held him in her arms. She felt his chest rise and fall. In and out. This is where she wanted to be. She syncd her breath with his. Out and in together; they moved like the sea. She felt the warm skin on his back. She shuttered with emotion. She fell onto his chest and kissed it. She held him. She put her ear over his heart and listened to it's steady beat. She would sync her heartbeat to his, if she could.

He circled his arms around her warmth. "Oh . . . " he said. He felt the softness of her hair on his bare chest. He held her. He became calm in a new way. This would be enough. She fit on him like a
missing puzzle piece. She looked up at him and his world became a blaze. A blaze of red hair and the green eyes of life. He could almost see a long braid down her back. It was her. The way she looked at him. She looked at him like he was a man. He became a man. He became the man she saw. Now, he could kiss her. For he knew that once done, it could never be undone. He would always be kissing her. If not the act of kissing, he would be thinking of kissing her, or hoping for the next kiss, or planning for the next kiss. In his sleep he would dream of the kisses. It would become his life's work. And, so . . . he kissed her.

No one saw them for five days.

Tony sat at the sleep study monitor fiddling with the video screen. The monitor was lit with all flat lines running. A warm glow came from the empty sensor room, waiting for a brain to scan. Bruce sat in a chair at the desk, leaned back and talked with Tony as he flipped a pen around. This was the fifth night in a row they sat like that and waited for Barnes who had been a – no call, no show – all five nights. The hour was late. They were prepared for an empty sixth night when Natalia Romanova showed up. She was dressed in Bucky's casual Under Armour. She wore no makeup. She was relaxed, her face open.

"Hi guys."

"Well . . . "

Even in the dim light, eyes enlarged and mouths gaped at the huge red mark on both sides of her neck. There was a line of nasty indigo blue bruising down the middle encircled with purple. She touched her neck.

"Oh, he did this – in his sleep," she said in a jovial manner. "You know that dream? The wake up screaming one. The dream you all are so hot to know about? Well, he confessed to me."

"Let's hear it," Tony scooted to the edge of his seat.

"Not you, Tony. You don't need to hear this."

"Bullshit."

"No, I'm serious. This is why he didn't tell you himself. His judgment is sound – on this one. Just go. I'll tell Banner and we can move on."

"Just tell it."

Natalia's whole demeanor changed. She talked to Banner, but her eyes were fixed on Tony.

"Okay," she started out, "he hears Howard." Nat took a deep breath and glanced at Tony again. She wanted what she was saying to have some time to sink in. She let her breath out slowly: an obvious stall tactic.

"He hears Howard calling him," she paused and glanced at Tony again. He was a rock. "You know, that video you saw? Zemo's video, Tony? Well, this dream is like the audio portion." Tony was unmoved.

"Okay," she continued, "he hears Howard calling his name," Natalie went on.

"He hears Howard calling him by name . . . Sergeant Barnes?" she paused again and opened her
mouth to continue. When the full meaning of what was to come registered fully with Tony - he yielded.

"STOP," Tony said, "uncle, or whatever. Okay, you're right. I don't need to hear this. You whisper to Bruce your quiet whisper, this room has like 50 microphones. And then you get his ass down here. I don't want that shit on the earth. I'm going to exterminate that dream tonight." Tony exited the area.

With each step Natalia took towards Bruce, the bruise on her neck looked worse and worse. When her lips got to Banner's ear, he saw green. She whispered directly into his ear with her hands cupped on each side of her face like in grade school. Banner shook his head. He moaned.

"Okay, that's enough."

As she pulled away she noted Banner's interest in her neck. She also made note of the look on his green face.

Tony slid in, assessed the scene and sided with Banner. Natalia did not like the look of sympathy she was getting – like she was a victim.

"What is it with you guys? It's a red mark. You think because I'm someone's girlfriend now, I can't take care of myself? Why don't you ask me what shape he's in? Or, or, just ask him to show you guys his taser burns," a sly smile crossed her lips.

"You tasered him?" A look of joyous glee spread over Tony's face. "You tasered him?" Tony laughed loud and long.

"Yeah, I had to practically torture him to get that damn dream out of him. He's not feeling too well." Nat stood with her feet wide apart and her arms crossed over her chest.

Everyone in the room laughed, even Nat.

"Still, he will be sleeping here until I release him as cured," Dr. Banner said.

"That's an absolute necessity," Tony chimed in.

"You guys are doing it again. Your galloping right over me. Let me make this clear, I won't be separated from him again for any reason, ever. Never again. WE will not be separated. I'll sleep with him in there," Natalia pointed into the sensory room, "I don't care."

"Banner?"

"Well, she has no electrodes, therefore, the machine won't sense her. Your presence will probably interfere with his REM sleep – too much stimulation," the guys snickered and Nat laughed.

Dr. Banner thought for a moment. "How about an alternative? How about this? JARVIS show me a timeline graph of Barnes' dreams."

"Collating."

A time sequence graft appeared on the video monitor adding data as they watched.

"Look here, he doesn't dream till 1 or 2am and insignificantly after 6am. Could we have him from 12 midnight til 6am? Could you spare him?"

"That could possibly be arranged."
"Can you get him?" Tony was eager to get the process started.

"He's right outside."

Bucky showed all measure of embarrassment. He counted the reasons: ashamed of the marks on the Nat's neck; ashamed of the dream he continued to have and frankly; embarrassed by the intimacy he enjoys with their colleague. He had broken the number one rule: never get involved with a coworker. He'd get over the last embarrassment soon enough. All he could muster was a glance in Tony's direction.

"He didn't hear it," Nat whispered to Buck and he sighed with relief.

"It was not recorded."

"Natalia. My little Natalia. Natalie, Natalie, thank you." His voice rumbled and whispered into her ear but everyone heard. He kissed her forehead and stroked her hair and she petted around on him.

"Come on, let's zap that dream," commanded Tony.

"Night all," Nat said. Then to Bucky, "see you around 6am, Angel."

"Honey," Bucky kissed her.

Tony rolled his eyes and mumbled under his breath,"this is not gonna work for me."

Buck passed Tony on his way to the sensory room.

"I've had it with you guys, with you and your buddy, trying to protect me. No more withholding information. We are a team. Got it?"

Bucky nodded affirmative.

"Are you tired? Can you sleep?"

"I'm EXHAUSTED," Bucky smiled and glanced in the direction of Nat's exit. "I think I'm dehydrated," Bucky mumbled.

"No doubt."

As Bucky turned his back and went into the BARF room. Tony made a huge face and a slow-motion silent guffaw and ran to Banner who was in hysterics at Bucky's 'exhaustion', Bucky's 'dehydration'.

Banner glanced at the monitor, grabbed Tony and pointed. With hands flying, at the monitor board he whispered, "Look, look, 30 seconds on the mat and he's sound asleep," another round of pantomimed hysterics followed.

Tony warmed up his monitor board and they settled in to watch the dreams to come.

SIX MONTH ASSESSMENT OF THE WINTER SOLDIER INVESTIGATION

Buck's teasing Tony to be the Dreamcatcher subject was, well, uninformed. Tony slept only 2 to 4 hours each night. Since the time portal was up and running Tony spent his considerable free time making what he called Cyberware for the cybernetic arm. Appliances that fit on the arm from the
various places the arm detached. Tony stored these gadgets in what he called the accessories closet. Bucky did not have access to the accessories closet. Tony told himself the militarization of the arm was something that Bucky did not need to focus on at this time. Most of these applications he would never use anyway. But, the real reason Tony withheld this information was because he knew Steve would not like it. Besides, Tony could not stop. He was having fun.

Of course, he developed a gun, and a knife that popped out of the wrist into the hand. Tony added to the arm: a communicator, basically a walkie-talkie, a must have; a wireless Internet adapter; an AC/DC plug-in and wire Internet; a video/audio recorder in the palm, and a scanner that read percent of oxygen in the atmosphere, air temperature, etc. He added a GPS for the arm, and even developed radar and sonar – it went on and on. The thumbnail flipped up to release a drug or toxin in a mist or aerosol. There was an injection finger that could inject a drug into a muscle. Plus a device that blocked metal detection.

The creme de la creme was the invisibility hologram, equipped with a nasty looking stump, design to distract the viewer from the echo. This shimmering of the arm could be seen in certain light, or at a certain angle when the invisibility hologram was in use. Tony could not seem to overcome this echo. The invisibility hologram used so much power, the pull of energy from this device even affected the life force energy of the wearer, and the user could feel weak, look pale, become lightheaded, or even pass out. The invisibility hologram was to be used for only short periods of time.

The second three months block at Solaris sped by. The pattern started with Banner, Barnes and Rogers remained. The addition of Natalia Romanova did not change the schedule, but her presence was like shining a beacon into a man cave.

With Nat around, the men were more concerned about their appearance. They shaved daily. They had more formal meals. They did not, however, watch the language or their use of sexual innuendos, jokes or double entendres. In that respect they treated her like one of the guys. They included her in all activities. Steve was delighted to have an additional playmate that could keep up the pace. Nat had no problem with the most difficult workouts and routinely bested both men in Kendo, Judo and Parkour – especially Parkour where she reigned supreme. To Steve's surprise she had no problem going to the mat with the Cyborg. She knew all his tricks. She relived and rehearsed them in her mind for 20 years. She was shocked at Steve's reluctance to wrestle with Bucky, she said, "what's the matter with you? I do that every night."

The glaring change came to the recreational movie. What was once a nice relaxation became a party. Tony came every night, usually at his place at the table, but as time passed he sat more and more with Banner on the floor in front of the sofa that held Bucky and Nat. It was a night of loud conversation: comedies, rock music, Wii bowling and golf, video games, dancing, and laughter. Most importantly laughter. Natalia's biting wit could only be matched by Tony's. She was challenging, in their faces, and they loved every minute of it.

Dr. Xhosa came for a visit. She had a conference scheduled in the states and she wanted to examine Bucky for her files. She had her own bedroom with the dresser full of Under Armour, but she stayed with Steve. Being a triathlete and a highly respected specialist, she fit right in with doctors and crew. She stayed a week. She had the time of her life. No one wanted her to leave. She said she be back. The only dark cloud stayed between Tony and Bruce. Bucky's battery of tests had been complete and they were in the process of going through analysis. It looked to be certain that he had suffered physical damage to his brain that could be seen on MRI, and PET scans. They had hurt him – damaged him in a way he could not recover from – in a way that was permanent. It was hard to face; that Barnes may never be right. Bruce admitted he was not an expert, and he strongly felt they needed to consult one. Tony hyperventilated with anger and doubled down on his resolve to find a
way to fix even this.

Steve had always insisted there was a stable personality and good character somewhere in Bucky. It was found that Barnes had no form of personality disorder or underlying mental illness. He did however, have a whopping case of Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder with all the trimmings. Hell, he had the whole banquet. Chronic, invasive, intractable, PTSD; indicative of devastating, catastrophic stress.

Finally, his memory problems and amnesia were glaring from his testing – glaring and also complex. He had amnesia and extracted memories. He also was full of implanted memories. Some used for brainwashing and some used to enhance the completion of his missions. Some of these he wanted to keep: like the extra eight languages he could speak, or the fact he could operate any machine put in front of him, or pilot anything that could fly. He was retrieving his own memories every day. He came to the BARF machine most nights with Natalia. It was found he slept more soundly with her then without her.

Natalia was interviewed by Banner for the six-month Winter Soldier Investigation assessment. She described Barnes as someone who got by a lot on charm, physical good looks and killer social skills. He loved to socialize. But she said there was a real mess going on in his mind. 'Rip a novel into a million pieces and scatter it around the room. The story is all there – but try to find it. It's all in his mind, but where'? She described moments his face would disappear in plain sight, go blank, and he would stare off, as if frozen, like he was on pause, soon to reanimate. She did not interrupt these moments, but waited for him to return to reality on his own. When she asked him about these episodes he said he did not know what they were, a déjà vu, or a memory. He thought it was in real time. The memory was so vivid, he thought what he was experiencing was real.

Natalia qualified her next observation, she had only been his constant companion for three months, but he looked to her to be accident prone. He could be having a black out, but he would fail to guard himself from harm and fall or get hit hard by her or Steve playing the contact sports and combat exercises they all loved so much. He seemed constantly marked somewhere on his body by violence.

For the vast majority of a 24 hour period she felt he was in reality, engaged, positive and bright. She reported she had never seen him angry.

No Avenger would have ever believed a relationship between Barnes and Romanova would have worked but somehow it did. She could easily dominate him but she did not. She knew his impairment better than anyone. She had spent a lifetime acquiring skills to assess the psychological state, strength and weaknesses of her opponents and coworkers a like, to manage them to her advantage.

She refrained from such behavior with him. She did not even try. Her speech, typically laced and loaded with double meanings and cryptic phrasing, suggestions and duplicity was cleaned up for him. She spoke to him in clear concise English or Russian. She checked with him frequently to see if they were on the same page. She knew he had been conditioned for 70 years to do whatever he was told, instantly, without a second thought and no question. So, she simply did not tell him what to do at all. She did not even suggest a course of action to him. She made a conscious effort not to boss him, even though, everything about him screamed out for guidance. She demanded nothing of him and expected nothing.

They say there is no love like your first love and she was happy every day to simply see him. She felt it was a miracle she had him at all.

She frequently thought how she agonized over his loss all those years and how she dreamed over and over the sound of his voice, how his skin felt and his scent. She thought how he held her in those
extreme wrestling holds and how he almost killed her two or three times. Her eyes rarely left him for fear he would disappear again. The strength of these feelings surprised her. It was because he believed her that she told him the truth – because he believed in her that she would not let him down.

He asked her opinion frequently, knowing full well his perceptions of reality were skewed. He understood the reality in which she was raised – he had lived it too. He saw her behavior as an adaption because he witnessed, first hand, the fear that created her methods of survival. Where others condemned her tactics, he admired her skills. He knew his memory and judgment were faulty, and he looked to her for guidance and example. She understood the modern world on a higher level, a more sophisticated level than he did. He had little experience outside a controlled environment. He did not judge her. He felt her decisions were based on his best interests. If she was wrong, he never suspected an ulterior motive.

He was happy just to look at her. To touch her was ecstatic to him. She was the sun that warmed his day and the moon that lit his way at night. She was life itself. When he was not with her he felt a pain akin to death, a fear of annihilation that he would not see her again. He was thankful every day: for another glance, another touch, another look into her eyes. They made a soft world together. They created a quiet reality, a sensual existence of acceptance. There was a goodness in the way they treated each other that strengthened their battered opinions of themselves. They loved.

Steve's interview spoke of similar experiences with Barnes.

"There's something wrong with this guy," Steve said. "Since Nat arrived, he seems to want to be hit. I know that sounds sick, but these situations have been creeping up a little too frequently. Frequently and obviously. For instance, just two days ago, we were boxing and it was getting heated, we were scoring points off of each other like mad and he just dropped his guard. The punch was already thrown. I hit him hard and he went down. I could have disabled him or even killed him. I felt horrible. I'm like, man, what are you doing?" Steve said, "these incidents I am describing are happening daily."

Steve also noticed periods when Bucky's mind would wander. Steve said he would poke him, or jar him, or snap his fingers, and say, 'stay with me' and, or, 'come to the party'.

"When I think back and picture in my mind the creature that fought me on the street. The suffering in his crazy eyes. And the paranoid half human I saw in his apartment in Bucharest, compared to how he is now, I'm not complaining. He's happy. I know he's not all there, but hey, he's doing something I've never been able to do – maintain an intimate relationship with a woman. He loves her. They're beautiful together. It's hard to believe he's only been in this program six months. I'm amazed at his strength . . . his speed. He's agile. He's graceful and he's built up some great stamina. Physically, I'd say he's in top shape. Nothing to do there but maintenance."

Bruce and Tony interviewed Barnes. He came to the meeting with a fresh cut on his cheekbone, held together with a steri-strip and a blackeye. Bucky described the blackouts with words like vivid, intense and involuntary. Again, he stated he did not know what they were: memories, dreams, false memories, daydreams – could be any of the above. He did know that these episodes were triggered by something in the environment, something sparked these memories, a smell, a sound, a feeling, and they happened in a flashback, or a dream, or spontaneously. When in them, they were so overwhelming, he felt he would never get over the exquisite pain.

Sometimes, after a black out, he'd let himself grieve for the life he would have had. He thought about playing around in the woods by the Mad River, or working in the garden, or building a shed in the backyard, or being a volunteer fireman. Maybe he would've been a schoolteacher or something. He let himself feel these feelings, these pains, he breathed into them until they passed. These impasses
did afford him an opportunity. They gave him a glimpse into his true personality. Because of this, he knew he would never, his true self would have never done what he did if he had not been pushed into primitive behavior by the horror of war. This knowledge gave him strength. For many years he thought he was nothing but a creature born to kill.

His response to the flashbacks was to do what Dr. Banner suggested, ride them out and try not to react to the content, however real, or disturbing. He tried, but sometimes they were so real he did react and skid out of control emotionally over them at times.

In a 24 hour period he was very happy most of the 24 hours. He said having Natalie made any pain he had to go through worth it. When asked about all his fresh cuts and bruises he said:

"I know it's probably not right to feel this way, but I feel like I don't deserve to feel good . . . like having her is too good. When I feel that good like when I'm with her, I feel it's wrong. I think it's something I'm going through . . . something I have to work out."

At the end of the interview Tony asked without much thought beforehand. "Is there anything more you'd want out of life?"

"I'd like a job," Bucky said. "Where I come from you have to work to get happiness."

Tony stood behind Barnes and mouthed to Bruce the words, 'a job'?

"What kind of job are you talking about?" Tony could not have been more shocked at Bucky's request.

"Oh, something like building a house, or a bridge, or highway. Something out there in the real world." Buck said and Tony was more shocked.

If Barnes had been paid for his services the last 70 years he would be a millionaire many times over. If he were for sale today he could be sold for millions. He has the skills only a few people on earth possess and he wants to be a laborer. Tony was touched.

"Well, I need help up top. I need a technician to service my solar panels and satellite dishes. I have a team once a week, but I'm having daily power fluctuations. They need maintained daily. I'll be putting in wind turbines in the near future. If you're interested in that kind of thing."

"I am interested. I've read about clean energy. I would love that . . . outside . . . Yes. That's . . . thank you."

"Good. The team is scheduled to come tomorrow. You can go with them. They'll instruct you."

Tony knew for certain that 'up top', was about as close to the real world as Bucky Barnes was ever going to get.

Barnes had wandered from place to place for the two years he was free and on his own. He held jobs as a day laborer. He loved his jobs as a construction worker: a bricklayer, road crew, house painter, etc. He liked each place but left for the same reason. Not to lay a track hard to follow and avoid recapture, but because someone found out about his arm. Usually, he gave himself away by inadvertently displaying super-strength, or someone would see the metal by accident, or hear the noises the arm made. In any case, he would become a freak show. A few times he would have a girl and they would break up, usually over the arm, and she would tell everyone about his arm. He would be stigmatized, bad. People would not forget it. They would not get over it. They would not move on so Buck moved on. Out of frustration he would pack up and try again someplace new.

"You know, Barnes, I'm spending 12 to 16 hours a day in the lab. I really could use a lab assistant.
Like four hours a day, if okay with Tony. Starting now," Bruce said.

"Sure," Tony said, "I can share."

"You mean a white lab coat lab assistant?" Bucky said with a big grin on his face.

"Yes."

"Great, I'd love to be of use around here," Buck said then mumbled on his way out the door, "maybe I won't feel so . . . guilty." Buck went about his day.

"Did you guys talk about anything like this in your sessions?"

"No, never, I'm as shocked as you are."

Bucky worked up top. He worked in the lab. One of his jobs as funky lab assistant and grunt maintenance man was to empty the trash. Not the regular organic garbage. Everything like that was done by Tony's personal robots. But the lab waste, electronic and mechanical waste. This amounted to piles of wires, copper, and other metals, tubing, plastic shapes of all kinds, nuts, bolts, metal pieces of all shapes and colors. Bucky, a child of the Great Depression, horded these beautiful pieces of nothing. He picked the most attractive pieces: a bright green wire; an odd shaped piece of Lucite; a piece of white plastic, opaque and smooth. Spontaneously, in an evening he looked at his treasures, they took shape in his mind, and he arranged them into a shape. He connected them with Tony's plastics gun. A super high-tech glue gun that ejected a hot clear plastic that could stick anything together. His first structure looked like a ball trying to escape a tentacled object. When he was done he started to take it apart for a new idea and Nat grabbed his hand and said: "STOP. That's beautiful. It's evocative. Can I keep it?"

"I don't know why you'd wanna keep it but it's yours," he said and started another. The second took on a more human form. A human form escaping from, or being consumed by the tentacled object. She stopped Bucky from cannibalizing this piece for parts, and Steve took it to his bedroom to look at it and 'think'.

At this point, Tony commissioned Bucky to make a wall sculpture for his living room. He gave Bucky carte blanche to a room full of junk Tony stored just in case he needed spare parts. This piece had it's base on the wall and grew out from the wall. Again, a figure, human in appearance, escaping a tentacled object, but this time the form led out by a mechanical arm. Tony was so impressed he commissioned Bucky for a large sculpture to stand inside the front gate of Solaris. Tony considered this the ultimate form of recycling.

Steve searched for Bucky in his usual haunts, but he was not to be found. Steve ran into Banner.

"If you looking for Bucky he's up top servicing the panels."

The sun shone bright in the gale force winds. The Pacific ocean's loud lament dominated the soundscape. Steve saw him but whistling or calling for Buck was futile due to the wind. Bucky had an application on his cybernetic arm which consisted of four tentacles that came from his elbow area and operated independently. Bucky used these tentacles as tools. One tentacle hooked directly into the machine. Buck communicated with the solar array in this manner. When Steve first saw this, a creepy shutter of fear stung him, a repulsion over the blank look on Bucky's face. The feeling flashed by Steve and he touched Bucky's human arm. Buck disengage from the solar array and his face animated.
"Hey," Bucky said.

"You look like a natural working out here."

Buck did look natural. He wore a blue cotton denim shirt, steel toed workboots in a rust brown, carpenter pants in tawny brown, and a yellow hardhat with the word Solaris in black. Slung around his waist was the same tawny brown colored tool belt filled with tools. His hair was wet around the temples and stuck to his neck. He glistened with perspiration and squinted against the bright sunlight and wind.

"When I was free I supported myself as a day laborer. I did all sorts of things, ship mate, warehouse worker, I drove a forklift."

Steve noticed Bucky's cyber arm laid on the ground with the other tools. Buck detached the tentacled appliance from the array and his arm. He reattached his cybernetic arm at the elbow. He flipped a screwdriver out of his belt, twirled it in the air, and flipped it back into the belt, grabbed another screwdriver, and screwed the maintenance panel back onto the array. Cap was shocked a second time – all the wiring of the Winter Soldier's knife tricks lived intact in Bucky's brain.

"Need any help?"

"You're on. In a gale like this we get the most damage."

"What from?"

"Birdstrikes. You can imagine, Tony has a massive need for power. SOLARIS is totally off grid, even one panel down is an emergency," Buck yelled to be heard over the wind.

"I see. What can I do?"

"When a worker comes to a site like this," Bucky explained in detail. He knew Steve had never labored a day in his life. "The first thing you're assigned is the grunt work. Go in the shed, get a hard hat, gloves and a large bag," Bucky grinned big, "walk this whole field, and pick up all the dead birds."

The wind was fierce – something to battle. Spindrift whipped right up the inlet and blew crazy all around the top of the cliff.

"Great. This will be fun. How many dead birds can there be?" Steve said and Buck smiled again.

Four hours later Steve had the answer. Four hours of picking up dead birds gave him time to think. He wanted to get some insight into why he was so disturbed over these applications and upgrades Tony constantly made for Bucky's cybernetic arm. True, Tony had developed an interest in Bucky, but only the mechanical part of the man. The part Tony took ownership over. Tony did own all the cybernetic parts of Bucky. Does his ownership of the arm give Tony the right to command the human? It appears each new application/upgrade invaded more of the 'biological unit', as Tony called the human part of Barnes. And there was the rub. Where is the human equation, the human Tony ignores? The tentacles, the look on Bucky's face, where is this all going and when and where will it end? Is Bucky into something so similar to what he spent so much effort getting out of - operating under someone else's command? Buck is now 1/4 machine. When will he cease being human? At 1/2 machine, at 3/4th machine? Seems in conflict with the primary goal of Buck's autonomy.

Barnes was right about one thing, Steve thought, it felt damn good to work: to do something to keep the place running instead of just being a guest to be cared for. The feeling was pleasant, to belong, to work together for a common goal. At dusk the wind stopped it's gale.
First thing the next day, Steve, Natalia and Bucky met up for their morning workout. One area of intense interest was the double teaming. This idea flowed naturally from the fact there were three in the workouts.

Buck and Nat were in their warm up when Steve arrived a little late. They worked with Kendo sticks, one of Nat's favorites. Not wanting to interrupt, Steve watched from the door. He leaned on the door well and smiled as he watched his friends. The smile left his face when the phrase natural born killers came into his mind. The movie was on their list but they had not yet watched. Steve wasn't sure if there was such a thing as a natural born killer. Was it just easy to label someone an evil killer? Everyone knew evil was beyond understanding. Was calling 'evil' just an excuse to do nothing about the situations that created killers?

Steve knew these were deep thoughts. All he knew for sure was about himself. Steve knew he was made to kill. Were Buck and Nat made or born? Steve watched his friends. They fought each other like animals fight. They were focused. They were vicious. They fought like their lives depended upon it. This was their play. Their communication with each other was so acute, so precise, they so clearly anticipated the others moves that their strikes became so rapid, so bold, that they seem to be in another world. Their minds were gone from them. There was no retreat only attack. Steve would not figure it all out right there on the spot but he knew one thing: if there was such a thing as a natural born killer, Buck and Nat were the real goods, and they saw him.

"Hey, you're the last one in. So . . . you're first up for the double team," Buck said.

Steve feared as much. He grabbed a stick and the fight was on. They were already warm, so they had a double advantage. They were serious. They were focused. They were deadly. Steve felt he fought for his life. At one point he thought, 'have they lost their minds'? They stopped suddenly and laughed, as if communicating by telepathy. Steve lay on the floor, gasped for air, his face was red from exertion and wet with sweat. He felt he was lucky to be alive. They moved on as if nothing at all happened. Buck and Nat left him lay there and hit each other with the sticks as their form of a cool down.


Steve maintained eye contact with Nat. This was something new they were trying out: communicating through body language, through the senses, intuitively, to create a new level of teamwork. They sparred a few minutes. Steve knew he should be focused on her as intensely as he had seen Buck do moments earlier.

"You know Buck, I want to talk to you about Tony and all these upgrades. I have concerns about who's in control, you or Tony?" Steve spared with Nat.

"As far as I'm concerned Tony owns me. I'm alive because he says it's okay. If he wants me dead. I'm dead. It's as simple as that."

"You should think more of yourself, Buck."

"You should think more of yourself and pay attention. She could accidentally kill you."

Buck watched the action and gave them a good long time together before he attacked them. It did not take long before Buck was beaten by the team of Romanova and Rogers. Even though he enjoyed kinesic communication with Natalia at all times and could anticipate her every move, he struggled to keep on his feet.
It was a freak accident. She tripped him up, and he fell backwards. She tried and Steve tried to catch him or break his fall, but he hit with a smack and was unconscious for seven or eight seconds. Natalia leaned over him and called his name. She called him Angel. She called him Soldier.

When he woke he clutched her by her shoulders and held her tight. Dazed, Buck said, "It was just like this. Your braid fell here." He slid his hand across his chest. "You were crying, like now, and your tears fell on me. There was blood on my hand. I touched your face. It got really bright in the room. We fought . . . more like a dance. We stood in the corner and made up our sign language. I remember. I remember."

Buck took her into his arms. Their tears flowed freely as they kissed and consoled each other. Steve backed up from the scene and out the door. He stood by the door, breathed deep and sweated. He looked around to see if they were okay and went on about his day.

This one most beautiful memory opened a door and did not bother to shut the door behind it. Memories of all types flooded in. Bucky remembered he bit her. HE put the scars on her neck. Buck stopped his regular routine. Steve did not see him for days and days. Buck was in the constant company of Nat and Bruce who guided Buck to navigate the amazing breakthrough he was experiencing and find a path to acceptance. Buck spent hours on the BARF machine even during the day.

After five days of not seeing anyone at all Steve couldn't sleep. He paced around his room in the middle of the night, gave up on sleep and headed out to the beach for some fresh air. He found Bucky at the time portal, flipping through the instruction manual.

"Hey, what's going on?"

Buck did not answer. He touched the controls.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going home."

"Do Tony and Banner know about this?"

"I'm going home," Buck said as he powered up the Time Machine."

"Are you sleepwalking again? Are you awake?"

Buck made his eyes big and looked at Steve, right in his face. Yes, Steve thought, he did look awake.

"Well, can we talk a minute? What's your plan?" Steve stammered.

"I'm going back before the war. I'm not going to enlist."

"You'd just be drafted."

"I'm not enlisting and you're not volunteering either. We're going to Canada or Australia and join some war effort there," Buck set the machine. "Maybe we'll get the Pacific theater," Buck mumbled.

"What? Can you hold on a minute? Can you stop and talk to me just a minute. I won't stop you, maybe you have a good idea. Just talk to me, just talk it over with me." In his peripheral vision Steve saw Tony, Nat, and Bruce in the hall. He waved them off.
Alright," Buck rested his hands on his thighs and gave Steve his full attention.

"Why now? What's going on now? Why today?"

Buck shook his head three or four times: sped it up as he went. He breathed in and out rapidly. He closed his hands but left them at rest on his thighs.

"I've been captured, Steve, by the other side. I'm confined. I'm a prisoner again, on machines again. I don't know where I am. I don't know when I am. I'm not real. This is not real. Am I a machine?" His eyes were wide open; his voice was up an octave. "Am I even human? What is this?" Buck waved his cybernetic hand around. "I want my real arm. I want my real life. I'm going home." Buck glanced around suspiciously and whispered. "I have to get away from here... It's Tony... I like him. I like him and I killed his parents. How can I live with that? I want to forget, for just a minute. I want it not to be true." He lowered his voice into the baritone. "I want this over. I'm going back and start again. I'm going home."

"I really don't think you're awake."

"I'm awake... maybe for the first time."

"You know, you're already there."

"I know all that science fiction bullshit. One of us will vaporize or whatever. If it's me that would be a blessing but not before two sentences from me straighten the other one out and straighten you out too."

"You can't save me, Buck. I had to volunteer."

"Huh?"

"You know that last attack I had before you deployed, well, the doctor told me a few more like that I wouldn't make it. He gave me a year – one year to live."

"Dr. Matthews told you that?"

"Yep."

"Steve?"

"Yeah, I know. You can't help me. But I can help you. I see your struggle here, Buck. I bet you've been down here before?"

"Yeah, yeah, sure I have."

"You've been here six months. I can see you're more yourself every day." Steve moved in close to him and looked him in the eyes. Bucky's eyes were large, moist, his face relaxed, his mouth was open and he breathe deeply through it.

"Considering what you're about to do. I'm ready to tell you some cold hard facts about living in this time. It's hard for me to talk about this but it has to be discussed. We can't go back. As much as I know we both want to. We can't go back. It took me a long time. A long time of grief. A long time of childish wishes and dreams before it became a fact. So I'll save you all the trouble. You can't go back. You can't go back and live the life you were meant to live. And you can't escape this time, or stall, because you can't go back into stasis ever again. We are stuck here. We will live out our lives here."
"You probably haven't noticed, being isolated here like we are at Solaris, but things are different now in the real world. Friendships like we have. Friendships from the cradle to the grave kind of friendships are practically nonexistent here. Families don't stay together. People have multiple parents. People don't even know their cousins. There is mass movement of people for jobs. People don't trust their neighbors. People are cynical here, people are out for number one, and they think everyone has an agenda – and they usually do. People are forced to try to protect what little they have.

"They don't know what to make of us here, Buck. They've not seen anything like us and they don't understand it and to everyone, every man jack of them, I think they're jealous: Rumlow, Zemo, Wilson, even Tony.

"I've been here eight years trying to build friendships and camaraderie like we had in college and in the army with the commandos. Still Tony treats me like a possession, an object in his arsenal to use like any other weapon. I see you contorting yourself waiting for any sign Tony's doing all this nobility for something other than himself, his resume, his legacy, and that he genuinely wants to forgive and repair. That he genuinely wants truth and reconciliation. He may, he really may, he probably does, but you may never see it. I've seen you, it's been six months. You've been through the ringer, monitored 24/7. And it will be another six month and then a year. Hell, Tony's committed to five years of you going through a lot of pain, a lot of suffering to see nothing from him.

"If you get to the point you can't take it anymore, which is probably where you are right now. If you can't tolerate anymore. If you can't suffer anymore, please Buck, please suffer for me. Take it a little longer. Because this place is unbearable to me without you."

Barnes glanced around the area and set the time machine for October 2, 1941.

"You're going to leave without Natalia?" Steve said in an act of desperation.

"Who's Natalia?"

Steve sprung to his feet, grabbed Bucky's shoulders and shook him, and shook him some more, "Wake up, Wake Up, WAKE UP!"

Buck sprung to his feet. "What are we doing down here?"

"We've been having a conversation for 15 minutes. Good lord, you were asleep."

"I was sleepwalking again? I turned this machine on?"

"Yeah, you said you were going home."

"I have to turn this machine off. Tony will get a notice. He'll get a notification. A loud one. Loud enough to wake him."

Tony, Nat and Bruce stepped on to the scene. Bucky and Natalia flew into each other's arms like magnets.

"This is my fault," Nat said to the boys, "I fell asleep."

"I'll power down." Tony said to Bucky, "why don't you forget BARF tonight and sleep in your own room – take a break – we could all use a break."

"No, Tony, I can go on. If ever I needed that machine it's now."
Banner took his arm, "I'll set you up."

Buck studied Steve – searched his face.

"It's okay. You can go."

Buck lingered and rested his hand on Steve's shoulder.

"Really, it's okay. We can discuss it tomorrow. Go on now."

Buck walked with Banner and Nat, one on each side.

"Are you going to restrain me?" He said as they closed in on him.

"No," said Banner.

"No, Angel, no." Natalie slid her arm up his human arm and they disappeared around the corner.

"Do you think he heard you?" Tony powered down the Time Machine.

"God, I hope not," Steve rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. "Tony, you've got to let up on him . . . all these upgrades."

"I see your point. I'll lay off."

Another four days went by without a return to the regular routine. No one showed up to watch movies. No one showed up to exercise. Steve had not seen Bucky since the time machine fiasco. And there he was in the hall, standing motionless with his back up against the wall. He stared down the hall at something. His body posture was odd. Steve looked and looked again and there was nothing in the hall – nothing.

"Hey man . . . Buck?" Steve touched Bucky shoulder. "I missed you man."

"Steve!" Buck rushed into Steve's arms for a full frontal Russian man hug, equipped with a kiss on each cheek. Buck pulled away quick.

"Sorry, I know you're not huggie."

"No, I am huggie," Steve smiled and hugged Bucky. He held him by the shoulders, looked into his face, held his head by the neck and shook it around, "you look like shit." Steve roughed Buck's head around and hugged him again.

"Where're you headed?"

"Kitchen."

"Me too."

Bucky's hand shook as he drank his coffee. The coffee splashed into the saucer. He attempted to dab the coffee with a napkin but spilled more.

"Talk to me. What's going on? I feel totally out of the loop. I know I'm not a doctor, but neither is Romanova."

"But she's lived this shit, Steve. You could be spared."
"If you spare me you're making me redundant, and you know how I hate that."

"I do, but I haven't been in reality much until today . . . I really didn't want you to see me like that, if you don't mind."

"Understood. Fill me in now."

"You saw what happened in the game room, well, that was just the beginning. Bruce said it was a breakthrough. Memories just kept coming." Bucky sipped his coffee by putting his lips on the cup on the table and tipping the cup and saucer to his mouth. Steve had seen his parents drink coffee like this many times. "You know, I don't know if I like that word, breakthrough. It sounds like something big – sounds like something good - doesn't it? Well, it's not – it was a pain in the ass." Buck laughed and Steve followed suit.

"God, I missed you."

"I asked to see you many times . . . then I'd take it back," Buck smiled and laughed.

"Don't do that to me again," Steve was serious.

"I won't, okay? I really won't."

"You know you can't work your body like we do and just stop. It's really bad for you."

"Don't I know it. I feel like shit. Let's start the routine in the morning. No, let's do something now."

"We could lift?"

The kitchen door flew open, and three of Tony's personal robots rolled in pulling a room service cart. "Complements of Tony Stark." The lead robot said.

"What is it?" Buck was courteous to the robot as if it was human.

"Homemade chicken noodle soup."

"What?"

The robot laid out the spread: a huge soup pot on a warming tray; a soup carafe for leftovers, soup bowls, oversized soup spoons; crackers, butter and milk, a whole comfort food bonanza. The robots ladled the steaming hot soup into the bowls. The smell rose and hit Bucky's face.

"Oh, oh," his eyes moistened when he saw the big hunks of chicken, "those look like homemade noodles. Are they?" Buck said to the robot.

"That is correct."

Bucky took a slurp, "Oh God," he buttered a cracker, but his hands shook so much he crushed the cracker. He tried again by laying the cracker on the table to add the butter, but he crushed that cracker too. The moisture in his eyes threatened to spill over. Steve watched with pain at the sight, but he got it together and casually buttered a few crackers. "Here you go, Bud."

They feasted.

"There's so much left over, I have to take this to Natalie. She's not slept much the last few days. We'll start in the morning. Same routine?"
"Check."

Bucky rolled the cart into their room, right up to her sleeping body. The aroma of the soup may wake her, he thought. He joined her on the bed, soft, quiet, so not to wake her. He put his body in communication with her's by his body heat, breath and scent.

This is how they communicated with each other, through the body, through the senses. They groomed each other like primates. They challenged each other's bodies, yes, but they also soothed and massaged, pampered and pleasured the body. And through the body the spirit became exalted and healing began. When alone their bodies always touched: stroking, holding, feeling, pressing against the other. And even when alone they spoke through their sign language. He would shut his eyes and feel her small hands make the signs as if the spoken word would break the spell they created together.

He snuggled by her neck. He took in the fragrance of her hair and returned it with his breath. He knew every hair on her head, every crease of her lips, and every fleck of color in her eyes. He could shut his eyes and mold her form with his hands with perfect precision. His gaze travel to her neck and to the scars from the bite he now knew he did. These feeling? When will these feelings lighten up?

At times like this his poor mind traveled to her other scars; someone had done her worse. He was drawn to the scars on her side and shoulder. He caressed them, massaged them and ruminated over them. He tried to push them out of existence. He tried in every way both subtle, and overt to hear the stories of these scars. He planned in his mind what he would do to the perpetrators when he discovered their identities. If he knew anything, in his whole life, in the whole world, he knew he would learn their identities, in this one thing he was patient. Her reluctance to tell him only inflamed his imagination. Was it Steve? Was it Bruce? Was it Tony? Or did they fail to guard her from harm in some way? He did not want to kill again, but in this case he would make an exception. He took this thinking to the point of madness. She stirred and rolled to face him.

"Angel?" she said, and they held each other. He knew his disturbed thoughts woke her, but he said nothing.

"What's that smell?"

Bucky was all smiles as he watched her finish off the soup. He watched her every movement as if each bite she took nourished him too. They walked in unison to the beat of each other's heart. They opened the door to the balcony, wide open, and laid on the floor on a blanket. They looked at the stars and the moon. They listened to the roar of the ocean in the distance and the soft tinkling of the inlet waters. He wanted her pressed against his chest where he could warm her. He remembered nothing but this moment. He wanted nothing but this moment. She ran her foot up and down his foot and leg; she moved her hand up the back of his neck and down to the rhythm of the waves. After an hour, when she thought he was asleep, she stopped.

"Don't stop," he said.

She resumed the beat. He could never be stroked or petted enough. She could never fill him up, his emptiness was so vast. She knew this, but still she would love to spend her life trying. For everything she gave to him she was replenished 10 times over, her love was so strong. They rolled themselves in the blanket; she laid on his chest and they slept like that. His restlessness woke her during the night.

"Angel, is your arm making noises again?"

"No, I dreamed I held you with two real arms."
"Oh, come on. You know I love the cold hard steel pressed to my body," she said in her gravely deep voice.

"I think you really do."

"Hold me tighter." He did tighten his grip on her.

"Ah, ah, ah, ahaaaa . . ."

The regular routine at Solaris started the next morning. Things rolled along and smoothed out over the next few days until the whole thing blew up when again. Steve received an official communication from T'Challa, The King of Wakanda.

Steve carried five packets, thick with papers and called everyone together in Tony’s briefing room. Bruce Banner in his white lab coat, pocket protector full of pens and pencils sat at the back of the room. Making a brave attempt at professionalism, Nat and Buck sat across the table from each other. They eyed each other and communicated using their secret sign language. Tony paced around the back and sides of the room, his mind a million miles away. Steve was serious and looked overwhelmed. He spoke in a voice louder than normal and shuffled papers around without his usual confident organization.

"We have a serious situation here. It seems Zemo – yes that’s right the Baron, Colonel Helmet Zemo was extradited from Germany to Wakanda a few months ago. If you have any question about that, or curiosity there is an international UN statute that gave Wakanda first dibbs on him because he is accused of killing a head of state. Zemo was being held in a maximum security prison in Wakanda, and during some unrest at the prison, managed to take 34 guards, and prison staff hostage. He is holding them in the security wing of the prison that houses a shit load of munitions. He has control of the intranet that serves the facility. He said he will negotiate with one person and one person only, and that person is James Barnes.

"Is this a joke?" Buck said, but he knew it was no joke.

"Good try, but I'm afraid you're on the hot seat. In front of you is a copy of the transcripts of all phone conversations with the King, all data his courier sent formally pertaining to the expedition, maps, and floor plans of the prison. King T'Challa requests Barnes come immediately to negotiate for the hostages."

"Since when do the Wakandans need help?" Tony said.

"The Wakandans are clearly not asking for help, their exact words were, it would be 'convenient' for them, if Bucky would come. I request we read what's in front of us thoroughly, before making any decisions."

Bucky stared into Natalie's eyes as he had been doing the last few minutes. He signed to her – 'I am going' – she signed back – 'yes, of course you are'.

Bucky rose from his seat, put the packet under his arm and said to Tony, "Come on, let's outfit this arm."

Tony shrugged his shoulders at Steve as he followed Bucky out of the room. Steve threw his packet on the table with a snap. "Dammit all to hell."

Outfitting the arm took longer than expected. Barnes repeatedly blacked out after 15 minutes using
the invisibility hologram: a necessity for this particular mission. Tony and Banner worked steadily to extend the time to 25 minutes, the barest minimum acceptable range. Steve could not get near Bucky.

Finally, Steve received notice, the LearJet would leave in 45 minutes for Wakanda. Steve met the team in the ready room. Tony, Nat and Banner milled around the back tables handling equipment. Bucky was around 20 feet from them – alone. Steve made his move.

"Why are you taking this on?"

"This is just the kind of thing I want to do. I want to do something good, 34 hostages – if I can help get them out of alive -"

"You know it's a trap."

"I have memory problems, Steve. My IQ's intact."

"You're getting as sarcastic as he is."

"Come on, he's funny. He's funny as hell."

"Yeah – well – Zemo's smart. He's smart as hell. He's blindsided us before. He has something planned no one can see."

"There's a team - " Steve grabbed Buck's arm and cut him off.

"I was never briefed. There is no team. NO TEAM. We're going as back up only. You're going in alone."

"You've trained me for six months. And you've no confidence in me?" Buck removed his arm from Steve's grip.

"Yeah, well, I don't see your diploma. I don't see you've graduated from the school you're in. Banner hasn't released you for duty."

"I'm close."

"Bucky, you were crying in your noodle soup three days ago." Steve whispered and glanced around the room.

"Really? You're going to bring that up? You know I hadn't seen noodle soup since 1943 and besides, three days ago – that's a long time."

Steve held Bucky's arm again and applied pressure. Buck glanced at the event and back at Steve.

"We had a deal - to combat your impaired judgment – oh wait – you've probably forgotten – right? Let me refresh your impaired memory. You use MY judgment until your head's on straight."

"I'm overriding all that."

"It's still nuts in there and you know it," Steve pointed a finger at Bucky's head.

"I am in control," Barnes snapped back and hit Steve's finger from in front of his face.

"Then why are you losing your temper?"

"And why are you needling me?" Buck jerked his arm away from Steve again, shook off his rising
irritation and continued calm and rational.

"It's called setting proper boundaries."

"God, I hate when you babel pseudoscience like that. What? Did you hear that from Banner?"

"You criticize my attempts at personal growth while you stagnate?"

"I'm telling you honestly how I feel...right now."

Under great restraint, Barnes calmed and took a deep breath. "Okay, okay. Look. Success would be worth the risk. T'Challa took great risk for me. Hell, Steve, you go yourself." Bucky made himself mad this time. "Now, let me get in your face." Bucky turned to face Steve, close in, face-to-face. "How can I not go?"

Steve was silent. Buck stared him down. The heat was turned up on Barnes - his stare down so intense that any sane person had only one course of action, back up, for Buck's eyes said one thing and one thing only, they said, 'I'm capable of anything.' He was not bluffing. Buck turned to walk away. Steve, intimidated by Buck's intensity, pulled him back by the arm a third time.

"So, what happened to your, 'I'm not going to be so user-friendly' idea?"

"Tony didn't ask me to go. Zemo asked for me. And Zemo's gonna get me." Buck said in anger.

"There's other ways to use people."

"You aughta know."

Steve grimaced at that like he'd been hit in the face. He changed tactics.

"Buck, Buck, you know you don't have to do anything like this ever again."

"Why? Because I fit so well into society? I can go be a carpenter somewhere, have a home and a family? No, I'm gonna do what I'm trained to do. I'm gonna do what I do best. I am gonna try to make up..."

"What are you gonna do, kill him?"

"I'm going to do whatever's necessary."

"That program has been removed. You're not the Winter Soldier, you know."

"Wanna bet?"

"Now, what are you trying to prove, and who are you trying to prove something to?"

For a moment Buck looked unsure. But this time he pulled away from Steve using his cybernetic arm. Bruce, Nat and Tony watched the interchange.

"Whoops, trouble in paradise?" Bruce said.

"That's a first," Nat added.

"What a fight that would be," Tony rubbed his hands together.

Steve stood with his hands on his hips and watched Bucky walk away.
Buck strode to the door. He brushed his hair behind his ear a few times with his human hand and gave his hair a little pull.

Tony intercepted Bucky.

"You look like a rabid dog," Tony said.

Buck thought that was funny.

"You better heel, boy."

Again, Buck laughed at Tony's sarcasm and made it out the door.

Steve ground his teeth.

Tony turn to Steve and said:
"This is 100% his decision. 100%. Let him spread his wings. Let him fly."

Steve knew Buck was flying, alright, flying right into the jaws of hell.

Zemo controlled the whole west wing of the prison complex. This area housed all security: security housing, mess hall, weapons room; evidence storage room, recreational areas - the whole works. Zemo was holed up in the observation room. A row of security cameras took up one wall. He stood in front of a long metal table where he had placed all 34 hostages: guns, batons, battering rams, mace, knives, brass knuckles and the like. Behind the table was a row of two-way mirrors that led to the interrogation rooms. Zemo could see out the window of the main door the metal detector down the hall that all visitors must pass through before entering the command center.

At last, he saw a one-armed man pass through the metal detector. No lights flashed. No alarm sounded. Colonel Helmet Zemo looked the man over, searched his face. He studied the camera view as the man stood before the door waiting to be buzzed in. It was him, it was Bucky. Zemo walked to the table, flipped the rifle strapped to his chest under his arm, picked up his cell phone and buzzed his visitor in the security door. As soon as Barnes stood in the room the heavy security door slammed shut behind him. Zemo pressed send on his cell phone. A shutter of joy shook his body and he smiled. He pressed record video and held the phone up to record his guest. Buck did not move. He stood right inside the door around 25 feet from Zemo.

"Bucky! You're here!" Zemo sarcasm betrayed his smile.

"My name's Barnes."

"Rumor has it you were here in Wakanda on ice."

Buck shrugged.

"I heard they came to get you."

"Yeah – so?"

"I heard you're all together again, the triad, working together."

"Yeah – so what?"

"I heard Stark made you a new arm? Where is it?"
"You hear a lot. Yeah, well, it's removable, if that's any of your business."

The smile left Zemo's face. "Take off your shirt."

Buck slipped off his shirt.

"Place it on the ground."

Buck dropped it. He did what he was told, and quick, there was a time constraint on how long he could tolerate the invisibility hologram before he passed out cold on the floor, right in front of Zemo.

Zemo looked Barnes over with great scrutiny. He searched the hideous looking stump. He recorded and replayed, enlarged and studied the area to get a close look, an exact look.

"You have a nice physique."

"Shut up about that."

"For a cripple, that is."

"Oh, go fuck yourself."

"You look pitiful. You look helpless."

"I'll kill you with one arm."

"Oh! beautiful!" This put the smile back on Zemo's face. "I couldn't have written a better script for you to read to the world." Zemo pressed send, then record. He propped his cell phone on the desk behind him. He sat on the table, raised his gun to hip level and fired the rifle in the general direction of Bucky – not to hit him but to activate him – which it did. Barnes discontinued the invisibility hologram, exposed his true cybernetic arm and advanced the 20 or so feet to the man, hair flying in his wake. Zemo fired to kill. Bucky blocked a barrage of bullets with his arm. The bullets ricocheted and rebounded in every corner of the room, breaking the glass mirrors and screens. Bucky marveled at the Vibrainums ability. With his cybernetic arm first time in combat Buck ripped the strap from Zemo's body. The rifle flew across the room and hit the wall with such force it discharged 20 rounds before it sputtered to it's death.

'Lighten up', Buck told himself.

He grabbed Zemo by the throat; the metal fingers squeezed the flesh. Both Zemo's hands reflexively grabbed the Cyborg's arm. Everything stopped.

With every step Buck took, Zemo shrunk in stature. When Bucky held him by the throat he held a small man. A man who's neckbones he could crush like wadding up a piece of paper.

"Where are the hostages?"

"Kill me and you'll never find them."

"What? Did you send them into another dimension? I kill you, I find them. You tell me, and I escort you back to your cell." Buck applied enough pressure on Zemo's carotids to hold him uncomfortably. Buck was now willing to take his time and let Zemo play out his whole hand.

Zemo picked up his cell phone and said: "You may be interested in seeing this." He held the phone in front of Bucky's face. Buck saw the video of the Winter Soldier and Tony's parents, had been posted to YouTube. Buck shut his eyes. It did not take much imagination to see the video, in real
time, flying into every home, every street corner, government office, police station and CNN. When he opened his eyes he had gone to another place. With Zemo's body trembling under his pressure, at that moment, he knew he would never be free of the monster.

"I think I'll kill you twice."

Buck flicked his cybernetic thumb off Zemo's neck and pushed back the thumbnail to release the yellow mist of truth serum. The serum wafted up Zemo's nostrils, his head relaxed, his eyes rolled back in his head as the rush of the drug hit his brain.

"Now then. Where are the hostages?"

"They're in the freezer."

"I know you filmed it. Show me."

Zemo showed Buck the video of all the hostages frozen.

"I'm going to kill you now. Set your recorder." Buck put the squeeze on Zemo's neck.

"I . . . I did want you to kill me." Zemo became distressed, "but now I don't want to die," came rolling out of Zemo's mouth at 100 miles an hour.

Buck stayed the execution.

Buck glanced into Zemo's most pathetic, begging eyes. "Why did you do this?"

"Because I don't have any friends."

Buck let out all his air through his distended nostrils and touched the communicator on his cybernetic wrist. He spoke to Tony. "The hostages are dead in the freezer. Can you confirm?"

A few moments later Tony signaled back. "Confirmed."

Buck took a second to glance around the room. A calmness washed over him. He felt calm and alert at the same time. He felt an extreme alertness and a perfect calm. Alert and calm in a way that most people never feel. The professional had taken over.

"What do the Wakandans want me to do with this weasel?"

"Still killing on orders?" Zemo spit out the words barely able to get air.

"My blood is stirred. Don't test me."

"You were a killer before they made you."

"As were you."

Tony came back with, "they don't have the death penalty. They would like him unable to kill again."

Buck thought that over for a moment. He didn't like it.

"I understand." Buck shut his eyes again. How did he understand? Only a seasoned, trained, professional assassin would understand the subtlety of such a request. Again, the monster. They all knew, they all knew who to send. They sent the real thing.
It took a moment for Zemo to realize what his options were. But being a smart man and a trained professional himself, when the horror of what was about to happen to him became real he panicked, picked up a knife, and slashed Bucky across the chest. Buck opened his eyes with that. He squeezed his metal hand to choke Zemo off, and received two, three, four, slashes, the last slash across his face, before Zemo became unconscious, relaxed his hand and dropped the knife.

Buck felt warm blood run down his chest, trickle down his abdomen to his waistband; his abs rippled in a spasm. The slice to his face began above his ear and cut over his temple, following the hair line. This cut bled profusely. Blood pooled in his ear. He shook his head violently, flicking the blood out of his ear, only to have it fill up again, run down his cheek and drip off his chin like a leaky faucet. He brushed his blood from his chin and mouth with force and irritation.

He held Zemo. He held him, oxygen cut off from the brain and he counted the second 12, 13. Buck remembered little of his feelings the last years but he remembered this feeling. 21, 22, 23. Zemo looked small and helpless; he went limp. They were alike in many ways brothers.

"I could've been your friend," Buck said out loud. 39, 40. He held the pressure on Zemo. 51, 52, 53, Buck looked into his victim's unconscious face. He shut his eyes for a third time. He had an overwhelming urge to let him go, 63, 64, but he knew he'd kill again. 76, 77, He put his hand over Zemo's heart. 80, 81, Bucky felt Zemo's heart beat, rapid and strong. 95, 96, Zemo's skin became ashen. His lips turned white, then gray, then blue, then fatal blue. Buck felt Zemo's heart skip a beat - and again - wait a little longer. He waited. He waited. He waited. Zemo's face was swollen and the red turned to blood red. The Cyborg's metal fingers snapped off the pressure on Zemo's neck.

Buck held him against his chest. His organic arm and hand supported Zemo's head and neck – like one holds an infant. With one sweep of a metal to metal screech, Buck cleared the table of all the weaponry, and laid Zemo out: lungs breathing, heart beating – could not vouch for the brain. Buck stood still a few moments, his own body tingled and trembled. He called Tony.

Tony was the first person to enter the room.

"He killed them as soon as he got them," Buck glanced at his chest wounds.

So did Tony. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, no, yeah . . . I'm okay."

"His condition?"

"He's alive, but he won't be able to plan or carry out a similar attack in the future." Buck shuttered as he felt his blood run down his abdomen.

The EMTs came in to Zemo.

Bucky said to them, "that's my blood on him – on his face."

Tony peered into Buck's face. "Oh my God," was his response to what he saw there.

"He . . . I . . . "

"It's alright – come on. We're outta here."

"Tony . . . the video?"

"Ah, we'll deal with it, come on . . . NOW. The team's on the plane – engine running."
Buck turned to look at Zemo.

"The PLANE."

Buck moved slow.

"MOVE. MAN."

Finally, some force propelled Barnes forward. He picked up his shirt by the door. Blood ran into his eye stinging them. He slipped his shirt on, picked up the front of the shirt with both hands and wiped the blood, sweat and other fluids from his face. He hustled out the door with Tony.

The knife was sharp, the cuts clean, in two places down to the meat of the man. Banner stitched and glued and dressed up Barnes. The facial wound most disturbed Dr. Banner. The cut exposed the temporal nerve and the temporal artery. Banner saw it pulsing away. A few cells deeper the artery would have been severed. He wished, at that moment, he was a vascular or neurosurgeon. If he made any mistake, Buck could have facial paralysis for life.

Natalia was present. Banner mentioned the debriefing.

"The debriefing will have to wait an hour. I need some time." Buck was declarative.

"Then lay still," Bruce barked back. He glanced at Nat, shook his head and returned to the main cabin of Tony's Learjet.

"Lay here with me." Buck's voice rumbled through his clenched teeth.

Natalie slid in beside him.

"Let me look at you. You're so bright. Your skin glows like a child's."

She nestled close to him.

"Your eyes shine like a child's."

She didn't know where to touch him.

"When you come into view it's like a sunny day."

She held him close. His eyes twinkled at the sight of her.

"You're like eye candy."

"Where'd you hear that?" Her gravelly voice double-crossed her youthful appearance.

"Osmosis?" he shrugged. "You're so soft. So warm."

"Are you trying to seduce me?"

"Oh, you don't want me. I'm still wet," he gestured with his chin to his bloody chest.

If anyone told her any person on the face of the earth was capable of putting cuts like this on James Buchanan Barnes she would have screamed impossible. Yet there they were, red blood oozing through the white cotton dressings freshly applied. Natalie hovered her hand over his cuts like Reiki.
"How did this happen?"
"I shut my eyes."
"Whatever for?"
"What I had to do to him . . . I couldn't watch."

She kissed him on the lips and held him close. Close enough to get underneath the surface. She could read the emotions on his body like braille. He had sunk into something she had never seen. Something new. This scared her.

"Where are you? Where have you gone?"

"Oh, what the hell. That bastard Steve was right. I'm in no shape to take on a task like this. I had no business going in there. I was . . . it was . . . "

Natalie pressed as close to him as she could get. She put one hand on the back of his neck and her other hand low on the small of his back.

"Oh, the way you touch me."

She stared into his face and spoke to him like a hypnotist.
"I'm not going to question the decisions you made in there. No Avenger would. I'm not going to scrutinize or judge the techniques you used to get the job done. No Avenger will. You were the man for the job. You were the only man for the job. You were sent in to do a job. The job is done. Is it not?"

Her cool hand on the back of his neck felt like a waterfall. He opened his eyes. "Yeah. That's certain. The job's done."

"It's done."

"It's done – it's done. " Whatever he was in, he sank in deeper. She had not reached him through the mind. His madness blossomed to the surface.

"Ah . . ." Buck gasped.

"What is it?" she cried.

"I hear them. I see them."

"What do you hear? What do you see?"

"The others . . . it's a parade."

"Oh, my Angel. What can I do?"

"Touch me. Pet me. Make me know I am real."

"Oh," desperate to help him, she nuzzled, caressed and kissed him.

"I'm going to be sick." He bumped her off him, entered the airplanes tiny toilet and locked the door.

He felt hot, then cold, and he was sick. He sat on the floor with his long legs folded up under his chin. He flushed the toilet and watched the water spiral down and out to the atmosphere at 40,000
feet. He flushed a few times and followed the water in his mind, around and around, down and down, rushing out, in the spiral, out into the dark free fall. He shook off that feeling. He washed his face, brushed his teeth, washed his hands a few times, and there it was again, the circle, the spiraling water – he rode it down again.

An impulse over took him. For an instant, the horror of the present moment outweighed the horror of death. What on earth could he off himself with in this tiny toilet? He did not have to look far. He encircled his human throat with his cybernetic hand and squeezed. This is what I deserve, he thought, the same as I gave. By chance he saw his reflection in the mirror over the sink. He looked like Zemo, the same swelling around the eyes, the same shade of blue. All at once he was Zemo. So this is what it felt like. He could have been Zemo's friend, that was true. Maybe some truth serum floated into him, too. From this depth and a little anoxia, an idea was born. Bucky was moved by the idea into an image of the future. Steve's friendship had saved him. One single person alone had saved him. One person that did not give up. Could happen again because it happened once. He tingle all over with euphoria. That's nice, he thought, you feel good right before you croak off. His lungs spasmed for air. His legs trembled. His cybernetic hand tightened on his throat and seemed at that moment to have a mind of its own. Bucky's human hand grabbed at his mechanical arm. He tore at it. He bumped against the door. He struggled. Some kind of fluid came out of his mouth. His eyes felt like they were about to pop out of his head. He was going down.

His hand mechanically snapped open from his neck. He coughed, and choked, and spit into the sink. He gasped for air. He became weak. He slid down the sink to his knees. He held on to the sink, rested his face on the cold metal of the sink and listened to his heart race. His cybernetic hand tightened on his throat and seemed at that moment to have a mind of its own. Bucky's human hand grabbed at his mechanical arm. He tore at it. He bumped against the door. He struggled. Some kind of fluid came out of his mouth. His eyes felt like they were about to pop out of his head. He was going down.

The jet shook with the sudden impact of turbulence, Bucky went airborne and hit the wall hard with his shoulder. He snapped out of it. He stood before the sink and inspected his neck in the mirror. How was he going to explain the marks? He wet his hair, combed it with his fingers and pressed the whole mess, slick, behind his ears. He found a T-shirt that belonged to Tony. He put the shirt on over the bandages. He pulled the neck up as high as he could get it and went into the bedroom.

Natalia had opened the door to the main cabin and stood in the door frame to keep an eye on the bathroom and talk to the group in the main cabin. They all held on for more turbulence.

Steve stood close to her on the other side of the door frame. As Bucky approached, Steve raised his leg, and set his foot on the opposite door well, thereby, his leg blocked Buck from entering the main cabin.

Buck took the path of least resistance. He walked to Natalie, put his arms around her neck and kissed her forehead, cheeks and lips. He told her with his eyes, he was okay. He could not stand there forever so he gave in and made eye contact with Steve.

"You were right, smart ass."

"Told you so, moron."

"Creep."

"Creepy looking – you look like shit."

"You are shit."
"Great to hear things are back to normal," Banner said as he passed the trio.

Steve lowered his leg and allowed Buck and Nat into the main cabin.

Tony flicked a look and closed his laptop.

"Hey, that's my favorite shirt you're bleeding on." Tony barked at Bucky.

"This? It has a cat on it." Buck frowned. "Well, it looks better on me anyway."

"It's too small for you."

"That's what I mean," Bucky smiled.

"Let's get to it." Tony stated the purpose of the file for Jarvis. "Zemo in Wakanda debriefing."

"Zemo was crystal clear about his intention, sameo, sameo, to break us up," Bucky waved his hand around the room at Banner, Nat, and Tony. "Especially irritating to him is the three of us," Bucky pointed his index finger at Steve and Tony, "what he called the triad. He knew I was stored in Wakanda. He knew you came to defrost me and he knew the three of us were working together."

"Does he have the address of Solaris?" Tony said with his usual sarcasm.

"How could he have known?" Steve said to keep the meeting on task.

"He said a rumor."

"Any ideas?"

"The two facilities are relatively close to each other, maybe 20 km, someone who worked at both facilities?" Buck guessed.

"Where else do rumors come from?"

"We can find that out," Tony open his laptop.

"When he heard the rumor, he took the hostages to get his cell phone and post the video. He records everything why would that particular video be an exception."

"Damn," Tony said.

"The truth serum took him right to the core of the issue. He was after the same results, but he had a different motivation. He said he did it because he doesn't have any friends. I can further that logic – and he doesn't want anyone else to have them either. His most brilliant life work, to kill off the Avengers from within was ruined by the magnanimous Tony Stark, making friends of his enemies. His plan was to end in a blaze of suicide by cop: me being the cop. Recorded for posterity, of course. The serum changed his mind." Bucky completed his report. The triad formed spontaneously Steve, Bucky and Tony stood triangulated.

"What Zemo's condition?" Buck asked Dr. Banner.

"Coma. His reflexes, however, are normal. Vital signs are strong. Prognosis will be clear in a few days. How much brain damage was done? Hard to tell at this point."

Tony asked Bucky, "how are you now?"
"I feel crazy but better in here with all of you. I was sick."

"I've done that," said Tony.

"I do that about every time," Steve added.

"Include me in that," Nat said.

"We all do," said Bruce.

Natalia and Bucky usually showed no affection at formal meetings. This day was an exception. Bucky held her by her hand and drew her to him.

"How successful is Zemo going to be in reaching his goal?" Steve asked. Turbulence shook the Learjet and they all sat.

"Very successful. There is already a warrant out for your arrest in New York State." Tony nodded to Bucky.

"THE video, and the one of you threatening to kill Zemo with one arm, is on every news station worldwide. If, and this is a big if, we managed to get back to Solaris without being apprehended we are using the time portal and Barnes is leaving, maybe for a year, maybe more, until I can get you an acquittal."

"What! You're harboring a fugitive! Land at the nearest airport. I'll turn myself in. Acquittal? Acquittal? Tony, I killed your parents."

Tony reacted instantly – he hit Bucky in the mouth with his fist. Buck raised his arms defensively and stopped. Tony grabbed Bucky by the face and jaw with his left hand and jabbed him a few more licks with his right, pounded him and yelled in cadence with each stroke.

"Don't say my parents. Don't ever say my parents. They're my parents," Tony held Bucky's face and squeezed his fingers into his flesh. Buck's facial cut burst out some blood clots.

"Tony, for God sakes man!" Steve yelled.

Natalia slid beside Bucky's chair with her hands on his cybernetic arm. She was poised to intervene, if necessary... more to stop Bucky should his reaction go physical. He could kill Tony like the snap of a twig.

"They're my parents. They deserve the truth... the whole truth."

This was a blowup brewing. Tony relaxed a bit and said:

"When the whole truth, the whole truth for everyone to see about their death becomes known you will be acquitted, or at least pardoned," Tony held Bucky's face with one hand, held him by the jaw with the other. He pushed Buck's head back for emphasis.

Tony had made his point. Barnes saw no need for further displays of submission, or the need to tolerate the humiliation of having his neck exposed to an attacker.

Barnes slowly slid his metal arm from Natalie's grasp, and picked one of Tony's hands off his face and held it firmly, in a little ball, in his metal grip. Buck tasted his own blood for the second time in one day – he wiped it away.

Tony avoided Barnes. He never looked at him unless he had to and then only a glance. He was
never close to him. And now their faces were inches apart. Tony studied the face before him. He tried to land on one emotion from the series of conflicting emotions he felt. Tony looked into Bucky's eyes. It was true what they say, his eyes were a blue like no other. His skin alabaster, without a flaw. His hair shinned like silk. The mouth, the mouth that Tony distorted with his thumb, could not be spoken of. Tony's face softened. He became sober for a moment from the intoxication of his emotions. He let up his grip on Bucky's face. He moved his hand, his finger, gently over Bucky's skin, a motion that Barnes interpreted as a tender touch. Tony did not know what he was feeling. He watched red form around the rim of Bucky's eyelids, and moisture congregate in the corners of his eyes. Until this very moment Tony thought, he, Tony Stark, was the most handsome man on planet earth. The mouth again, the mouth he pressed with his thumb open slightly, air rushed out and Buck looked deep into Tony's eyes and spoke:

"Tony, what are you doing? Tony, these feeling are too much. You must give up, man. You must give me up and forget all about this. You gave it a good try. It's just too much."

Tony put the squeeze back on Bucky's face. Tony's eyes hardened. He saw beauty and he wanted to destroy it. Smash it. Mess it up. He saw it, he could not process it, he could not be it, so he wanted to destroy it, like men so often do. Tony dug his fingers into Bucky's skin and shook his head.

"Boy you've got a piss poor attitude. I'm not quitting. I'm not turning you over to the police. I can just see you with the police, blinking at the lights in your face. I'll never give up. I'll never give you up."

"Can you unhand to each other?" Steve suggested.

Tony glanced at Steve, "No."

Bucky glanced at Steve. His eyes said back off.

They were both intent to get something out or get something settled.

"Take the portal." Tony said.

"You think you've collected everything? There's more than you know . . . I did things . . . crimes." Buck glanced away.

"What? The prisoners? The prisoners you shot? The prisoners of war? That's on him," Tony jerked his head in Steve's direction, "that's on your commanding officer."

Natalie gasped and covered her mouth with her hand.

Buck eyeballed Steve.

"But it lives in me," Buck said loudly, "I survived all those years because I was brainwashed, Tony, not in spite of being brainwashed. It all lives in me like cancer."

Tony put more pressure on Bucky's face.

"If that's how you feel why did you stop in there? Why did you stop?"

"You have a camera in your bathroom?"

"NO . . . it's on you . . . or in you, rather . . . in the arm."

"Tony?"

"Just for today."
Steve saw by Buck's expression, a crack appeared in Tony's veneer.

"You could've set the hand on automatic and nothing would be living in you. Why did you stop?"
Tony turned up the squeeze on Bucky's jaw and face and Bucky jacked up the squeeze on Tony's hand.

"Why did you stop?" The two men stared at eachother.

Nat held her hands over her ears. Steve held her by her shoulders.

There was a pause. All involved were soothed, momentarily, by the hum of the jet engines.

"Sometimes one person can make all the difference," Bucky's attention darted to Steve and Nat.

"And you might be that person in someone's life?"

"Yes, that's what I was thinking. I can't make up for anything if I'm not here."

"Now then, we can talk sensibly. You could turn yourself in. Yeah, sure you can. You can spend the next year or five behind bars punishing and torturing yourself, and lose all the ground you've gained, which is considerable, or you could pick a nice year, lay low, and work on your obvious self-esteem issues," Tony added under his breath, "and other glaring mental problems I'm not rude enough to mention at this time." Tony continued, "you could build on your progress and finish what you committed to do. Personally, I'm glad the video is out there. I'm gonna bring the truth to light regardless of your decision. If you're here or not here. If you're alive or if you're dead."

Buck was hurt more by Tony's last statement than any punch in the face.

"That live or dead crap I just said, I want to retract that right away. You know I want you to take the portal." Tony sat on the arm of Bucky's chair. Tony loosened his grip but did not remove his hand from Bucky's face and jaw. "You know, I know you're over 100 years old, but I figure you've only been alive on the earth about 25 years. I have lived considerably longer. Take it from me, your punishment will come. Punishment always comes. You want to suffer? You will suffer. No one can escape it. There is no free lunch. So don't rush it. When the time comes you can take it like a man. Like you just took the pounding from me. Which I do not take back. I wanted to smash your face for a long time. It felt so good."

Bucky glanced at the beads of perspiration on Tony's forehead. Buck took off some of the squeeze on Tony hand. He was unaware of the pressure the metal hand exerted.

"Will you take the portal? Give me a year. You decide. I need to know fairly quickly," Tony let go.

The Cyborg's fingers opened and Tony's hand fell out to his side.

"I'm on edge. I need to take five." Tony walked by Bruce and whispered only to Bruce. "Come with me. I think my hand is broken." Banner and Tony shut themselves off in the bedroom with the medical supplies.

Bucky leaned forward in his chair. He put his elbows on his knees. He rested his head in his hands. He did not move.

"Having a good day there, Butch." Steve rested his hand on Bucky's shoulder. Nat put her hand on his other shoulder.
Bucky looked up and smiled, "that was funny, thanks." He placed his organic hand on top on Natalie's.

"I'm going to go in and talk to him," Cap said.

"Please don't." Buck glanced up at Steve. "Leave it between the two of us. I can't imagine what it's been like having me at Solaris for six months – a constant reminder."

"Angel? Please let me talk to him. That was humiliating."

"He knows he can't hurt me physically. Let's leave it . . . this time." Buck gazed into Natalie's eyes, their faces inches apart.

"You know," she said. If you decide to turn yourself over, I'll be there on visiting day. If you decide to take the portal, I'm going with you. I'm ready to go this minute without a second thought or any hesitation." Bucky flew into her arms. They stood by the bar, leaned on the bar and floated with the shifting turbulence of the jet.

"I shouldn't even have to say this, but I will make my position clear. I'm going with you, too. I don't need a refresher course in how to live in the 21st-century alone." Steve joined the couple at the bar.

"Steve? No."

"Skip the argument, Buck. I'm going. Prison or portal."

Natalie pulled Steve into the circle and held him there, her arms around both men's waist, drawing them to her. The men circled her with their arms. Steve rubbed Bucky's shoulder and Buck put his hand on the middle of Steve's back. Nat, Steve and Bucky looked into each other's faces and acknowledged to each other the emotions they felt in the face of adversity and the outlandish adventure they were about to undertake. Steve lingered his gaze on Buck, he'd seen this wild look on him before.

Meanwhile – in the bedroom.

"How long do I have to keep my hand in this ice bucket?"

"20 minutes in and 20 minutes out."

"Are you sure this hand is broken?" Tony asked.

"Yes, Tony, I'm a doctor and I'm sure. Your hand is fractured in a few places. Who do you want to see?"

"I'll go to my doctor in New York City . . . damn."

Tony and Bruce moved back into the main cabin.

"I need to be on the main computer unless you'd like to see U.S. fighter jets trying to force us to land."

"It's that acute?" Cap questioned.

"Think about it – this administration? Having something like this on me. To force down my private aircraft and arrest my guest. They'd love it. I'm balancing thousands of satellites to find a place to get lost." Tony took a seat at the computer.
"Barnes, you're bleeding through." Bruce noted.

All eyes focused on Bucky. Tony's T-shirt showed big red lines.

"Why am I bleeding like this?"

"You need to be restful and horizontal. You've been neither. Come with me."

Bruce and Buck entered Tony's bedroom and closed the door. Banner pointed to the exam table and Bucky laid himself out gladly. His chest hurt. His face hurt. The Novacaine had worn off. The whole side of his face throbbed like the kettle drum with each heartbeat. He felt sick, weak and dizzy. He felt he was growing bigger, like the jet was too small to contain him.

Banner removed Tony's T-shirt from Bucky and his dressings. "You need to stay down for a while."

"When do we land for petrol?"

Banner pressed the video/audio connection with the front cabin and Tony.

"What did you say?" Banner curled his hand over his ear, motioned he could not hear over the engines roar.

Bucky spoke louder, "I said when do we land for gas?"

"Few hours, I guess," Banner cleaned up the bloody mess. Two stitches on Bucky's face had burst open. Banner made short work of the repair.

"These wounds are nasty," Banner put a heavy pressure dressing on Bucky's wounds.

"I feel crazy, Bruce."

"What would – feel crazy – do, Bucky?"

"I'm gonna turn myself in. There's no doubt about it. I'm gonna tear this place apart. I'm gonna fight anyone who tries to stop me from getting off this goddamn plane."

"Oh, I see." Banner stayed calm. "Let me give you something for that. You need to be still for a few hours," Banner saw Tony on the video screen holding up four fingers then six fingers, "for, say, four or five hours of sleep. Deal?"

"You don't need to finesse me Bruce. I'll take the drug."

"Alright, here's the new needless method."

Banner handed Barnes an inhaler with a tube of the lavender liquid known as Tranquility. "Now, this liquid will aerosol as you inhale. You must take it all the first time. No second chances. Inhale all the liquid. Watch the liquid go down as you inhale. Pace yourself."

Buck raised up on his elbow and took a few deep breaths. The bandages were tight, but it felt good somehow. It felt good to have a boundary - a limit - something to keep him from exploding. He inhaled slowly. He watched the liquid go down and down halfway. The muscles across his body jerked and spasmed. He strained to hold himself up. His eyelids fluttered. He hit the bed, out cold. Nothing remained in the canister. He laid like death. He did not breathe for a full 30 seconds. The rolling rhythm of his respirations returned. He was at peace. Bruce Banner was at peace. The people in the front cabin were at peace.
Chapter 2 Every Other Emotion

Bucky Barnes woke with the Learjet's violent break for landing. He was alone. He was just as crazy as when he went out but now he was calm. He was calm and out of his mind. Calm enough to make a plan and crazy enough to execute the plan.

He moved so fast. He appeared suddenly in the main cabin. He spoke to those in the cabin. "Going out for some air." He unlocked the emergency door with a snap, jumped off the plane and ran. He ran 30 miles per hour. The team in close pursuit: Tony suited, Natalie armed, Dr. Bruce Banner with a tranquilizer gun, and Captain America directing traffic.

"Iron Man, tackle him. Black Widow do not engage with him physically. Talk to him, play good cop, and keep talking. Hulk shoot, at your earliest opportunity."

Iron Man tackled him. Hulk shot him with the tranquilizer gun in the back of the thigh. Black Widow talked, and talked, and still Bucky ran. They followed. They followed until the crazy animal cornered himself in a blind cavern up against rock walls on two sides. Barnes stood panting, all of the cuts bleed through the dressings. Even his facial cut dripped a thin streak of serosanguineous fluid down his face. The team surrounded him.

"Now it's my turn," Cap said as he walked into a face to face with his friend.

"Where do you think you're going, you crazy lunatic?"

Buck backed up against the stone wall of the cavern, spread his arms out on the wall - his hands open - his fingers grasped the stones. His eyelids fluttered. His head look too heavy for his body.

"I'm going to the police." Buck's speech was slurred.

Cap slid close to peel him off the wall. When he was close enough to be seen by Buck, and Buck could manage the effort, he roared like a lion and hit Cap in the face with his cybernetic fist. Steve staggered back a surprising distance, righted himself, and grabbed Bucky off the wall. Steve tapped him a left and a right in quick succession. Bucky's reaction time was bad, but he still stood. Buck started a windup. Cap shook his head. He hit Barnes with a full strength blow. Bucky's body and head hit the ground hard.

"Geez," Cap knelt down by Bucky's side, felt his neck, felt his jaw and pushed his head a bit.

"You fool. I could've broken your neck. Well, he's out. Iron Man fly him out of here. We're right behind you."

Tony's Learjet took off from Stark's private watering hole in the middle of nowhere. Cap was designated babysitter. Natalie and Bruce were needed on computers. Not taking any chances, Cap pulled the side panel off the plane by the examination table and chained Bucky's cyber arm, above the elbow, to the steel frame of the jet. Buck slept like a baby through the whole procedure.

Steve thought about how he complained about boredom on their first 20 hour flight home from Wakanda. He would enjoy some of that boredom now.

Buck slept nine hours. When he woke he appeared sane.
Steve dug for the truth. "Are you prepared to talk sense and do some problem solving? We've got a real situation here."

Buck tensed his muscles to sit and winced at all his painful areas. He touched his chest, he touched his head, he touched his chin, he touched his neck.

"You're all there," Steve slid his chair in close.

"I thought it might not have been reality."

"That's a big negative."

Buck smiled at Steve. He felt better.

"You know, you're a lot of trouble." Steve smiled back at Bucky. Buck looked better. "Now, are you going to choose the Time Machine?"

"I want to take the Time Machine."

"Why?"

"All that was said, one thing was the truth. I made a commitment. I wanna keep my word. I wanna graduate from the school I'm in." Buck gave Cap a small grin.

"That's a really good reason," Steve handled Bucky's chain, but Bucky intercepted Steve's hand.

"No, I like it. I want it. I want to be restrained."

Steve looked into his friend's face. He was better but still wild around the edges. Buck grabbed Steve's hand tighter and looked into his face.

"Steve, I need to be restrained."

"Do you need more drugs?"

"I think not . . . We'll see . . . Maybe."

"Nat!" Steve called loud into the front cabin. "We're gonna time travel."

"Fabulous!" Natalie sat on the bed and rattled the chain on Buck's metal arm. "Let's pick a time. Where do we . . . I mean, when do we want to go . . . I mean, you know what I mean."

"The future," Bucky said.

Natalie frowned. No one liked the future they were in.

"Like the 60s." Bucky teased Steve. "You can see the Beatles."

"We need a specific year." Nat tested the strength of the clamp on Bucky's upper arm.

"When did the Beatles come to Southern California? You've got all that stuff memorized." Buck said to Steve but looked at Natalia. He put his hand on hers.

"1963." Steve said. It was true, he did have it memorized. Steve got the oversize screwdriver to unscrew Bucky from the chain.

"1963?" All future time travelers agreed on the year. Natalie was happy to go to a future for someone
born in 1917.

"Let's see if 1963 checks out."

Tony got in on the conversation. "Why 1963?"

"Da Capin here wonts to see da Beills," Bucky said in a very bad British accent.

"The what?"

"Ya now, da Lods," again with the cockney accent.

"What?"

"The lads. You know. The Beatles."

"Good enough reason." Tony ran the calculations. In 1963 Natalia Romanova was not yet born. Steve Rogers was frozen in the Arctic. Bucky was not in use in 1963 or 1964. He was in Cryo, Tony repeated the Winter Soldier was inactive in 1963, and as far as time travel was concerned cryo-freeze was just as good as dead. Tony remote controlled his personal robots at Solaris. The robots warmed up the Time Machine, set the date for September 10, 1963 and packed the bags.

The moment Tony's Learjet entered US airspace they were detected on radar. Upon landing at the Solaris airstrip they could see fighter jets in the distance. Buck, Cap and Nat went down the hatch door in the bottom of the jets floor and down the manhole cover entrance to Solaris, hidden in the middle of the airstrip.

Tony made one move after landing. He backed the Learjet a smidge, and placed the front wheels of the plane over the manhole cover, making it virtually invisible. It would take an act of Congress to get him to move his plane on private property. Tony did not need anywhere near that much time.

The personal robots escorted Buck, Steve and Nat to the Time Machine. A robot spoke to Natalie, "Tony said to personally hand you this." The robot handed her a diamond encrusted choker, "in case you get into trouble. The diamonds pop out easily and can be sold." Nat snapped it on around her neck.

Another robot handed Bucky the communicator from Dandalo's ship. "Tony said to tell you he always has his on him in case anyone drugs you again."

A third robot spoke to Steve. "Tony said you need nothing because you will not get into any trouble." The three friends picked up their backpacks and stepped into another time.

Tony squirmed in his chair. All his body parts leaned in the direction of his elevated right hand that throbbed with pain. With his elbow on the arm of the chair, his hand raised to the sky he looked at his hand and moaned.

"Could you make some Martinis?" he said to Banner. Tony moved his fingers. Pain shot down his arm to his elbow and up to his shoulder. He would not try that again.

"We're just gonna sit here?" Bruce waved a hand in the air.

"Did you incinerate his bloody dressings?"

"Yes, of course."

"And my cat shirt?"
"POOF."

"Ooh," Tony frowned, "then yeah, let 'em come to us."

Bruce and Tony sat in welcomed silence and sipped their Martinis. It felt pretty sweet knowing Barnes was 50+ years away in the custody of two super powered Avengers. When they heard helicopters land, Tony suited up and went out to the landing field.

Tony raised his hand, "STOP, this is private property. I am armed. State your business."

A voice from one of the helicopter said loudly, "FBI, we have a warrant to search your aircraft."

Iron Man lowered his hand, "come ahead . . . with the warrant."

The FBI searched the plane. They harvested fingerprints, cells, and hair samples. Bruce made another batch of Martinis. They searched the hanger, the ranch house and the grounds. They ask a lot of questions that Tony did not answer, well, he answer two.

FBI, "Why did you land?"

Tony, "Why don't you look at the gas gauge, Investigator."

FBI, "Where were you going?"

Tony, "The flight plan is laying right in front of you, Sherlock."

FBI, "I'm trying to understand how you must feel right now Mr. Stark but please just answer. Was James Barnes on this plane?"

Tony, "Okay, yes. I gave him a ride to Wakanda on King T'Challa's invite."

FBI, "And you left him there?"

Tony, "You don't see him do you?" Tony waved both hands in the air and regretted it later.

FBI, "Were you friends?"

Tony, "Yes."

Bruce threw a shocked look at Tony.

FBI, "That's tough."

"BREAKING NEWS . . . TONY STARK . . . " Was heard four times a day, every day, from every new service worldwide for one solid year. Tony gave press conferences. He turned over evidence directly to reporters. He hired attorneys. He hired a press agent. Tony spoke to Congress in open and closed hearings. He turned over all his Winter Soldier Investigation material: 5 GB of data, reams of hardcopies, film and tapes. Dandalo supplied the physical evidence of the control chip and a record of the chips implantation and removal. Dandalo spoke with the FBI, the Justice Department and a closed congressional hearing using Skype. The YouTube video of the Winter Soldier and Tony's parents had been viewed 500 million times before public outcry forced YouTube to take it down, much too late, for everyone had their own copy.

Public opinion was brutal against the Winter Soldier with demands for the death penalty. Anger and
outrage at Tony for harboring him was extreme and no one believed Tony did not know where the Winter Soldier was. As more and more facts became known plus a critical leak from the FBI, opinions started to soften and change.

First a few veteran groups and POW/MIA groups spoke out. Brainwashing and torture were nothing new. There was a precedent, a precedent of leniency, even if it involved human casualties.

The case was debated in every home, office and bar worldwide. Fights broke out. Friendships disintegrated and marriages moved from the tennis courts to the divorce courts. Attorneys argued over the statute of limitations in the state of New York. The Justice Department discussed civil court versus military court. The debate went on and on and everyone had an opinion. Experts from different fields spoke to the press and presented their evidence. Hypnotists said the Winter Soldier looked hypnotized in the video. Others in the field presented conflicting opinions. Drug company executive said he looked drug. Neuroscientist said brainwashing was real other neuroscientist said it was impossible. The Winter Soldier's behavior in the video was scrutinized and analyzed – every movement, every expression – for evidence that he knew what he was doing or recognized his victims.

Only one thing was crystal clear: James Barnes killed Howard and Maria Stark, brutally. There had to be consequences. He could not get away with murder. Yes, Barnes was a victim, but he lived. Tony's parents were dead and that was the bottom line.

So it went around and around in circles. The case was tried in the court of public opinion.

New York State decided to prosecute: the charge manslaughter. Barnes was found guilty. Tony, being a taxpayer in New York State had some sway with the judge sentencing Barnes. The meaning of Tony's plea was enhanced by the fact that Tony was so harmed by the defendant.

James Barnes was sentenced to 70 years in prison, 35 years for each murder. He was allowed to use his 70 years as a prisoner of war as time served. Case closed . . . for the moment.

The next big blow came when the United States Army announced it was proceeding with a court martial and dishonorable discharge of Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes.

Tony flew into high gear. He flooded the news services with his idea that James Barnes/The Winter Soldier was made by the U.S. Army to succeed as a soldier, and because of these very skills, he was picked out, singled out, for the Nazi Super Soldier Program. Tony received his strongest public support on this issue. A staggering 72% of people in public poles said they did not want to see Barnes court martialed. The same amount saw Tony favorably, going to the mat for someone who had wronged him so severely. Most people supported Tony's goal of Bucky's recovery as a message to anyone who might think of taking American soldiers and messing them up in the future. Eventually, the army lost motivation. The Barnes case was shelved somewhere, buried in bureaucracy.

The whole process did take over a year. There were reports of copycat kindness. People made moves to forgive their transgressors. Revenge lost some of its appeal. It look like the concept of truth and reconciliation had become a fad. Tony's favorability rating ratings were so high that there was a backlash. Rumors flew around that the Justice Department and the FBI were trying to make a case against Tony for fraternizing with an alien. The military wanted Tony to turn over his time machine. Tony, recognizing a bigger battle on the horizon called Barnes on Dandalo's ship communicator.

"Hey, we have a disaster back here in the real world. I need your help."

"Funny you should say that. We need to come back. We were about to call for a lift."
Tony and Bruce waited at the time machine for the time travelers. Natalie, Steve and Bucky stepped through the time portal together as was mandatory. One year and a few weeks in 1963 had changed them, it had transformed them, and the transformation was staggering. They look like golden forest nymphs or pagan gods. They glowed. They were dressed in as little clothing as considered socially acceptable in the 1960s. They were tan. In fact, they were bronze, with pink areas on their cheekbones and shoulders, indicative of fresh sun exposure. All exposed hair had been bleached white by the sun. Their hair glistened and added to the glowing quality of their skin. Gone were bulky weight lifting muscles: they never entered a gym all year. Their muscles were sleek and firm and evenly developed like a cat.

Steve wore crisp white plaid shorts with a gray and green stripe and a jade green t-shirt with a KUKUI tree in white on the front with Sierra Club written below. His eyebrows and lashes were bleached blonde by the sun and his face was so bronze his blue eyes popped, and his toothy grin glowed brilliant white. No one bothered with a haircut. Steve had a nice shag going.

Natalie wore a bikini and a mini sun dress of earth colors. The material of the dress was so sheer, the bikini showed through the fabric. She wore bracelets and necklaces of what looked like found objects from the sea. Her hair bleached out strawberry blonde was braided down one side of her shoulder. She carried a small fringed bag with a strap across her chest. The bag held the diamond encrusted choker Tony had given her a year ago. She wore no makeup. She has never held so much beauty on her. She radiated a healthy natural look.

Bucky's sun kissed brown hair had been twisted into braids or dreads that pulled back into a loosely coiled knot at the back of his head. The knot gave the impression that even a slight jarring would unleash his hair into a feral dance. His Bermuda shorts were lemon yellow with green palm trees, all faded out, washed out of color as if he was the fifth owner. They were topped by a plain white v-neck t-shirt two sizes too small. Taut brown skin with bleached out blond hair sparkled between the two.

The men were clean shaven which was not the style for the time unless you were a surfer – facial hair make sprays. Their eyes shined. Their faces shined like stars. They looked electrified. Tony and Bruce felt like moles that had just crawled out from a hole underground and were blinded by the sun light. They squinted. They were speechless.

"Is everyone feeling alright? Is anyone feeling any effects from the trip?" Banner came to and asked the time travelers.

They all agreed they felt some vertigo that was subsiding. Barnes said he felt claustrophobic.

"We're never in a building," Nat laughed.

Overly casual, Buck sat on the nearest table. His sandals slipped off his feet and hit the floor with a snap. Everyone glanced at the noise, and watched as Buck flicked his toes around sending sand all over Tony's sterile floor. Natalie stood in front of him between his legs facing the others, their arms around each other. She turned to him, laid her hand on his chin and made eye contact with him.

"You okay, Angel?"

"I guess. Feels close in here . . . don't you feel it?"

"No."
When her hand breezed by his face he kissed it, her head by his, he kissed it. He kissed her cheek and her shoulder. He held her tight, and kissed the back of her head, her ear, and her neck. He left his head by her shoulder. She put her arms around his neck, kissed his chin and his cheek. No doubt they were sickening. Steve stood by and grinned like the proud owner of two adorable but miss-behaving puppies.

"So what's the disaster?" Buck came up for air.

Tony was not impressed by the display.

"You first."

"Nat?" Steve said.

"Well, this one here," Natalie grabbed Buck by the chin and shook it around a bit, "needs the BARF machine."

"It's really nothing."

"No now," she put both of her hands on his face. She attempted to move his mouth like a marionette to get the proper response. "Come on, now, say yes."

"It's a minor inconvenience is all," he took her hand away from his mouth. Smiling, she attacked his face again with her hands.

"Alright, alright," he laughed, "I might benefit from the BARF machine. Now, you tell the rest."

"We're pregnant." Natalie beamed, Steve beamed, Bucky not quite a beam.

"That's impossible," Bruce Banner said.

"That's what we thought," Natalie said.

"That's what they all say, right? Har, har, har," chuckled Steve.

"We have three theories on how this happened." Bucky's face was serious.

"I am on the edge of my seat." Tony crossed his arms across his chest.

"Don't bring up that third idea Angel, okay?" Nat whispered but everyone heard her anyway.

Bucky smiled and teased her. "Well, the first idea is they messed up her surgery."

"That sounds likely but it doesn't explain why now. What's the second one?" Bruce crossed his arms over his chest too.

"The second idea came from Steve. Probably, maybe, something about what was done to us. The experiments? The enhancements?"

"That could be. And the last one?" Banners curiosity was peaked.

"Don't say it," Nat's voice took a serious edge. She put her hands over Bucky's mouth. She held his mouth closed as their hands played a little dance over the battlefield of his mouth.

"Don't. Don't," she said.
"The third idea was – critical mass," everyone laughed. Tony laughed loudest.

"You said it. You bastard." Their little dance of hands turned into a slapping contest as she slapped at his face and he tried to stop her.

"They could've thought that up on their own, Honey." Buck laughed and snickered along with the rest of the men.

"Quit laughing. Don't look at me. Don't talk to me. I'm a pregnant woman. Get that sticker off your face."

"Honey . . . " Buck whined, and Natalie huffed off down the hall.

"I need to examine you," Banner said as she shot by.

Buck rushed after her, not bothering to slip on his flip-flops.

"I need to examine you too." Banner said as Barnes flew out the door.

Steve, Tony and Bruce laughed and Steve glanced around the door well and listened.

"Seriously, it must be hard being a pregnant Avenger," Steve stuck his head around the corner again.

"Oh . . . it must be serious. He speaking to her in Russian."

"You guys look great. What have you been doing all year?" Bruce said.

"Surfing."

"Surfing?"

"Yeah, by accident, we fell into a great cover. When we went through the time portal, pop . . . I can tell you there is nothing out your back door in 1963. We walked south down the coast. The sun was setting so we built a fire, cozied up, and slept on the sand. Thank you, Tony, for the protein bars, man, and the survival blankets.

"When the sun came out so did the surfers. Some youngsters teased Nat into trying it. She went out and came back another person. I went out later that day. It was like nothing I've ever done. Bucky had those fresh slashes on his chest, so he went the next day or two. In two weeks we were addicted. We surfed seven days a week, sun up to sundown. We followed the waves down the coast and around the circuit. Around the world really, the whole deal: Raglan, New Zealand; Teahupoo, Tahiti; Mundaka, J. Bay, South Africa, Frigates, Fiji, everything. We competed. Natalie financed our whole endless summer with her winnings. She has your choker in her bag." Steve stuck his head out to check on Nat and Buck.

"He's changed to French. Now that is a last resort."

"That's all you did was surf?"

"Oh, at night we'd go wherever the other surfers went. To clubs. To see bands. To see rock bands and dance. We'd have parties right on the beach with a fire and dance . . . We ate a lot of fish."

"Now, with all the sex the rabbits out in the hall we're having, what were you doing?"
Steve's face was open and relaxed. He slouched on a table top. His body posture was casual. He spoke without censoring his words, like a man used to speaking that way.

"Well, they slept on the beach in their sleeping bag. So, I had the van to myself. I'd just pick up a chick, a bird or a beach bunny usually . . . I mean, most nights."

"I need to examine you too."

"Why?"

Tony and Bruce rolled their eyes. They could not believe the change in the man.

Meanwhile, Natalie walked down the hall to a large window that overlooked the ocean. Buck right behind her.

"Can we skip down to the make up kissing?" Bucky pleaded. Natalie pulled away.

"You haven't kissed me in a whole hour. Just one little kiss? I'll argue with you the rest of the day. Just one? See how I suffer?"

She knew it was a mistake to look at him. She looked. She kissed. Only once, but that one kiss ended with flushed faces.

Steve glanced around the door frame again.

"They kissed. I know surfing sounds like a lot of fun but this is serious." Steve animated with gestures, "it was like a calling – for me it was like, all I had done physically my whole life was in preparation for this – for surfing. We're serious addicts. I am jonesin for a wave right now man."

It was hard for Tony and Bruce to judge how serious Steve was, he had changed so much. He was so open, without cynicism.

Bucky and Natalie started back, but stopped halfway down the hall. Buck's voice rumbled into the briefing room. Nat's voice tinkled away into thin air.

"That's what this is about? You want to be treated like one of the guys?"

There was a pause for an inaudible reply.

"But guys think you girls say no 75% of the time."

Muffled response.

"Okay 50%."

Inaudible reply.

"You tell me no."

Natalie's voice did not carry down the hall.

"Yes you do."

Muffled reply.

"Well, you HAVE said no."
Silence.

"You've had to have said no to me sometime?"

Her reply was inaudible to Steve and the guys.

"Alright, alright, I can't think of a specific time you said no... not just right off the top of my head!"

Muffled reply.

"Yeah, okay, so you haven't said no, but they don't know that. They're gonna think you're like every other girl."

Again, Natalie's reply could not be understood.

"You want to be one of the guys? You want to be treated no different than one of the guys? Well, then, I'll tell you, you're gonna be teased. Guys are gonna tease. I'm teased. We're all teased."

Long silence for her reply.

"If that's true, you're just gonna have to take it. Just take it like a man."

Natalie and Bucky made it to the door where Steve stood... she balked. Bucky pulled at her. The guys looked stoic.

"Come on, Honey, look at these guys. They're your best friends. Let them in. They understand. They could be such a great support to you. They love you. Look at their faces."

Nat did look. She looked at the ridiculous smirks they all wore. Natalia Romanova laughed. The guys laughed with her. There was chitchat of congratulations. Natalie said she was so ecstatically happy, unbelievably happy. Bucky and Nat cuddled affectionately, and Buck said something like, 'it's not like we planned this.'

And Tony said: "Yeah. You don't take responsibility for anything. Do you?"

Bucky did not move. No one else moved either. The air was sucked out of the room. Only Natalie continued to talk. She had talked through the whole interaction between Buck and Tony.

Bucky felt an unfamiliar heat in his chest. Suddenly, he heard his heart beat in his ears. He saw metal appear through the human hologram on his cybernetic arm. He felt a surge of adrenaline, and his pupil's dilated all the way open. The heat expanded in his chest and flashed up both sides of his neck. He looked at his arm. It was all metal. His left hand involuntarily formed a fist.

"What's happening?" Astonished, Buck stared at his arm. "I'm not doing this."

"It's the fight or flight response we gave you for the arm. Just ride it out. It'll pass." Banner said.

"Goddamnit Tony, what did you say to him?" snapped Nat.

"This hasn't happened all year," Steve said.

Natalie took hold of the cybernetic arm. She tried to pry open the fist Buck made. Bucky's soft blue eyes were a thing of the past. His pupil's dilated so large, no blue remained. This black eyed creature fixed his razor sharp gaze on Tony and advanced a few steps.

Natalie's open palm pressed against the middle of Buck's chest.
"Whoa, cowboy. This doesn't have to be physical. Just say what you need to say."

Buck stared Tony down. "You had your chance to kill me. I won't give you another." Buck's deep voice reverberated throughout the room. He took another step toward Tony.

Natalie steeled her position in front of Barnes.

"Now, that's a threat. Can you come up with something else?"

Tony initiated his suit up protocol. Cap advanced to the scene.

"I'm gonna to rip your head off." Buck said in English but with a distinct Russian accent. He stared at Tony. His intent written all over his body posture, like tattoos. All the muscles of his body contracted.

"What the hell's going on?" Cap said to Banner.

Captain America did not wait for an answer. He intervened and grasped Bucky's right arm. "You should keep those thoughts to yourself."

Bucky shoved back hard on Cap's chest.

"You won't stop me." Buck spoke to Cap but did not avert his gaze from the lock he had on Tony.

Natalie forced Buck to look at her.

"He doesn't recognize me!" she exclaimed.

"That's not Bucky." Cap yanked at Nat. She stumbled into his arms.

The black eyes of the Winter Soldier left Tony Stark and traveled up the wall behind him to the ceiling where he stared, fixated, like an aura or an oculogyric crisis. His mouth was open. He panted for air.

"Cease-fire." He said in Russian. "Holster your weapon." Again, in Russian.

"What's he saying?" Banner question.


"I want everyone out of this room, now. This is a medical emergency. Everyone out. Out." Banner said with authority.

Tony, Steve and Natalia left the room.

Banner approached Barnes who did not protest or acknowledge Banner's presence in any way. Banner touched his back and looked into his face. He broke a vial of spirits of ammonia under Bucky's nose and watched. It worked. Buck jerked out of his fixed posture and relaxed his stare at the ceiling. He grasped Banner's hand that held the ammonia by his face and glanced around at Bruce.

"Easy. Easy now." Bruce said.

"Huh?"
"It's okay. You're okay." Bruce placed Buck's hand over his heart, and pressed Buck's chest and back between his hands like a sandwich. Bucky breathed up against the pressure.

"It's okay. Just concentrate on your breath."

"I . . . " Buck mumbled. His metal arm stretched out mechanically. "Oh . . . " he said and shut his eyes.

"Can you come to the lab? You're okay."

"Natalie?"

"I'll send for her as soon as I get you straightened out."

Buck put his metal hand over Banner's hand on his chest.

"Right."

Bucky sprinted into the BARF room and threw himself on the gurney. When his head hit the sensor board emergent alarms sounded.

"Shit!" Banner said to himself. "He's gonna seize."

Buck laid in the fetal position. His metal hand in a fist on his knee. He relaxed his cybernetic hand, and made a fist over and over kneading the metal fingers into the flesh of his leg. His human hand covered his face. He gasped for air.

"Barnes, it's medically necessary I treat you for this." Buck nodded affirmative. Banner quickly started an IV, and the medication in bags dripped away in minutes. Bucky hid his face from Banner. He averted his eyes, panted and kneaded his metal fingers into his leg.

"Let me try something?"

Dr. Bruce Banner placed his palm on the back of Bucky's head, and his other palm between Buck's eyes on his forehead. He applied pressure. Banner felt vibrations from Buck's body. He held his pressure steady. His patient's breathing slowed.

"It would help me treat you if I had your subjective account of what happened in there?"

"I'd rather have you rip off my fingernails."

"I know what you're feeling. I know what it feels like to lose control."

Buck glanced at Banner for a split second. Bruce lifted Buck's chin for a looksee. Bucky blinked his eyes rapidly and gazed to the left of Bruce and to the right of Bruce, anything to avoid direct eye contact.

"Come on. I'm your doctor." Bruce was gentle.

With a few more flutters Bucky made eye contact with Bruce. His pupils were large but a small amount of blue beamed out around the black pupil. His metal fingers dug hard into the flesh of his leg.

"They look better . . . a little. Now, tell me?"

"I know Tony says things. I was prepared to make some smart remark. I wanted Natalie to go with
you. I wanted to go with you," Bucky glanced at Banner. Bruce slid a stool to the bedside and relaxed into it. Bucky scrutinized the IV in his arm. He glanced at the tubing and the bag, and the liquids drip, drip, drip. One alarm beep stopped.

"Please, don't hold anything back."

Bucky covered his face with his hand.

"I was going to laugh it off, but I went into a RAGE." He said rage so loud, the alarm that ceased, sounded again.

"Come on Buck."

"Well, I heard . . . " Buck stopped, listened and looked at his cybernetic arm.

"You heard?"

"My arm's making noises." He held up his metal arm and glanced at Banner.

"What kind of noises?"

"Mechanical noises and other noises . . . like it's thinking."

"How longs that been going on?"

"About a week but all day today. That's another reason we wanted to come back – "

Banner cut him off. "I'll do an all systems diagnostic."

Bruce was in shape he was in from some offhand comment Tony made. This kind of thing needed to be built over time. Banner glanced at the hole Buck was churning into his leg with his metal fingers. The site turned blue, purple and oozed a pink liquid.

"Now." Banner approached Barnes.

"What?"

"I'll take the arm . . . now." Banner disconnected Bucky's cybernetic arm at the shoulder.

"Ah!" Buck exclaimed as Banner abruptly snapped his arm off.

Banner laid the arm on the bed by Buck's leg.

Buck cringed when the arm made a series of jerks and twitches as it shut itself down into stillness and silence. Buck was visibly relieved, relaxed his body and sunk into the soft cushion of the gurney.

"Go on."

"I thought my arm was making some new noise but then I realized it was gunfire. I couldn't deny it. I heard gunfire," Buck blurted out, "off in the distance. It got louder and closer. It was gunfire."

Banner increased the drip of the IV. A few minutes passed. Two alarms stopped. Bulky rolled to his back, placed his human palm between his eyes and applied pressure, pushing his head into the firm mat.
"I can't tell you how good that feels," Buck said.

"Tell me the rest."

Bucky looked at the ceiling. "It was like I watched from high up in the room." He looked at his hand. He shut his eyes. "He meant what he said to Tony. He would've carried out his threat. Steve couldn't have stopped him. Nothing would've stopped him. The gunfire was so close. No more, please, no more. Then someone said jump," Bucky glanced at Bruce, "I did. I jumped from a great height. I thought Tony grabbed my ankle. I realized it was my tether, my leash. I hit the water. I felt my board break when it hit. Then I hit bottom." Bucky relaxed his arm to his side. One alarm remained. He looked straight up at the ceiling. "I've been down there before. I always like it down there. It's like . . . peace." The last alarm ceased.

"Bucky, who told you to jump?"

"God, I guess." Buck whispered half asleep.

"Is your arm making noises now?"

Buck looked at his cybernetic arm laying beside him.

"Can't you hear it?" Buck shut his eyes and fell asleep.

Banner sat for a moment, expressionless. He touched Barnes on the forehead. He took the penlight out of his lab coat pocket and checked Buck's pupils again. Blue dominated the black pupil. Banner stared at nothing and attempted to digest Bucky's account. A small beep, beep alarm sounded.

Tony called out from the monitor room.

"Hey, Doc-tor, your pat-ients not breath-ing," Tony said in a singer.

Banner slowed the IV and robotically turned on the O2, placed the bag mask over Bucky's face and slowly squeezed oxygen into him. He watched his chest rise and fall gracefully.

Tony spoke from the door. "A little overzealous with the joy juice in there?"

Banner chuckled, pointed to the pulse oximeter of 100% and said, "Just shallow respirations for a moment." He returned to his expressionless stare and lost track of time until he heard Nat and Steve out by the monitor board. He picked up Bucky's arm and joined them.

"Is he alright?" Natalie questioned.

"He'll sleep all night now. Go in."

As if anyone could stop her.

Bucky's body curled around itself. His hair, free long ago from the knot, fell over his face. Natalie smoothed the hair from his face and kissed his forehead. He stirred and she backed out of the room.

"What was that?" Cap asked.

"I'll have an answer for you in the morning. I'm running tests. Jarvis is collating. I need information from you two about the last year's events. Any illnesses, especially mental illness, medications, especially psychoactive medications, injuries, especially head injuries, infections, especially high fevers, drug use, stress of any kind? I know he's under severe stress but anything else going on I don't know about?"
"He almost kills himself every day on the waves he's so reckless. He's probably has a concussion daily," Cap thought . . . "He's always mental . . . but nothin' like in there."

"He's totally freaked out over this pregnancy," Natalie added. "Um . . . he took LSD."

"What? When?"

"About three weeks ago," Natalie said.

"Off the street?"

"No, of course not. He went to Timothy Leary."

"Buck took LSD from Timothy Leary? He took LSD 25?"

"Yeah, it was Leary's personal supply, I think," Nat said.

"Yes, it was LSD 25, I saw it. I read all about it," Steve added.

"Now, would you two please, kindly sit down here, make yourselves comfortable and tell me the whole damn story," Bruce crossed his arms over his chest.

The whole damn story went like this:

"Hey, Boss," said the bodyguard, "this is the third day the same guy's on the front porch. He insists on an audience with you, his words. He said he's not going away. Says his name is James Barnes gives his occupation as surfer."

"Not another drug crazed hippie?"

"Doesn't look like a hippie, Boss. He's buff, man, and tan. Looks like he's been living outdoors though. Could be a beach bum. Could be a surfer – no beard."

"Yeah, some of those surfer dudes get radical out there on the waves. James Barnes, James Barnes, sounds familiar. Well, let's take a look at him. Show him in."

Bucky did not stop to look the room over, he walked directly to Timothy Leary, and offered his hand, which was not clean.

"James Barnes, sir."

Tim shook and offered a chair. Tim walked around the desk and sat on the corner, his arms across his chest. He did his ten second size up.

Timothy Leary was noted for, was famous for, his 10 second size up. He was so good at it he published papers on the subject. Probability he would, overtime, be proven incorrect was less than 7%. Tim would later dictate the following to add to his statistics. James Barnes: here we have a serious, sane, sober, very unkept gentleman in considerable mental pain.

Bucky was dirty. His hair was dirty, uncombed, half in a knot on the back of his head, half hanging down samurai style. His clothes were dirty. He was odiferous.

"Are you homeless son?"
"We have a van. I have a sleeping bag on the beach – if that's homeless – then I am, but I've been on your porch three days."

"Sorry about that. You can imagine what kind of craziness shows up on my front porch."

"I saw some of them."

"I was about to order lunch. Can I interest you in joining me?"

Bucky glanced at the clock on the wall, 10 AM it read, he smiled and said, "Yes, that's very kind of you, thank you."

"Now, what can I do for you?" Timothy Leary fiddled with some papers on his desk.

Tim's bodyguard brought a tray with a pot of hot tea, cream and sugar - the whole set up. Buck made a cup with lots of cream and lots of sugar. It was the best thing he ever tasted.

"I think you may be able to help me. I've read some of the studies you did at Harvard with prisoners. I was a prisoner," Buck paused for a breath and continued, "a prisoner of war," he stopped again. It seemed too harsh to drop it all, to blurt it all out.

"It's alright." Tim observed James Barnes as only Timothy Leary could look at someone – right into the soul. "Just go right to the center. Right to the core."

Buck took a deep breath. "I was a sergeant. I was captured. I was tortured, of course. But they used . . . I was used for medical experiments, medical torture, medical interrogation, human experimentation, of all kinds. Hypothermia, isolation chambers, suspended animation. Various other things, psychological torture. I was given drugs. I was brainwashed, memories extracted, memories implanted. They tried drugs to brainwash me at first, later they use devices and different machines . . . ."

Buck broke off. He waited and watched for disbelief or horror that would make Tim emotionally pull back. He saw none. Bucky continued carefully. He walked a fine line. He wanted Tim to know his situation was dire, but he did not want to be rejected for sounding insane. But his story was insane; it sounded insane even to him.

"I was programmed in someway and forced to do unspeakable things, heinous acts, assassinations, killings, many times over many years. When my captors were attacked by a third-party I escaped. I had significant memory gaps, amnesia really. After a time the brainwashing leaked, and I had flashes of memories of these acts and other things real or not real at any time, day or night."

"Are you having problems sleeping?"

"I did. In sleep I would recall the acts, and I would wake abruptly. I had work done in that area. I don't think it's an issue now. I sleep fairly well."

"Who did the work?"

"I was at the Solaris Research Facility."

"Where is that?"

"Here in California."

"I don't know it."
"It's private. Over the last year I've done nothing but surf, be with my girlfriend, and eat fish." Bucky smiled. "I've bathed my brain constantly in the best feel good neurochemicals the human body can produce, and still this dominates me, it taxes me, it wears on me. It's like a ball of lead in my brain that I can't make any smaller or any lighter or jar loose in any way," he shook his head quickly and slapped his head with the palm of his hand.

"Oh, I function alright – surfing all day and sleeping in a sleeping bag on the beach with my girlfriend. About a week ago my girlfriend and my best friend, another surfer who lives with us, confronted me about my reckless surfing. I've had many accidents," Bucky made parenthesis with his fingers, "many near drownings; more than they know." Bucky rolled his eyes. "The last incident, I injured a novice with my recklessness. My friends say I've crossed the line. They say I'm a danger to myself and to others."

"What do you think I can do for you?"

"I need to look at what happened to me from a different angle – from a different perspective. I need to push past this – somehow clear a place so my life can move on."

"And do what?"

"I don't think surfing is a lifestyle. I know some people do but I do not. I want to function well enough to make up, somehow, for the damage I've done. To hold a job. To have a family, a home, be a father, to be a husband. I want to fit into society. To be of use instead of a drain, which is what I am. My girlfriend and best friend have surfed with me all year. Their lives have stopped to help me through this. My girlfriend deserves better than a sleeping bag on the beach."

"They sound like truly loving friends. You're lucky to have them, but we are not going to concern ourselves with them right now or be defined by their reality."

"You mean you're taking me on?"

"Yes, I think I can help you."

Lunch arrived. Buck ate slowly with manners, even-though, he wanted to cram the whole turkey sandwich into his mouth and swallow it without chewing.

Bucky was not half bad at sizing people up himself. As he ate he took stock of the famous psychologist. Tim seemed deep in thought.

"Well, what do you think of me?" Tim said.

"You're a mind reader," Bucky laughed, "hearing my story out loud just now I wouldn't have believed it, but I think you do believe me – but I think there's a but, isn't there?"

"I do believe you. There is a but. The technology needed for . . . "

"I can assure you –" Buck stopeed talking abruptly.

Tim stared at Bucky, he knew somehow the store was closed. "You're not going to tell me anymore are you?"

"No, I'm not . . . I cannot. I said too much . . . I wanted to confess . . . to unload, I guess . . . to get rid of it."

"That happens a lot. Don't worry about it. I'm confidential." Tim rubbed his head. "You wouldn't
happen to have any physical evidence to support your far out story?"

Bucky handled the unusual looking salt shaker on his lunch tray, held it at different angles and studied it as Tim spoke. The shaker was blown glass, handmade, unique in form and aqua in color.

"That's quite an interesting problem. Physical evidence?" Buck continued to examine the shaker. He turned it over to look at the bottom and salt poured out - spilled out. Shocked, he quickly righted it. He picked up a pinch of salt and threw it over his shoulder. As his left hand passed his face his attention followed. He flicked the salt from his fingers.

"Alright," Bucky said. He turned the human hologram for his cybernetic arm off to expose it's true metal appearance. He waved his metal hand slowly, gracefully. He presented his arm, palm up, for Tim to look over. For added effect he activated the EMP just a bit, just enough to cause a 3 inch arc of light to shoot from the palm and dance around. With his steel blue eyes and deadly stare he looked over the top of his cybernetic hand and across the table at the astonished Timothy Leary.

"You can touch it if you like, examine it."

Tim's mouth was open wide. He came around the desk and did just that. He touched the metal. He ran his hand up and down the arm, flexed the wrist, folded the fingers, and unfolded the fingers, pushed up Bucky's shirt sleeve, and saw how the arm was connected to his body. He threw out adjectives: amazing, elegant, unbelievable, supple.

"How do you activate it?"

"I can't. I'm not going to . . . "

". . . To answer any more questions?" Tim finished the sentence for him.

"I know. You're right. I can see that this is distressing to you. You're not here to satisfy my curiosity. Son, you have shocked me to my marrow. I probably won't sleep a wink tonight, and I LOVE IT! Can you stay here?"

Bucky turned the hologram back on his arm.

"Whoa? Wow!" Tim said at the sight of Bucky's arm change again to look exactly like his human arm.

"I can stay."

"Can you take a massive amount, a barrage of psychological tests for me, before and after dosing?"

"I'd love to."

"I should have you out of here in a week. We stay up late around here and sleep in. I should caution you - I've been arrested probably 20 times over the last three years, so staying here - anything can happen."

"Thanks for the warning." Buck gave Tim a big smile. He was struck by how sweet Tim was, warning a mass murderer and assassin, that the police may come to the house and look for drugs that are not even illegal in 1963.

"Can your friends come if needed?"

"Is that customary?"
"Not mandatory, but nice if I could talk to them once. When you are coming down it's nice to see a loved one. It can sometimes be a profound experience - an opportunity you may not want to miss."

"They would come no doubt. They may show up without being asked."

Tim opened the door to reveal his bodyguard had stood on the other side of the door the whole interview.

"Give Mr. Barnes the bedroom with bath." Tim emphasized the word bath. Bucky laughed out loud.

"I'll send up a change of clothing. I'll call you for the real lunch." Both men smiled.

Three days later Bucky heard the van pull up in front of Tim's house. He raced for the door, Timothy Leary right behind him. The van's door flew open, and Natalie ran, Bucky ran to each other. They hugged and kissed and repeated the same multiple times. Steve watched on with a smile. Tim watched and shook his head at their child like exuberance for each other.

"Why don't you show your girlfriend your room? Give me a chance to talk to your friend."

"Honey, I'd like you to meet Timothy Leary, mindreader."

Natalie shook his hand, "Hello, there."

"And my other partner Ace."

"Nice to meet you sir."

Buck pulled Natalie along. They ran up the steps, Bucky, two steps at a time. He opened the bedroom door with a bang and jumped on the bed. He scooted to one side and patted the top of the mattress with his hand. A broad grin spread across his face.

"What a nice room – and a bed – and look at you," she jumped on him, "your hair," both hands ran through his hair, "your hair is so silky!" she exclaimed.

"I washed it three times." He said with pride. He relaxed on the bed.

Natalie kissed his hair.

"Breck shampoo...smells so good. And look at you...you're so...you're so...clean." She slid down his chest kissing spots along the way. She put her face on his chest and smelled his shirt.

"TIDE," she said, "Um, um, good."

She picked up his shirt and ran her face over the skin of his abdomen. She licked and smelled and tickled him.

"DIAL SOAP," she said.

She clasped her knees to his hips and sat on his lap. His arms moved into the surrender position. Her hands rippled over his abs. She slid her hands up his lats, to cup his pecs with her hands. She spread her hands slowly across them.

"Ah," she moaned. She slid her hands across his chest to his shoulders. She held him down with one hand on his chest, pushed his shirt up, kissed him on his abdomen, and worked her way up his chest, she lingered at the pecs. This is where she sat up and slowed down. She fell on to him. She kissed his neck and worked her way up to his lips. She kissed him on the mouth.
"PEPSODENT," she relished the Pepsodent kiss and kissed him again, "PEPSODENT," "PEPSODENT," "PEPSODENT," she whispered. Each Pepsodent kiss was longer than the one before.

Done playing around, Buck abruptly traded places with her and kissed her romantically.

"Being without you was like death." He nuzzled her neck, kissed it, and breathed out his passion upon it. He tasted and smelled her skin.

"FISH," he frowned with a sour face.

"UGG," she pushed him off her with a kick, a shove and a laugh. She jumped off the bed.

"Where's the bathtub?"

Buck pointed and jumped out after her.

"I wanna wash your hair."

They were loud and banged around like people not used to being indoors.

Downstairs in the office, Timothy Leary was giving Captain American the 10 second size up.

"Are you guys vampires?" Timothy asked in all seriousness.

"NO." Cap said with a laugh.

"Because I've never seen anything like you man."

From Tim's point of view they look like another race altogether: aliens, mythical gods, androids, uberhumans - something. Timothy was flat out fascinated.

They heard a big bang and commotion from upstairs. Natalie screamed.

"Get off me! Stop it, that hurts," followed by another loud scream.

Cap and Tim reacted badly for a moment until they heard bath water shoot out the faucet, laughter, and a door slam.

"James is obsessed with the bathtub."

"No doubt. The last time we stayed in a hotel was two months ago," Cap went right to the chase, "I'm guessing JAMES was compelled to tell you the truth?"

"I don't accept anyone if I feel they are not truthful."

"Since you are a professional, I suppose I don't have to tell you how confidential what he told you is, and how dangerous . . . "

"I understand your concern. I can see you're protective of your friend and that's a beautiful thing, man, really, but under no circumstances can I discuss what he said with anyone. That includes you."

"I see, well, ah good, that sounds good," Cap was happy to hear a serious professional under all the folderol.
"Are you aliens?" Timothy smiled.

"NO."

"If I guess right will you tell me?"

"No."

"You guys must use the same decorator. I know you're here to support your friend. I'm here to tell you how you can do that."

"Yes, I want to understand and help if I can."

"I will give you an overview. Tomorrow James will take LSD. I will be with him for around six hours maybe more depending on my assessment of him. When he's coming down - "

"Down from where?"

"The trip."

"Where's he going?"

"With this type of LSD at the dose he will have tomorrow, 100% of the time guaranteed, he will get off the level of consciousness he is on, the one he lives on, the one he's used to, and he will move to another level of consciousness. From that place he can see his life, life in general, the world – the universe – in a way not possible from the level he is on now; the level that has been dominated by others."

"What do you mean?"

"Most of our lives, most of us live in realities determined by others, imprinted on our brain by education, religion, politics, and by authorities. Tomorrow he will experience another type of reality. He will not be living his life, he will experience being alive. From this place he can make adjustments to his thinking, his ideas or beliefs. Not intellectually or emotionally but experientially. What his subjective experience will be, can range from mildly pleasant, scary, or profound. It's individual. In any case, he will not be harmed by the experience. Drinking a bottle of tequila would be 10 times more harmful. If you have heard anything to the contrary it's simply propaganda. No one who has any skin in this game of life wants you to transcend the reality they have taken such great pains to create for you. When I'm sure he's coming down, I'll turn him over to you and Honey. This period can last another six hours or more and is quite lovely and insightful in and of itself. Do not lead him by suggestion or questioning. Do not judge by body language or tone of voice. If you can't do this just pass on seeing him – no problem. Please don't feel pressured if you don't believe in what he's trying to do. I know it's a big learning curve, but what are your thoughts so far?"

"I see his struggle. I know he's desperate. I look at him, and I see a man standing on a cliff. Every time he takes his board out, it crosses my mind that I won't see him again," Steve stopped talking. He shook his head and continued, "no, it's more than that. He was honest. I want to be honest. That was almost a white wash. When I look at him, I think he'd like to get a gun and blow his brains out, all over that nice wall of yours, behind me. That's what I see. He won't say it – he won't do it - but that's the god's honest truth of how I feel. So, if he thinks he can get a different take on it, or get some relief, or if somehow this treatment will lighten his load in some way, and it sounds like it may, I'll do everything you suggest."

"Yes, of course. You're a good friend son. The goal is to lighten, enlightenment for sure. We're solid. Now, are there any issues or stresses of late, that you have seen, that maybe he doesn't see? In the
sessions things denied, ignored, or forgotten tend to come up to the surface. What may come up tomorrow that he may have not told me about?"

"Besides the pregnancy?"

"Honey is pregnant?"

Cap rolled his eyes and used his hands to express himself. "Really, I'm not surprised he didn't tell you – he's flipped out, this wasn't even a remote possibility."

"WOW, I'd like to talk to Honey tonight. How long does this, ah, upstairs usually take?" Tim said with a smile.

Cap smiled too, "minimum five hours, maximum five days."

"Hmm," Tim rubbed his chin, "you know, James has been eating regular meals here for about four days - no fish. I'd wager you a bet that he will be in the dining room for dinner."

"That's quite a bet. I'll take that bet," Steve loved this guy.

"Can you stay here? I have one more bedroom."

"I'd love to. Do you have any reading material about this LSD? This treatment?"

"I have just the stuff. Here you go, dinner at 8."

Steve walked into the dining room a little before 8pm. Natalie and Bucky sat in the same chair at the foot of a great table. She straddled his lap. He held her with his cybernetic arm up her back and stroked her face, neck and hair with his human hand: their chests pressed together, their faces an inch apart. Her arms wrapped around him. One hand slipped up and down the nape of his neck. She circled her fingers with his silky hair. They both wore sly smiles as they gazed into each others shining eyes. They made a pretty picture. A picture Steve messed up upon entering the room. He rubbed them both on the back, and cupped the back of their heads as they looked up at him. Steve could not help smiling at how they glowed. It was infectious. He felt the glow rush up his hands to his face. Natalie made a move to stand. Bucky moaned at her departure and yanked her back.

"What possessed you to give your real name?" Steve whispered.

Buck waved him off and motioned for silence. He flew into action, jumped from his chair, grabbed Steve and pulled him out the front door. Tim intercepted Nat at the front door and took her into his office for their chat.

Steve and Bucky walked on the sidewalk in the cool California night.

"He's being surveilled by the FBI. I think the house is bugged," Buck confessed.

"Why?"

"The drug."

"It's not illegal."

"They fear it anyway."

Steve rolled his eyes.
"Yeah, I know. I didn't know when I gave my real name. I couldn't lie, Steve, he would have known and rejected me. Anyway, Captain America and Bucky have long been forgotten. Sad but true. No one would believe it anyway."

"Yeah, we could end up in a psychiatric ward."

"Yeah, I'd wind-up there, you wouldn't." Buck scanned up and down the street.

"And that would probably do you some good," Steve and Bucky laughed finished the block and returned to the dining room and dinner.

The next morning Nat and Cap lounged around Tim's office. They could see Tim and Bucky out the windows of the French doors that led to an outdoor patio and garden.

Tim equipped the patio with benches and chairs, various plants and greenery: a bird feeder, a record player, and a stack of vinyl albums. There was a 5 gallon water bottle on a stand with a spout and little fold up white paper cups in a dispenser. Beyond the patio was a small fenced in wooded area: not landscape but wild. It was the kind of day see you in Maui, but rarely ever in the Bay Area.

Steve was the most anticipatory of a whole lot. He did not take his eyes off Barnes, and he expected him to turn colors, or melt at any moment. Tim's patio chairs were Adirondack chairs, white, wooden and slatted, like the kind you find on the East Coast. They were pointed out to the trees and there is where Bucky sat. His left arm fell over the armrest and laid in the grass. He had not moved much in two hours. Occasionally, Steve saw Buck shield his right arm over his eyes. This did no good, Buck still hallucinated like a son of a bitch.

Buck's cybernetic arm seemed an area of intense interest. Even though the arm appeared human with the hologram intact, Buck frequently touched it with his human hand. He touched the arm where it connected to his flesh. He studied his cybernetic hand, held it close to his face, and he turned it over slowly before his eyes like he had never seen it before, or could not figure why he could not feel it. At one point he did not move at all for an hour.

A light rain fell, a common occurrence in the afternoon. Buck watched, felt and tasted the raindrops as they fell on his bare skin, his lips and his upturned face. The rain fell hard for an hour. Barnes stood in the rain, under the trees and watched the dark clouds. As the clouds receded and cleared, a double rainbow was seen for a short time. Tim thought what a lucky bastard Bucky was.

Buck and Tim wandered into the wooded area and disappeared from sight for hours. The sun was low in the sky when Tim came in the French doors.

"He did fine. He's all yours," Tim said to Natalie and Steve. Immediately Natalie went out the doors, Tim call after her, "he's in the woods, somewhere," and then to Steve, "you can go also." Tim went to his desk to organize his notes.

Steve sat in Bucky's beach chair and waited. Tim came out of the house loaded down with food and drinks. He started a fire in the fire pit. Tim played record after record, cleaning the each album carefully with a felt bar before setting the record gently on the turntable. He touched the records only by the edges, careful not to fingerprint the vinyl. Tim used all his powerful focus and as if the world slowed to a halt and stopped spinning altogether, he gently, carefully, exactly, dropped the needle down. Most of the records Tim spun that night - he knew the artists personally.

Cold night air drove the lovers out of the woods and to the fire. Steve vacated Buck's chair and took another. Bucky and Nat cozied in one chair. He sat with his leg over the arm of the chair and leaned in to the other arm. Natalie sat between his legs.
Tim sat on a stool by Buck and handed him a glass of water. Buck stared at the clear glass and the water inside. He splashed the water up against the side of the glass, and studied the water as if it was the very liquid from which life sprang 40 billion years ago. A thin blue rim could be seen around his dilated pupils. Tim coached and pushed the glass to Buck's lips, tipped the glass, and forced him to drink. Getting the idea Buck drank the rest of the water unaided.

Tim handed him a bowl of strawberries. Bucky was fascinated, and examined the strawberries as if he was trying to guess their molecular weight. Tim shook his head and popped a strawberry into Bucky's mouth. An ecstatic look crossed his face as he tasted the berry. He rested his head on the back of the chair and opened his mouth for another. Tim laughed and fed more strawberries. Bucky's huge pupiled eyes followed Tim like he was a god of some kind placing the very stars from heaven on his tongue.

Steve was moved by this scene in some way he could not identify, moved emotionally or spiritually. Tim tired of feeding the little bird, passed the bowl to Natalie and walked to the fire pit. Instead of exploring his feeling's Steve said to Tim:

"Is he going to have to be fed like that the rest of his life?"

Tim laughed and reassured Steve that Barnes was A-Okay; progressing normally through all the stages of virtually being out of his mind.

The records popped, the fire crackled and characters of every type came, and went around Timothy Leary's fire pit that night. Some visitors brought marijuana in pipes, or rolled into cigarettes, and passed them around, which no Avenger took. Alcohol was served in different kinds, and amounts, and no Avenger drank. Tim's bodyguard brought a steady stream of various types of food from the kitchen, and no Avenger ate.

The party started to break up around 1am. Most people had gone by 2am. Bucky was the last person to step through the French doors. He stopped when the blast of indoor air hit him. He would go no further. He said it was 'unnatural'. This was the only word Steve heard him say all day. He would not go in. He simply could not go in to the house. Natalie got their sleeping bag from the van, and put a few more logs on the fire, and they settled in. Steve shook his head and went to bed.

When Barnes entered the kitchen the next morning, if twelve noon is morning, only Tim sat at the table with his coffee and the San Francisco papers.

"Hey, you must be hungry, man?"

Bucky nodded, "starved."

"I know it's after noon but he'll make you anything you want. What's your favorite meal?"


"You got it – how many eggs?"

"How many do you have? I don't wanna eat 'em all." Buck had not fully reconstituted - as far as time warps go.

Tim hesitated a second on that. This was an odd statement for James to make. Tim's thinking so far
had run where are these people from? This is the first time he thought when are they from. There had been no egg rationing or shortage in America since . . . World War II. Tim called to his bodyguard:

"How many eggs do we have?"

"What? 5–6 dozen."

"How and how many?"

"Wow," Bucky said. "4 over easy."

"You hear that? Your tests are on the table on my desk. Whenever. I have some errands to run. Take your time."

Timothy Leary did not make eye contact with Bucky as he went out the door. Buck felt nervous for a second. He flipped through Tim's newspapers on the table, picked out the funnies and forgot about it. The security guard brought a pitcher of orange juice.

That evening Natalie, Steve, Bucky and Tim sat around the fire in Tim's backyard to watch the sunset. This was the first chance they had to talk intimately about Bucky's experience.

"You looked scared to me." Steve said.

"I was. I felt I died. I opened my mouth. No air moved in or out. It was like I was underwater. I had no heartbeat. I panicked and I died. A few minutes later I knew I didn't need to breathe or have a heartbeat to live. I really did feel like I was underwater . . . No, it was real, the atmosphere and how it's all connected. It's like a cocoon we all live in. It sounds way out, but I saw that all things are connected. I literally saw the connections; one molecule touching the next . . . I saw things that are not true."

"So, what's not true?"

"Almost everything is not true," Bucky laughed, "everything, buying shit, selling shit, ownership, property, money, war, boundaries, nations, race, religion, royalty."

"So, what's true?"

"There was one thing that I want to tell you both. One thing, one truth that dominated the whole day," Buck grabbed Natalie as she walked by, and held her in front of him. He looked up at her. Natalie touched him. Steve held his breath to hear the secret of the universe. Buck bit his bottom lip and spoke.

"I'm pregnant," Bucky said, "I felt the child alive in me. I felt it move in me. I felt it's heartbeat. I can feel it now. It's mine. I want it. I want it more than I've ever wanted anything. I want to see it's face. I want to hold it. I love it. I love it. I love the baby." He pressed his face to her to chest and they embraced. Natalie was overcome with emotion. She kissed his head, forehead and face. He was emotional as well. Tim went to them and congratulated them.

Steve was swept up in the emotion of the moment and paused to enjoy the moment. But then he said:

"Thanks a lot, Tim. He was halfway nuts when he came here, now he's all the way nuts."

As they were leaving James Barnes was the last out the door. He did not know how to say goodbye to Timothy. He did not know how to thank him properly.
"I hope we...I'll never forget you," he said to Tim.

"I hope to see you again, BUCKY."

Buck stopped his trek down the sidewalk. His heart fell. "What gave me away?"

Tim did not answer; he was too shocked to learn his guess was correct.

"It was the eggs, wasn't it?" Bucky said.

"Yes."

Bucky shook his head. He stared at his feet.

"Listen son, you made a mistake. You made a mistake because you were relaxed with me," Buck glanced at Tim, "you were off your guard with me because you had the good judgment and instinct to know I was someone you could trust."

Buck glanced at the van with Natalie and Steve all comfortable inside.

"And you CAN trust me. To the death of me. You can trust me."

Bucky grabbed Tim. He hugged and kissed him like hippie men greeted each other, like Buck saw many times, but never tried. Steve started the van. Tim held Bucky's arm.

"I hope we do meet again...somehow."

"So do I. Tim, thank you." Bucky bound down the sidewalk.

Tim called after him, "take care man."

The side door of the van slid open, and Bucky jumped in the back. Honey turned from the passenger seat to speak to him as Steve jerked the van's stick shift forward, throwing her into Bucky's waiting arms. He fell with her onto the blanket on the floor of the van. Steve jerked the van down the street as the side door slammed shut. All three Avengers laughed out loud.

Tim stood in the street in front of his house and waved goodbye to the time travelers. A shiver crossed his body when he acknowledged the words time traveler. He stood with his arm raised above his head until the van rolled out of sight.

"Well, Bruce, there you have it. That's the story. During the weeks that followed he spoke of his experience often and with continued insight. You'll have to talk to him about his trip – fascinating stuff – really," Steve stood to stretch, "you don't think LSD could have caused what happened today do you?"

"I don't know yet. What's this about his cybernetic arm making noises?"

"He started complaining about a week ago." Natalie said.

"Did you hear any noises?"

"No. He said it was on the inside somehow...whatever that means. That all sounded kooky to us."
"I'll do a diagnostic on the arm like, now." Bruce looked at the arm laying on the desk and shrugged his shoulders. He glanced at the monitor as Bucky's vital signs rolled by. Bruce saw by the brain waves that Bucky was dreaming, probably some routine, horrific dream that was his life. A rustling noise came from the sensory room and an odd vocalization.

"When did his sleep disturbance start again?"

"Oh, five or six weeks ago," Natalie estimated.

"He's dreaming now," Banner said.

"I'm going in to sleep with him," Natalie headed in.

"But?" Banner raising a finger.

"Wait!" Cap raised his whole hand.

Natalie replied curtly, "you'll have to kill me to stop me," and she was serious, "you've been pumping drugs into him for two hours. I think I'll be fine." As she passed the table she ran her hand over Buck's cybernetic arm as if it was his human flesh.

"It's medication," whispered Dr. Banner.

Stealthfully, she entered the sensory room to check out her lover. The BARF sensor room was cool and dimly lit. He laid on the gurney with his head on the sensor mat, injected electrodes forever under the skin of his scalp. The oxygen was on, and flowed with a hissing sound. His IV stuck in his arm, dripped in the medication. He was attached to machines, stuck like a bug on some flypaper. He looked odd without his arm.

She touched the hem of his faded yellow shorts and pressed the material between her fingers. She saw his white t-shirt ride up his abdomen. Small flecks of sand glistened on his bare feet and legs. She saw him, in her mind's eye, on the beach, shirtless, virile, his brown skin bathed in sunlight, the sea breeze blowing his shining hair. His brilliant smile and bright blue eyes flashed in the sun as he pushed the hair out of his face and dug his surfboard into the sand. The waves pounding out their beat behind him. Could that image have been just three hours ago? Tears welled in her eyes, she fought them, and planned his kidnapping. Her hand brushed her belly. She would get him out of this . . . in time.

His eyeballs fluttered under his eyelids. Only a small movement of his organic hand, a twitch of his toes and some muscle contraction, could be seen in a body paralyzed in a dream. Paralyzed and aroused simultaneously – all his muscles were engorged with red blood. She had seen this many times before. He mumbled and moaned and made small noises that did not sound like language.

She stacked her bag, dress, and jewelry on the chair. She unbraided her hair and slid her bikinied body in beside him. Her hand slid up his shirt to his back and she urged his bare belly to touch hers. His skin was hot; his face flushed. She rubbed her face next to the soft skin of his face. She ran her fingers in his silky hair and massaged his scalp. She whispered in his ear, "baby, baby, baby." He instinctively pulled her closer to him. Banner saw the end of the dream before Natalie felt him relax.

"Jesus Christ – she's like a drug to him." Banner noted as delta waves dominated Bucky's EEG pattern.

She could fall asleep at last.

In the morning she woke to the sounds of voices outside the door. She slipped out of his grasp, slid
into her dress and joined Steve and Bruce at the monitor board.

"What the hell are we supposed to do with him?" Steve had a worried look on his face.

Tony appeared behind the crew. His arms were folded over his chest. Perfect posture. He was not a tall man but he had the presence of a giant.

"We're not going to do anything," Tony said with purpose, "he's gonna do whatever he decides to do."

"But yesterday – that was not Bucky – that was not even his voice. We all know who it was. How's that even possible?"

Tony cut Steve off. "Okay, yesterday. Banner you're the doctor around here what's your professional opinion of what we witnessed yesterday?"

"I'm not a shrink. It could be anything."

"Just throw out some possibilities."

"You want it plain or technical?"

"Plain. Plain." Steve said.

"Just get to the verbs." Tony said. Impatient as always.

"Alright – in order of severity – A reaction from time travel, he said he felt claustrophobic. An outbreak of anxiety. A panic attack. PTSD? A paranoid reaction. A flashback of some sort. A disassociative reaction, or a psychotic break."

"What's your best guess?"

"Well, I'd chop both ends off. Probably something in the middle. Probably PTSD flashback."

"Is he dangerous?" Tony asked.

"Is he dangerous? You've armed him like a colossus. Hell yes, he's dangerous. He's armed and dangerous and goofy in the head." Banner gave a glance at the monitor, "and he's awake." The microphone was open and Banner snapped it closed. "He heard everything I just said."

"Good. I want everyone to hear. Jarvis?"

"I'm here sir."

Tony flipped the microphone open and said, "Starting now, James Barnes is to have no restrictions. He is to have full and open access to anything in this building. As of this moment he has a top secret security clearance. Full access to all computer data, the accessory closet, the weapons room, the time machine, and the front door should he choose to leave. And give the man back his arm." Tony flipped the mic off, "let's see what he does." Tony walked away.

Natalie poked Tony in the chest. "You asshole, for once you're right, but you need to come up with an explanation for your behavior yesterday."

"I will do no such thing." Tony headed out of the area.

"I need a moment." Banner followed Tony down the hall.
"Frankly, I think they're all out of their minds." Banner glanced over his shoulder to see if anyone was listening. "They are all so high they're buzzing. A year of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, AND surfing addiction in the intoxicating 60s? We can't get caught up in this. We've got to reign this shit in, right now. Let them go through withdrawal and come down from their sensation seeking behavior high. Then we'll see what we have. We're lucky only Barnes took LSD. We could have an absolute mutiny on our hands. Christ, beach bunnies." Dr. Banner had Tony's full attention. "Another thing Tony, we're remiss if we don't pick up right where we left off with Barnes. We need a neurology consult. He needs to be sleeping on BARF every night. Period. No compromise."

"Agreed."

"We need to call the Norwegian."

"I already have. She'll be here in under a week."

"Tony, got a minute?" Natalie came from nowhere.

"NO, no, no," Dr. Banner protested. "I need to examine you – yesterday."

"Look, the rabbit died. I'm the same amount pregnant as I was yesterday. Look at me. I'm in a bikini. I'm packed with sand. Can you give me a minute? I'll come to you soon." Natalie left with Tony.

Frustrated, Bruce returned to Steve who waited patiently. They sat for an hour before Buck walked out of the sensor room dragging his IV stand behind him. Bruce removed the IV bag but left in a Hep-Lock. Buck sat on the desk and watched as Bruce reattached his cybernetic arm.

"I can't say definitively what caused the noises you heard but we did find some wear in circuits which we replaced and some hotspots which we also replaced. I totally replaced the silent running feature. Considering the work out you put the arm through this past year I'm not surprised we saw some wear."

Bucky watched his arm go through it start up sequences. The human hologram spread its way from fingertips to shoulder.

Both Banner and Rogers looked at Barnes with great concern. Bucky sat with one leg on the desk and one leg on the floor. He leaned on his top leg. He towered over Cap and Banner.

"Thanks Doc. I'm sure it'll be okay now." He covered his cyborg arm with his human arm and held it close to his body. Maybe he did miss it. Buck glanced at all the equipment and the faces. "I have to get real."

Banner rolled his eyes and prepared himself to hear some 60s hippie babble. Cap was all ears.

"You know, I appreciate everything everyone has done for me here. I really do. I can never repay you but I've had all this," Buck waved his hand around. "I've been confined. I've been handled. I've been controlled by experts. I've lived on machines and drugs and medical experiments. I can see your concern. I can see it on your faces. I can feel your unease. Your fear. I can hear it when you speak."

"I'm not afraid of you Buck."

"You're afraid of him." Bucky drilled Cap with his gaze, and they both knew the truth. "I know I scared the holy shit out of everyone yesterday, but it scared me 100 times more than it did you. I know what he did to you. I know your wounds have healed, but when I look at you... every time I look at you, I see you laying at the bottom of the Potomac, 30 seconds from death, four bullet holes and just as many knife wounds in you, that I did... How many times did I pull your scrawny ass out of that swimming pool when we were kids? And in the war? You trusted me with your life. Every
day. Every day. And I was good for it. I want her, Steve. I want to be a father. I want my child and I want your trust back."

Buck let that sit out in the air for a while. Steve and Bruce were silent. Tony who watched and listened from his monitor said: "Son of a bitch. He's gone rogue." Tony ran out of his surveillance room followed by Natalia.

Buck stood by the desk, stretched his muscles and rubbed his empty stomach.

"And I want some food." He walked a few steps away and Steve called to him.

"It was one."

"One? Huh?"

"You shot me four times but just one knife wound," Steve sang out with pride, then under his breath, "but that one knife wound punctured my lung."

"That doesn't make me feel better." Bucky continued to truck to the kitchen.

"You know, I'm hungry."

"Me too," Bruce and Steve rushed to catch up with Bucky.

At dusk Steve found Barnes at the computer center. He stood by and watched what Buck looked at so intensely. Shocked, Steve saw Buck watched Tony's top secret video file on the Winter Soldier. Steve seated himself by Buck and shook his head.

"Why are you torturing yourself with this?"

"I can't defeat him."

"Neither could I. Maybe no one can."

"Why not? And if not, there has to be something about him I can accept."

"Sun Tzu Art of War?"

"Exactly. I can't see it. I'm glad you're here, maybe you can."

Steve made a determination to watch the video objectively as if the Winter Soldier was simply any another adversary to analyze, to discover their techniques, strengths and weaknesses. It was horrific. Bucky squirmed in his chair and held his breath. Steve was uneasy about the whole idea. After a while they relaxed, and Steve was able to make some observations.

"He's relaxed. He standing there leaning on one hip like he's standing on a street corner waiting for the light to change or strolling down Central Park. Anyone in these situations would be tense."

"Yeah, like our T'ai Chi Ch'uan Master. Relaxation is the key to the flow of Chi. Where there is tension the Chi cannot flow – relaxed and focused concentration."

"He's not relax because of discipline. He's not encumbered by fear, or worry, or compassion, or even mercy, or any emotion. The mind is wiped clean."
"It doesn't know it can be killed."

"Yes, that's it." Cap said. "He doesn't know he can be killed. You hurt it and you can't hurt it. It just keeps coming at you."

Buck shuddered. "What a horror . . ."

Steve noted Buck's emotional reaction of sympathy and continued nonchalantly.

"If your buddy Freud was here he'd say that this creature was the ID alone, functioning without the ego or super ego, which have been removed. This enabled him to focus intensely and exclusively on completing his mission." Steve's speech drifted off. They watched in silence.

Tony collected everything about the Winter Soldier he could get. Not just random street camera footage, but training videos, experiments, and actual torture filmed for whatever depraved purpose. It took extraordinary guts to watch this bizarre concoction. Buck was overcome.

"Uum . . . I'm a monster." He growled.

Steve grabbed Bucky by the shoulders. He ripped his view away from the screen.

"Stop it! Don't say that. Don't think that. You're blaming the victim. They don't do that anymore."

"I don't want to be a victim."

"Look, that's your body – it's not you. If you don't remember who you are – I do. You've got to see that. You've got to understand that." Steve shook Barnes. Shook him hard.

Bucky clenched his fists. His arm glistened metallic, the blue of his Iris was invaded by the black of pupil dilatation. It was the fight or flight response again.

"Stop it." Steve shook Buck. "Stop it if you can.

"I think I can. I want to." Bucky pressed pause on the video.

"Stop it," he said to himself. "Stop!"

"You know you don't have to keep watching."

"I do. I need to know what I did. I need to know what they did. I need to know what really happened. I need to face it, Steve. I need to face it this one time. I've got to get a grip."

Bucky's arm look flesh again so he pressed play.

On the screen men in a white lab coats were doing something unspeakable to Barnes. Barnes laughed at them.

"Oh God. They're torturing you and you're laughing?"

Buck placed his fists over eyes. He sucked air through his teeth.

"You're laughing," Cap said. "Do you remember this?"

Buck did not look. One look was enough. "No. No. I don't."

"Goddamn you – God damn you all to hell." Cap yelled at the video.
Buck sprang from his chair and moved between Cap and the screen to block his view. Buck shook him by his shoulders.

"I must've been out of my mind. I can't explain it." Neither man looked at the screen again, but the sounds of the torture filled the air - it was worse than watching. Bucky held Cap by the shoulders until he calmed down. "Come on let's get it over with."

They watched on. Cap glanced at the timer. They were near the end, thankfully, mercifully, near the end of the file. The digital video ceased, and a good quality 16mm film started - a film of an elaborate surgery suite. Barnes was brought in, obviously drugged, and obviously with two functioning human arms. He was anesthetized. The surgeons amputated his left arm. Steve held his breath.

"What? What are they doing?" All the blood drained out of Bucky's face. He turned glacier white. "No . . . No . . . that's not what happened. That's not my memory. They saved me. My arm was gone. Ripped off from the fall. I saw the blood on the snow. I was bleeding to death. They save me. They gave me a new arm." Bucky stood so suddenly he knocked his chair over. He held his cybernetic arm like what he saw on the screen was in real time.

"Every detail is as clear . . . is as clear . . ." Bucky backed away from the film. He back as far from the film as he could get.

"As clear as . . . the other implanted memories they gave me. I should've known. It was so real. It was so perfect. Too perfect. They gave me that memory to control me, and it did," Buck's voice got loud. "It did control me. That was the one thing I held onto. The one thing I told myself. Oh, they helped me once. They saved my life. They were nice to me once. They'll do it again. They'll think I'm worth something. They'll be nice to me again. They never were. They never were." And Bucky cried. Not just on the inside, he cried on the outside. He cried unabashedly. He did not cover his face. He did not try to hide his emotions. He cradled his lost arm like a baby, and he wept. He cried like a man.

When Bucky cried Steve cried as he had done as a child. It hurt like hell, but his heart broke for his friend. Steve cried until he could not stand another minute of it and he flew into action. He jumped from his chair and picked up Bucky's chair. He rescued Barnes from the back of the room and made him sit. Steve knelt on one knee in front of him, with one hand on each arm of Bucky's chair. His massive chest and arms encircled Barnes, who had no means of escape physically or emotionally.

"Buck, you don't know this. I might as well give it to you all at once. All this." Steve flashed his hand at the screen. "All this, is my fault. If I would have . . . When you fell, Buck, when you fell. I didn't go back for you. No one did. I thought it was hopeless. And I reported the situation as such, by the book, logically. Morita argued with me. God, I had forgotten that. He fought passionately for you. He threatened to go alone. I said I'd have him court-martialed for desertion. He threatened to go alone. I said I'd have him court-martialed for desertion. He never forgave me. We were never friends again. He would've gone for you but not me. He was your true friend but not me. I left you there to be eaten by wolves - or whatever would befall you - whatever would be your fate. Good God . . . Even if I wasn't your friend, I was your Captain. It was my duty if you perished to retrieve your remains, your dog tags, handle them with dignity and send them home to your mother." Steve could not control his sorrow or hold back his tears. This time he cried for himself.

"I didn't even try . . . How many hopeless things have come to pass since then, Buck, how many?" Through his tears, Steve glanced at Bucky.

"Oh God. You look at me. How can you look at me with sympathy, you sweet creature. I don't deserve your look of sympathy. Don't. Don't try to let me off. Because I know, I know the truth." Steve shook Bucky's chair. "I know what you would have done." Steve glanced at Buck again.
"If I fell that day – you would have done anything – broken any rule. You would have gone AWOL to find my body and send it home. You would have moved heaven and earth and you know it. So don't tell me with those eyes that I'm not responsible. I did nothing and look what happened to you . . . all those years, Buck." Another wave of painful tears flowed over Steve as he hung his head in shame.

"The one time," Steve looked at the ceiling and shook Bucky's chair with his powerful arm so hard that Bucky shook with the chair. "The one time, I didn't follow my instincts."

Steve's outburst had accomplished one thing: Bucky stopped crying.

"What instinct?" Buck cradled his Cyborg arm in his lap.

Steve hung his head and was silent.

"What instinct?" Buck lowered his head and followed Steve's eyes around as he glanced here and there.

"When the handle broke off and you fell. My instinct was to let go." Steve lowered his head. With his body language he asked for forgiveness, bent on one knee, as if asking forgiveness from a king. More than a few moments passed until both men regained their composure.

"I suppose it's not going to do me any good to remind you that was a 4000 foot drop. You would've been killed."

"You survived," Cap glanced up and back down.

"I was caught by Dandalo's people."

"I repeat, you survived." Cap stared at Bucky's lap. He saw Buck's human hand let go of his metal arm, relax, and slide across his body.

"You did nothing and I survived. They did everything and still I survived. I survived it all." He waved his hand across the myriad screens in the room.

"Yeah, you survived it all."

Steve slid his chair and sat in front of Bucky, knee to knee. They listened to silence. They looked at nothing. They thought their own thoughts.

"Is there any more on that timer?"

"Around 60 seconds."

"Well, let's see it. No more surprises." The film showed the gruesome end of the amputation surgery. Buck shuttered and rubbed his human hand over his metal shoulder. He rubbed his hand over his chest.

"Let's get out of this room. I'd like to get out of this building." Buck glanced around.

They strolled down the hall of Solaris and out the back door. They did not luck out with the weather, however. They stood on the beach in all the dark, cold, wind, rain and pelting sand the Pacific ocean had to offer.

"You know, I faked crying in there - just to get you to stop. Ha and it worked," Steve puffed his chest out.
"What a bunch of BS. You just keep telling yourself that, Ace."

"I'm serious. I can cry at will."

"Yeah, you're seriously full of shit. If my mom told me once she told me 50 times. When we were little, if one of us cried the other would cry even if they were not the one hurt."

"Okay, okay, just don't tell anyone I was crying."

"Tell anyone? Where the hell do you think we were? There's 20 cameras and microphones in that room alone. Tony, Banner, Natalie, they all probably ate popcorn and watched it live."

Steve threw his head back and flailed his arms around. He knew Buck was right. "Christ almighty."

Buck loved when Steve was off-balance a bit; it took his mind off of everything.

"I'll have to accept it but just don't cry again, really I . . . I . . . I just can't deal with all that."

Buck's mood was brightened by this kind of banter.

"I don't know, man. I kinda liked crying." Buck flexed his muscles and inhaled a deep breath. "It felt good."

Steve threw his head back again and looked at Buck. "What?"

"Didn't you get anything out of that encounter group Natalie made us go to?"

"NOPE."

Barnes laid on the tease.

"You can't be a whole person if you don't have access to all your emotions."

"Wanna bet?" Cap said under his breath and added: "Is that like all humans are capable of horrific acts in the right situation?" Steve dished it out but lost Buck's attention. "You with me? Buck?"

"I was thinking."

"About what?"

"Guess."

"A hamburger?" Cap joked.

A spontaneous laugh broke out of Bucky's mouth. "No, a big wave." Buck smiled big.

"Oh man, I can dig it. How many days has it been? It's painful."

"My tan is fading."

Cap burst out laughing with that one. "What are we going to do about it?"

"I know what I'm going to do. I'm gonna explode."

Steve was on that page with Barnes, but he wanted a controlled release of built-up steam. He wanted to get his mind off where it was and on to something else, anything else. The night was damp, cold and nasty. The rain pelted down with gale force winds. They huddled by rocks, but even so, their
exposed skin was sandblasted.

"Nice night." Buck looked around for the moon.

"You think this is nice?"

The wind picked up. The sand blasted into their face. The rain came at them horizontally; they covered their faces with their hands.

"We could try Tony's new boxing program?"

Tony invented and developed boxing helmet, gloves and vest with sensors throughout that recorded points via a computer program.

"I'd love to." Buck said and they rushed in the beach door of Solaris.

"Marcus of Queensberry rules?" Cap said as they scooted down the hall.

Bucky hesitated. "Really? Well, if you insist."

"First blood?"

"Seriously? Well, okay." Buck was not a boxer but he was the most trained boxer of the two. Politeness permitted the lesser trained make the rules for their comfort.

The brand new boxing suite door would not open for Steve.

"You have clearance for all rooms. You try." Buck put his hand on the glowing pad by the door, nothing happened. He placed his face by the pad for a retinal scan, no go. Finally he said, "James Barnes here," and the suite door opened with a gust of new leather smell. The room held a regulation boxing ring: overstuffed leather viewing chairs, two sinks with cabinets and a large ornate carved wooden bar in the back - looked to be from the 1920s. The whole set up gave the impression of a rich man's fantasy boxing ring, which is exactly what it was.

Once in the room Buck, being a pro, began the meet psychologically way before the first punch was thrown. A long table ran down one side of the room with the newly invented equipment laid out for viewing pleasure: boxing boots, shorts, vest, helmet and gloves. One set in gold and the other set in blue. Steve was attracted to the gold. He handled the equipment and tried on the helmet. Barnes said he wanted the gold. They argued about that a while until Steve gave in only to have Barnes change his mind and want the blue. This kind of silliness irritated Rogers and Barnes knew it. He would not have pulled such nonsense if he thought he could beat Rogers out right – which he knew he could not.

The splendor of the equipment distracted both men from the psyche out contest. The vest and shorts were made from extremely lightweight material full of the silicone sensors. The boots were soft with their own built-in sock. The boots tied with Velcro closures. The gloves and helmet look the most standard with the exception that the gloves had no laces but Velcro closures also. The stand out items were the hand protectors. They were a soft white silicone that slipped over the hand. After a few minutes on the hand, body heat custom molded the unit to the individual hand, webbing in between the fingers. They were strong but elastic and pliable.

Bucky went to the sink and lathered up his face, hands and arms to remove the sand that blasted onto them from the beach. He looked at himself in the mirror and drifted off someplace. He ran his human hand up his neck and gave the hair behind his ear a little tug. After six passes of this unexplainable ritual, Steve feared it was pre-weeping behavior, and he could not take anymore of that, so he
distracted Bucky by dancing around him showing off the hand protectors. It worked like a charm.

The hand protectors were nice, brilliant in fact. They admired them. Again, Tony had invented a revolutionary new item that would set the standard and add another cool billion to his stock pile.

As Steve dressed, his mind wandered back to the first time, as kids, he boxed with his friend. Back then he was 98 pounds, not even a minimum weight, boxing against a light heavyweight. With such a significant weight difference between them there was no contest; Buck was in an instructor role and Steve a student. In many ways Steve remained 98 pounds on the inside.

It felt strange to Steve to be equally matched with Barnes. He assessed his opponent. Besides a Vibranium jaw and a cybernetic arm, Buck's stand out future was his speed. He was superhumanly fast. Steve thought back to a time when he had to hijack a car to catch Bucky when Bucky was running with purpose. Steve wondered if he would be able to land anything. It would be like hitting a mirage. Compounding his speed, he never repeated a pattern. He never gave himself away, and what he would do next was coming at you in a split-second. Steve felt he did not have a chance.

As Bucky dressed he assessed his opponent. He had been in intense physical training with Steve for six months, and he firmly believed Steve did not know his own power. Buck knew he was going down. All Steve needed was one blow that connected and that would be the bloody end – nothing could withstand that. The only question in Buck's mind was how long could he delay the inevitable. He thought of the ways.

The blood brothers, Steve and Bucky, glanced at each other suspiciously as they dressed.

Again, Buck froze. He stared at his hand. Bucky's eyes darkened. He saw metal show through the hologram on his fingers that held the mouthguard. He hyperventilated.

"What's the matter?" Steve touched his shoulder. "What's wrong?" Steve glanced at Bucky's hand.

"What is this thing?" Bucky stared at the mouthguard. "WHAT IS THIS THING?"

Steve looked it over. "Why, it's your mouthguard."

"No . . . NO!"

"Yes, it's just a mouthguard, see?" Steve put his guard in his mouth and took it out.

"Oh, oh I see." Buck stared at his metal hand. So did Steve.

"I'm not fighting that," Steve said. If the cybernetic arm showed metal the arm was full strength and there would be no match.

"I didn't turn it on." Bucky said. "Not now, not now, damnit." He said forcefully and his hand resumed his human appearance.

Steve looked at Buck's mouthguard. "Don't think about it just put it in quick."

Buck nodded. He did what he was told in one movement.

Steve had no idea what all that was about – neither did Bucky.

The first foot fall into the ring activated the whole contraption - lights came on - Jarvis spoke:
"Welcome to the Wonderful World of Boxing. Opponents state your name and suit color."

"James Barnes – blue."
"Steve Rogers – gold."

"State your rules."

"Marcus of Queensberry standard."

Jarvis reviewed the rules verbally.

"Commence the action." Jarvis sounded like a carnival barker.

Both men stood still in the center of the ring facing each other.

"Let's see how this works. Let me touch your helmet." Steve approached Barnes to touch his helmet. Buck hit Steve's hand away.

"No, no this is practice. I'm just going to touch you," Steve tried to touch Bucky's helmet again. Buck quickly pushed his hand away.

"Dude – I'm just going to touch you to see what happens."

This time Bucky batted Steve's hand away and growled.

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea." Steve relaxed his hands by his side.

"Come on, you runt, let's play." Barnes put his dukes up, bounced around playfully and smiled at Steve.

They sparred lightly. They felt their way with the new equipment to get a sense of how Jarvis called the blow-by-blow action and dispensed points. Both men slowly increased the pace. Steve discovered something new. For a man who had been emotionally all over the map this day, Buck had a focus and concentration that was overwhelming. Steve felt constantly on his heels. Bucky was not going to be beatable; he was just too fast.

They fought on. Steve prepared himself to lose . . . but that did not feel good. Steve wanted to win, even this silly competition, so he encouraged himself. He talked to himself, 'If there is one thing I know. I know this man. I know Buck. I know him like I know my own genetic code.' A little smile filled Steve's mind as he remembered Barnes had stammered when Steve suggested the Marcus of Queensberry rules. He hesitated when Steve said first blood. Bucky would become bored – bored with the rules – bored with the limits of the rules and he would push those limits. Steve would stake his life on this fact. Steve could win on points. Not the best way to win but a win, nevertheless.

As sure as the sun and the moon are in the sky, Barnes started to accrue penalties: occasional, small, minor, but penalties.

ROUND 4

Jarvis call a foul, gave points and they fought on.

ROUND 5

By round five, it was evident they could continue to punish each other like they were, indefinitely. Their minds were on nothing but their body's movement. They didn't think of the past. They didn't think of the future. Their muscles were hot. Their joints were loose. Everything flowed. They felt good. Both men worked up a lather. Their skin shined with sweat. Their faces were red and swollen with effort. Their muscles bulged tight and glistened with perspiration. They made little noises of exertion.
'Ah,' - 'Oh,' - 'Ug.'

Cap knocked Buck down. He sprang to his feet. They fought on.

Impulsively, Buck ripped off his helmet and gloves and threw them out of the ring. Sweat flew off the helmet. His hair was soaked from sweat. He shook his head like a dog. Sweat flew around the ring. He put his dukes back up.

Shocked, Steve dropped his hands to his side, spit out his mouth guard and shouted:

"You put that shit back on right now!"

"MAKE ME." Buck's face was red from exertion. He gave Steve his lovely eyes and sly smile.

"Oh, so that's how it is?"

"Uh huh," Buck did not break eye contact.

Steve ripped his helmet and gloves off – the real fight began. First blood came and went. Jarvis fell over itself to keep up with the action.

"Foul, Mr. Barnes."

"Point, Mr. Rogers."

"Penalty, Mr. Barnes."

"Penalty, Mr. Rogers."

The fight digressed into a 12 year old's free-for-all. Jarvis call penalties and fouls, and yes, grabbing your opponent by the jaw and shaking them is a foul. Hitting your opponent on the top of the head is a foul. Pulling your opponent's hair is a foul. Twisting the arm behind the back is the foul. Pretending your fencing in the boxing ring is a foul. Kicking your opponent in the ass is a foul. Holding your opponent down on the mat until they say uncle is a foul!

Steve had a clear win on points but when he threw Buck to the mat, stood on him and shouted, 'I am the victor!' He was disqualified. Steve laughed and kicked at Buck who rolled across the ring, under the ropes, and off the platform. At the last second Buck grabbed Steve's ankle and pulled Steve over with him. They wrestled on the floor - rolled around and laughed til it hurt - until they could laugh no more.

"Stop, stop it!" Buck laughed. "I can't take it. Get off me."

"You stop. My sides hurt. I'm gonna throw up." Steve held his sides.

Bucky pushed and kicked Steve away. He crawled to the sinks. Steve grabbed at his legs. They both slowed down to get their breath.

"I haven't laughed like this in years."

"Is it possible to laugh yourself to death . . . to die laughing?"

Buck crawled up the sink with an occasional break out of residual laughter. For no reason they started up the hysterics again. Bucky ran water over his bloody hand protectors and slid them off his hands. He threw one at Steve followed closely by the other. The wet bloody white blob hit Steve in the face. He deflected the other.
"Now, don't start anything you can't finish. Stop it! I can't laugh anymore . . . my jaw . . ." Steve attempted to get to his feet.

Buck stood at the sink and took stock of the damage done. His lip was as split open. "Man, oh man, are you going to be in the doghouse when Natalie sees this."

Steve did not bother with an answer, instead he kicked Bucky's helmet, it landed at his feet. Buck got the message and shrugged his shoulders. He continued with his inspection. His teeth and mouth were full of blood and blood clots.

"Oh . . . it's cut on the inside too," he spit blood into the sink.  
"A week of ugly."

Buck opened the cabinet over his sink and a female computer voice said: "You are authorized to remove any contents from this cabinet."

"I need a first aid kit."

"Cabinet #2." The voice answered politely.

"What was in there?" Steve questioned.

"Drugs," Buck shut the cabinet and walked away.

"Wait a minute," he returned cabinet #1 and opened the door.

"Do you have Tranquility?" he said hopefully.

The cabinet answered: "Tranquility can only be dispensed by Dr. Bruce Banner."


"No - Wait!" Buck shut the door and opened it again. "Do you have anything for pain?"

The cabinet spoke, "describe pain."

Bucky did not want to admit to pain, let alone, describe the pain.

". . . pain in the mind," he glanced at Steve.

"No Buck."

The cabinet did not respond.

"Mental pain," his face showed it.

"Psychic pain," he tensed up.

"Pain in your feelings . . . help me," he blurted out with anguish in his voice. He giggled the side of the cabinet.

"Take two Tylenol," the cabinet responded.

A rare thing happened. James Barnes lost his temper. The Cyborg Super Soldier hit the cabinet with his metal fist and broke the glass. Steve tightened his grip on Bucky's human arm, and yelled,
"STOP." The second hit broke the door off the cabinet. The third strike set off alarms. The fourth blow smashed the alarms into silence.

In one breath Barnes regained his composure. He rested his metal arm deep in the destroyed cabinet and leaned on the sink with his human arm: Steve still attached. He hung his head.

"Oooh," he lamented. "I lost it, Steve . . . I lost my temper."

"Oh, Buck." Steve shook his head.

"Geez – ," Bucky glanced at the damage and winced. "I guess I'll have to pay for that."

Steve did not have the heart to remind Bucky he did not have any money.

"Yeah . . . wow," Steve said. "You lost your temper, and look, a smashed medicine cabinet. Maybe you can relax a bit and not be wound so tight. You lost your temper and you didn't kill anyone . . . okay?" With a good grip on Buck's human arm, Steve corralled his cybernetic arm and poured over his face.

"You okay?"

Bucky studied Steve's face in response.

"Yeah, I'm okay – but you're not." Buck laughed. "You have two black eyes."

"WHAT?" Steve inspected his face in the mirror. "Now, who's gonna look at that."

"What difference would it make you have a different girl every night anyway."

"That was the same girl. She's a makeup artist." Steve looked over his beat up face - from side to side.

"Too bad she's not here now she could do something for that face."

They laughed and did a show and tell of the various other injuries they wore with such pride.

Bucky retrieved a decanter of whiskey from the bar, rinsed his bloody mouth and spit. Blood and stringy blood clots splattered into the sink. The whiskey hurt like hell on the cuts. He repeated, and held the whiskey in his mouth to numb the wounds. He repeated until the whiskey looked clear.

"That's like Hillrock Whiskey you're spitting down the sink."

Buck took the last of the whiskey in a huge swig, gargled, spit it down the sink and came up with a smile. He pushed his hair out of his face.

"I'm going home." He placed his hands on Steve's shoulders and shook him.

"Thanks Steve, nothing brings one back to reality better than a well thrown fist in the face."

"Don't mention it . . . you horse's ass."

"We'll see who's the horse's ass – there's a camera in this room too. Later," and Buck was out the door.

Steve shook his head. He looked himself over in the mirror, close in. He touched the skin around his eyes. He did wish that girl, that makeup artist, was here at Solaris.
Natalie had been in Bucky's room only a short time, yet, as he walked in, the room felt like a home. A warm cozy holiday of a home. The smell of coffee and toast kind of holiday with Natalie rustling around in the room. When he saw her all the lights in the world came on bright. He felt profound sadness for all the countless men who wandered the world alone; for he is death looking for a place to happen and she is life's spring time bloom.

She said nothing about the cut on his lip but kissed him softly – avoiding that area. It may have been the heat still on his body from the fight or his flushed face but, his blood and whiskey soaked kiss intoxicated her. She went back for more, again and again.

"You little vampire," he said.

She kissed him many times. She kissed him. He felt such a sense of relief to be in her arms; he felt such a release, that he felt weak. His head swam. She kissed and kissed again and with each kiss, he died a little only to be born again. With each kiss he took one step toward something and another step, then another, until weakness drove him down, and he gave himself over to the moment.

Steve rose early, eager to start his Solaris routine – the four hour work out – he felt he needed from the fight and the emotional roller coaster of the day before. He knew Barnes would show up at any minute and fall into the same routine, but he never did. Steve looked around for his friend but could not find him. He stopped by the BARF Machine. Bruce was there at work.

"Hey, I can't find Bucky."

Bruce nodded to the video screen and turned up the sound.

"He's been hitting the ball like that and talking to himself for the last 4 hours and 45 minutes." Buck hit the ball hard and fast splat, splat, splat, it sounded like gunfire.

"What?"

"Tony said let him do whatever, but if you walked in on him I wouldn't be unhappy. I'd like to get him on the machine and compare what's up today after, you know, yesterday."

"Yeah, yesterday. I'm on it."

Steve heard Tony's non-interference directive loud and clear, so he stood at the door and watched. Buck hit the ball using his whole body. He was drenched with sweat. The echo in the room made the ball hit, kerplunk, kerplunk, kerplunk. It made an ear shattering racket. Buck fell against the wall and yelled, 'stop' or 'not now'. He held himself up with his metal arm on the wall and looked over the arm at Steve with the black eyes of the Winter Soldier.

"Not now," Buck said again and his eyes appeared more blue and the metal arm looked more like human skin.

"Me?" Steve said.

"Not you, Steve. Come on ahead."

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to get control. Trying to get control over myself."

"Does Banner know what you're doing?"
"I'll tell him right now. Let's go." Buck was cheerful.

When Dr. Banner saw Bucky he jumped up and said, "Hey, great I need a reading," and he motioned to the sensor room.

Barnes itched for a place to lay and rest his arm, obliged by throwing himself on the gurney. He stretched his throbbing human arm out over his head and groaned. Banner called out, "I'll be there in a second."

"That was the Winter Soldier in there hitting the ball. He's trying to control it. I thought that was impossible. I thought it was impossible for him to control the fight or flight response?"

"People say crazy until someone does it and then it's called science. In theory the nanite string will stream. Well, look at that brain . . . as clear as an unmuddied lake . . . as clear as an azure blue sky."

"Am I good?" Buck yelled out from the gurney.

"As right as rain. But sleep here. Tonight. 12 midnight."

"I'll be here. WE will be here."

Steve and Bucky trotted down the hall. Bucky read his friend's face and body language like a book with big print.

Buck stopped in the hall. "Alright, Banner's satisfied why aren't you?"

Steve stopped in the hall and turned to face Barnes.

"You know, I was around the last two days. I know what you're up against, man, I really do. I feel for you, all the way, but tell me what you're doing. You want me to trust you? I want to trust you. You made a decision. Let me in on your thought process. I can help. I know I can help you."

"I've got to get control of this. Just, what, two days ago? I was having an out of body experience, up in the corner of the room watching what HE was doing, unable to stop him. I could've done anything."

"But he did nothing . . . just threats."

"I wasn't in control of my body, someone else was. I know he's part of me, and I know he's not going away. I have to accept that. Someday I may need him. Someday he may save my life. I know I can't control the fight or flight impulse. I don't want to try. It may save my life someday, too, I understand that. But I want to be in charge of what I actually do – fight or run. I want to shut the whole thing down if the best thing to do is neither. I can't have a repeat of the other day or the medicine cabinet with Nat and the baby. I've got to get this NOW. I know I've been acting like some prince around here. I've got to accept he's always going to be there. I've got to accept it. You could help. I want you to help. I need you to help me do this."

"What do you need?"

"Well, I need a real threat. I can't hit the ball another day. It's not bringing on the fight or flight response anymore anyway. It has to be a novel situation. A situation with a real threat."

"What can I do, Buck?"

"I want you to try to kill me."
"I don't care what that machine just said about your brain – you're out of your mind. What do ya want me to do get a gun and shoot at you?"

"I don't think I'd react to that, frankly. If you pointed a loaded pistol at my head, I don't think you'd fire. I wouldn't react."

"We can go up top and I could hang you over the cliff side?" Cap dripped sarcasm with this one.

"Yeah, like a Buck Rogers episode?"

"How about waterboarding?"

"Now, wait, that's a good idea. I might react violently to that."

"That's what I'd be afraid of."

Buck considered waterboarding. "You need special equipment for that. Hey, how about I let you put me into a wrestling hold down. You know how I hate to be held down. You do that and then put me in a chokehold." Buck's eyes got big, bright and eager. "I know. I know they're illegal. But I know you know how to do 'em. Maybe I panic and go off."

"Geez, that sounds pleasant."

Steve was lassoed right into the gym and into breaking his number one rule - NEVER WRESTLE WITH A CYBORG. Before he could reconsider he picked a hold down and put the compliant Bucky into the hold. At first Buck just laid there letting himself be held by Cap. It seemed a long wait before Bucky flexed his muscles and moved under Cap's weight and strength. Buck moaned then growled. Cap could feel Bucky's lungs expand. Buck's squirms became constant. Steve choked him off. In 30 seconds, Buck commenced a careen of violent muscle contractions to get free. Steve saw the metal appear on Bucky's arm, and he knew his pupils were dilated all the way open. They both started to sweat all over, all at once, as their bodies attempted to hold their anaerobic postures.

Buck roared like an animal. His contortions became so violent Steve could not hold him; the sweat made him slippery. Buck got free in a flash and put Steve into a choke hold. Steve had time to say, 'what happened to the shutdown', and that was the end of that. Buck did not let go of Cap until Cap lost consciousness. Buck did not let go of the animal he thought he caught, until he felt the animal's body go limp under his force. Only then did he say, 'not now, stop, not now', to end the siege.

"You almost killed me." Steve mumbled.

"I didn't almost kill you. You blacked out."

"You almost killed me, man."

"Hum, you're not all there yet."

Buck held Steve's face with his cybernetic hand and gave him three little taps on his face with this human hand.

"Hey . . . hey! Are you with me?"

"Ug, I blacked out."

"Yeah, you blacked out." Bucky held Steve's head and spoke to him.
"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Wanna do it again?"

Steve did a double take. "I'm ready." Steve put his fists up.

"You're still not all there, Ace."

Steve raised himself up on one elbow and shook his head to clear the cobwebs. "Well, that was a great idea. Got anymore?"

"Are you mad at me?"

"What? Huh? Yeah. I am. Yes, I'm angry."

"Well, then, maybe you'd hit me like you meant it."

"What? You're not giving up? You're not calling it a day? I almost peed my pants. You're loose, Buck." It crossed Steve's mind that maybe Buck did need that drug Tranquility.

Buck was up on his feet ready for more. Steve wobbled to attention.

"Come on. One more for the cause."

"You know, I'm about mad enough to smack you around and like it."

"Come on, come on you 90 pound weakling."

Steve knew what was coming next and he did not want to hear it. His eyes enlarged and his face flushed.

"Don't say it."

"Oh you mean . . . Pee-wee." Buck's smile had never been bigger.

"I'd like to smash you in the face but you're . . . you're just too damn handsome."

"Do it! Do it!"

Steve moved on Buck like a bulldozer and forced him to the wall. He held him against the wall with the side of his arm across his shoulders, clavicle and neck. Steve raised his hand to hit him in the face.

"I can't."

Tony suited up as he burst in the doorway.

"Well, I can."

Tony did not stop for pleasantries. He walked to Barnes and struck him with such force that Buck took flight and landed on the back wall. The hologram on his arm disintegrated. His bug eyes blackened instantly on impact. He sprang to his feet like an acrobat and advanced on Tony. With his cybernetic arm, never fully tested in combat, he picked up Tony, suit and all, and threw him over his head as one would throw a baseball. When Tony hit the back wall his suit alarm sounded. Tony was
shocked to see his suit had cracked by his rib cage. Buck was on him. He pounded the crack like a jack hammer. Over and over he struck Tony with his cybernetic arm. He watched as the crack advance with each blow. Tony attempted a response but the strikes came in such rapid succession he failed to mobilize. Bucky continue to hit and shout. "Not now, not now." On the third round the human hologram reappeared and some blue could be seen in the black of his eyes – for anyone who cared to look.

Bucky stopped. He backed away from Tony. He shook his head like an animal shakes off flies. "Arrg, arrh." He said.

Tony raised his arm, fired from his palm at Barnes who blocked the beam. It ricocheted around the room and knocked Steve off his feet. Banner entered the room and rushed to Steve on the floor. Bucky held the beam with his Vbrainum encased arm and advanced on Tony. He kicked Tony's arm. The beam cut a substantial hole in the south wall. He proceeded to plummet the crack in Tony's suit with a series of blows until there was a large enough hole for a finger hold and he ripped the side of Tony suit off. Bucky reacted to the sight of Tony's body like he had been zapped with a Taser gun. Tony's exposed body activated every ounce of strength Bucky had to combat the Winter Soldier. He could not let the Winter Soldier harm Tony. He screamed, "Stop it! Stop now!" at the top of his lungs. "Arrrgghhh!" He yelled and pulled his hair. He slowly backed away breathing heavily. He backed off from Tony and smiled.

Tony was in a fury. He headed for the door, turned back, and apprehended Bucky by the throat. He thrust him against the wall. He held him a foot off the ground.

Bucky latched on to the Iron Man hand to keep his airway open.

Tony took a long look at his choking victim.

"Don't hold your breath until you get another upgrade for that arm."

Tony released Bucky by giving his head a bounce off the wall. Buck slid down the wall and joined his friends on the floor. He coughed and choked and rubbed his throat.

"Thank you, Tony." Buck sputtered. His choking sounds turned funny, turned into laughs. Steve and Bruce joined in.

Tony heard the laughter waft down the hall. He joined in at the irony of it all.

Bucky picked up the piece of Tony's suit he ripped off and headed down the hall after him. Steve and Bruce followed. They caught the limping Tony.

"Give me that." Tony snatched the piece of suit out of Bucky's hand.

"Get away from me." Tony batted Bucky away.

"How about some duct tape there, Tony. Always works for me." Buck laughed.

Laughter filled the soul of the three men as they fell into step with Tony and followed the yellow brick road down the utility hall.

LATER THAT DAY

Tony tried hard to stay mad, but as he walked into the cinema room he heard such infectious laughter
he forgot his anger and went in to join the party. Natasha, Steve and Bucky were watching surfing competitions on the big screen. They stood by the gigantic image and pretended they were on surfboards. Each tried to knock the others away. They jockeyed for the best spot to play act their ride on the wave. They scrambled for position. They watched the ever moving surfer on the screen to get in a position that felt like they were actually on the surfboard. They talked all at once, laughed, and did tricks to foil the others. Bruce laid out on one of the sofas curled in a ball and held his sides with laughter. The waves on the screen were massive. The competitors wiped out left and right, dramatically. Natalie imitated one of the wipeouts. She flailed her arms and legs around wildly, jumped high, and crashed to the floor. All present laughed hysterically. The boys not to be outdone took up the practice. Again, they jockeyed for position, pulled and pushed each other to be the one to catch the wave. This was crazy behavior but they were surfers and they were desperate.

With one year of constant surfing under their belts they were bona fide, class A, number 1, certified surfing addicts. Day four at Solaris - their withdrawal was bloody terrible. There is no addiction quite like surfing addiction especially for people like them. Everything about surfing was the antithesis of their prior lives. They wore practically no clothing. Their exposed skin constantly bathed in the warmth of the sun, the silky buoyancy of the water and the sensualness of the ride itself. In the water they were just another creature in the vast life of the sea. A stark contrast to the uniforms, conflict, fighting, and death of their former lives.

But it was the brain that made surfing so addicting. The combination of the neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine mixed with adrenaline composed a potent cocktail that made the brain hum. The intermittent nature of the kick made surfing an activity one would desire to repeat. Just like a gambler who never knew when he would win; you never knew when you would catch the perfect wave.

Their days were filled with the activity of surfing. Their evenings full of talk about surfing, usually with more experienced surfers. Their personal thoughts focused obsessively on equipment, the next day's weather report, air temperature, water temperature and what beach to try next. Was there sand, rock or coral on the bottom? All their friends were surfers, or in Steve's case, the beach bunnies he routinely picked up. And in their dreams at night they were dancing on a wave. No doubt they suffered legitimate pain of mind and body.

Steve was a strong surfer. He was calm and steady. He had such strength to carve the board through the water like a knife, creating a great spray that dazzled on lookers. Surfers love to nickname. Steve acquired the nickname Ace after his resemblance to an airplane taking off as he glided over the water with this massive chest and long arms outstretched. He was patient on the board and worked his ride like the tactical genius he was. All who saw him, and experts alike, agreed he would quickly move to the big wave stratosphere.

Bucky was a hotdog - a reckless, fearless surfer - not always a good combination. Impulsive and intuitive, he was always pushing the envelope of board, of man and of sea. If things were smooth he created a crisis. Seemingly indestructible and inexhaustible he was a thrill to watch but other surfers avoided riding next to him for when he wiped out, which he inevitably would, he would take you right down with him. In one year, he developed a reputation for hitting bottom more times than any other surfer in history. He was timed in one of these hold downs at twelve minutes underwater. He walked out of the water on his own accord, noodled to an extreme, but still he walked out. It was agreed by all that saw him, and experts alike, he was headed for death. There was even a betting pool on when he would buy it – an event no one wanted to miss.

But it was Natalia who was the real sensation. She had the strength of form and fearlessness of a great surfer but also a grace on the board like no other. She stuck to the board like she was planted on the board with roots, there by acquiring her nickname, Daisy. With feet stuck to the board her
body was as pliable as a wet rope. She became part of the wave. Her name spread like wild fire through the world of surfing. She dominated every competition. She single-handedly financed their entire endless summer with her winnings. It was agreed by all who saw her, and experts alike, she was headed to make a fortune on sponsorships and merchandising.

They had new lives, and on some primal level, they wanted to live out these lives. The euphoria they felt, out there, was so intense they felt it may have a spiritual dimension. This aspect of surfing justified their addiction. Buck was especially affected by this end of it. For him, out there balancing on the wave, there was no future. There was no past. There was only now.

It was true they had all experienced an increase in risk taking behavior: the hallmark of the true addict. But Buck had nowhere to go. His level of risk so dangerous any increase looked suicidal. And he did look suicidal.

It all came to a head when Bucky had a particularly nasty wipe out taking a young novice with him. Bucky's board broke and hit the kid in the head requiring 10 stitches. It took great effort to get the boy out of the water. The boy would probably never try surfing again. Buck was sincerely sorry and apologized to the boy's father who did not accept the apology. The boy's father was a surfer. He told Bucky his behavior was outrageous.

Later Steve and Natalie confronted him. Bucky said he would never surf around other people again. Simple solution, problem solved. Steve said, not so fast, that was an impractical solution, there would always be other surfers around. A proper solution would be something Bucky could control.

Nat and Steve were confrontational. They pressurized him. He told them they had no right to try to modify what he was doing out there it was . . . personal . . . a freedom he had never experienced. Surfing was different for him. He liked being underwater more than he liked being above water. He thought if he stayed underwater long enough he would evolve back into a sea creature from which life sprung. He felt he communicated with the sea life, even down to the most basic muscle or snail. He understood them and felt he fit in. Buck wanted to be ocean before we were separated.

He admitted to Steve and Nat surfing was the source of anything even vaguely, or remotely spiritual he had ever experienced. Just as he supposed surfing was for them. Steve said he understood what Buck was saying and agreed, but he wanted the whole story out of Bucky.

Natalie asked him point-blank did he have a death wish? Was he trying to kill himself? Buck was on the hot seat. He was not angry. It was another emotion entirely. It did not have a name that he knew of, but he did not run from the feeling or feel the need to act out on the feeling. He just let it be. He tried to put the feeling into words. Yes, he said it was true he was playing with death out there on the waves. But every time he lived, every time he came out of the water, every time the sea allowed him to come to the shore, was like a forgiveness. Like someone, or something was forgiving him. Natalie stood by Bucky in silence. Steve join the pair completing the triangle. After a long silence Steve broke the emotional tension.

"Thus spoke the atheist, hey?" Steve said.

Bucky smiled and shook his head. "Yeah, right." He felt relieved, in a way, that his intense feelings to be punished and or forgiven, were out in the open.

The action in the cinema room had escalated till blood had been drawn. Blood ran from Buck's elbow.
"Angel, you're bleeding."

Buck burst into the bathroom for a Band-Aid. He walked in on Bruce Banner, not in the bathroom to use the bathroom, but in the bathroom to use the drug named Tranquility. Bucky saw the distinct lavender colored liquid go down the tube as Banner inhaled. A look of detached euphoria followed by shock spread in waves over Bruce's face. No look of shock could match the look of shock on the face of James Barnes. Bruce drop the canister and fell forward onto the countertop. He dropped his head, shut his eyes, and lamented to himself, anyone, anyone, anyone, but Bucky Barnes of all people to walk in on him – to walk in on this. Banner tried to speak.

"I ah . . . I um."

"Are you sick, Bruce?" Bucky voice was full of emotion. He had gone from zero to 100.

"No, no . . . I'm not sick," Bruce glanced up, shook his head and dropped his eyelids over his eyes.

"Then why? For fun?"

"No, no," Bruce could not look at Bucky. He slid lower on to the bathroom countertop.

"Oh, for mental pain?" Buck growled.

"Yes, Buck. Mental pain."

Bucky raised his voice louder and deeper. "Then why wouldn't you give it to me? I asked you. I begged you many times. I'm not suffering enough? I need more pain? You don't know what it was like to have an hour of peace, five minutes of peace." He quit talking and shook his head at how foolish he sounded – how thoughtless that statement was. He tried again.

"Why wouldn't you share? Share now. Do you have more? Is there more in that canister?" Bucky picked up the canister and shook it.

"Just give me a little? I don't understand this – you take it yourself – why won't you give it to me?" His voice boomed in the small tile bathroom.

Bruce Banner shrunk under the weight of Bucky's voice – he spit out the truth.

"Cap forbade it, kid."

"Cap? Cap forbade it? What does that even mean? You're the doctor. I'm your patient. That shit works."

"He saw me inject you, Buck. He saw it. He said it wasn't right. He said it didn't look right."

"What? A doctor putting his client out of their pain?"

"That's not what he saw."

Buck moaned, "Aw Ummm." His chain had been pulled and he fought for control.

"Well, okay then. What did he see?"

Banner would rather cut off HIS arm than say what he had to say.

"He saw an addict making another addict," Banner hung his head. "He saw a junkie making another for himself."
"Mmmmm." Buck closed his eyes tight and covered his ears with his hands.

"And he was right. I'm so sorry. He was right. How are you ever going to understand this. I wanted company. I was so alone. How can you ever forgive me? He was right."

There was a long silence.

Buck's aggression rose like a wave; a swell that washed over Banner. It was tangible – physical. If Bruce possess the right equipment it could be measured. Buck seemed to physically expand in size. He towered over Banner and threatened at any moment to break out in violence.

"I'm happy to be company for you, Bruce. Do you have more on you?" Buck mobilized and advanced towards Banner. "You do, don't you? You wouldn't go anywhere without a good supply. Would you?" Buck reached with his hands.

"Don't touch me." Banner held his hands in front of him. He backed a step toward the tile wall.

"I'm going to frisk you." Bucky came on until Banner was against the wall.

"Don't touch me. You know what will happen if you threaten me like this." Banner pointed his two index fingers at Barnes.

"I don't care. I have a big guy of my own." Bucky took hold of Bruce's lapels. Bruce held Buck's hands at the wrist.

Banner looked around the room measuring the diameter in his mind. "Yeah, but my guy won't fit in this room."

That did not stop Buck. His metal hand broke free from Banner and headed for his pocket. Bruce caught it.

"Buck! Think man. Think what you are doing. You are trying to get drugs by force. Think, man, think. This is how powerful addiction to this drug is. You took it a few times a year ago and look what you're doing. You're man-handling a friend. You're trying to force me. And look what it's done to me! I took an oath to do no harm. Look what I've done to you. You trusted me. You trusted me. I broke your trust. Like so many others. How could I do that to you? I could've chosen 12 other less addictive drugs to treat you with. But I didn't. I chose Tranquility. You have to believe me Bucky. You have to believe me. I didn't know at the time. I didn't have a plan. I didn't realize until Steve spoke. God forgive me. Then I knew. I knew . . . I loved it. I loved giving you Tranquility. I loved watching you. I love watching the drug work on you. I loved it. That's how sick and depraved and powerful this drug is over people. Look at yourself. Are you feeling rational right now? You can cover your ears all you want. You'll still hear what I'm saying. This is what it means. Addict. This is what it means. Junkie. Don't come another step, and let go of my jacket."

Buck let go of Banners lapels and stepped back.

"Mm mm." Buck squeaked. He placed his human fist between his eyes and his other hand on the back of his head and pressed – the acupressure technique Banner taught him – he found effective. Bucky stood for two full minutes. Both men took some deep slow breaths. Buck released himself. He rested his quiet hands by his side.

"How do we get out of this? I don't like any of the exit scenarios I can come up with. Is there nothing good that has come to you from taking this drug?"

"Tranquility created petite Hulk – the saver – the helper – the rescuer. I have no worries. No fear of
"Hulk. No guilt over the past . . . I can work like a demon."

"But you can't quit taking the drug?"

"I've basically made a lifetime commitment. Yes, it's my relationship . . . It's all my relationships. You have Natalie. You have Steve. You have your child. I have Tranquility."

"And you don't feel good about that?"

"No, I feel like a failure."

"Okay. Bruce. I'll make a lifetime commitment. And I won't feel like a failure. Now give me the drug. Give me the Tranquility." Buck's baritone reverberated off the tile walls.

"Goddamn you, Bucky." Banner lost his temper and slapped a full aerosol vial of Tranquility into Bucky's human hand.

Buck's reaction was an immediate gasp. He looked at the vial and back at Banner and back at the vial. His respirations increased, his eyelids fluttered, air rushed in and out of his mouth, his face flushed, his eyeballs rolled back into his head and his head loosened on its joint. He fell. He slid down the sink and wall. His face softened. He opened his hand, looked at the ampoule of Tranquility again, closed his hand and placed his hand over his chest. He clasped his metal hand over his human hand and held the ampoule over his heart.

"I can have it? You gave it to me? I don't believe it. I have it. Thank you. It's mine now. You gave it to me." He gasped for air - his head fell against the wall - his eyes rolled closed. "Thank you. I can take it. I can use it." He whispered, "I have it. I have it." He pressed the vial to his chest with all his might.

Banners eyes were like saucers as he witnessed the incredible behavior of Barnes who reacted to holding the canister of Tranquility as if he had taken the drug.

"You do know that holding that aerosol canister against your chest will not get the drug into your bloodstream. What the hell, Buck, are you not gonna use it?"

"I feel too good right now. Maybe later." Buck tossed the canister into his pants pocket, picked up his Band-Aid and jaunted out the bathroom door.

Banner inspected himself in the mirror. His sclera was lime colored and his skin was green tinged. How could he have this reaction with Tranquility on board? How could someone as youthful and angelic looking as Barnes scared the holy shit out of anyone?

Banner lingered a moment in the bathroom and took a long hard look at himself in the mirror. The drug created petite Hulk? What bunch of bull Banner thought.

"I created petite Hulk." Banner said out loud to his reflection in the mirror. He looked at himself a long time.
When Bruce Banner join the others, Natalie instructed Tony on how to spring up on the surfboard, Tony, doing a good job of it. Banner sat by Steve and looked at Bucky who focused on Natalie, as usual.

"I don't know what to make of your friend Bucky. Is he a genius or an idiot?" Bruce said in all seriousness.

Steve burst out a laugh.

"Well said. I have the same problem." Cap whistled his military whistle to shake Buck's attention off Nat.

"Buck! Are you an idiot or a genius?" Steve asked.

Buck thought before he answered and said:

"Yes. Yes I am." He joined Natalie and Tony on the floor popping up.

"Well, there you have it – the answer of a true disciple," Cap said.

"Disciple of who?"

"Timothy Leary."

Natalie and Bucky went as far as taping off an outline of a surfboard on the floor with masking tape to teach Tony some footwork. For a man his age Tony was in top physical shape. He was well balanced, coordinated and flexible. He was tenacious. He would make a good surfer. After Natalie, Bucky and Tony popped up 300 times Steve was exhausted and went to the bar to make drinks. Bruce noticed Steve's awkwardness and approached the bar.

"Need some help?"

"What's a stinger? How do you make a stinger?"

"Cognac and Creme De Menthe."

"Oh. That sounds terrible." Steve made a sour face.

"How about some very dry very dirty Martinis?"

"Great."

"I'll tell you how to make a virgin Margarita for Natalie. Get the blender."

They turn the sound off on the surfing competition, hit the sofas to relax and tell stories. The subject? Surfing. They told the tall tales of surfers. They imitated the cadence and colloquialisms and surfing slang of the times. They sounded like they were speaking a foreign language. Steve was up first:

"One day we ran into Branch Gleason, the most famous surfer around in 1963. Everyone genuflected to this guy. He walked on the beach like he owned the world. He did. We were impressed. We stood around with goo-goo eyes and our mouths hanging open and here's Bucky." Steve imitated Bucky standing by his surfboard stuck in the sand.
"Now, Bucky was known. Since day one he had a rep. Even before he went in the water he had folklore. That first day he was sunning his chest wounds on the beach, you remember how bad they looked and that slash across his face – brutal. Well, they looked even more gruesome the next day. A group of young surfer boys maybe 12, 13-year-old Mexican kids saw him and one was like 'dude.'” Steve imitated the kids body posture and language.

" ‘Dude, what happened to you?’ Buck was all stoic and said, 'knife fight'. The kids said, 'Well, gee whiz, what's the other guy look like'? Buck says totally straight faced, intense eyes and all, 'He's dead', he said. Well, the kid froze right in his tracks and Bucky seeing this quickly said, 'I'm joking'. Then they all got loosened up and Bucky blows it and says, 'He's only brain-dead'. They were like 100 times more scared and backed away from him. There he was all white and slashed up and those scary eyes. They looked at him like he was an escaped psychopath or something. One kid asked Buck in Spanish his name and Buck said, 'Diego'. The kid ran away from the scene and said, 'Diego El Diablo'." Steve said this with a pretty good Spanish accent.

"Diego the devil. And I'm afraid it stuck – so this guy knew the story of Diego Diablo and Buck's reputation as a hotdog, an aggro. And, you know, Buck stands out on the beach. There's a maturity about him or something I don't know . . . but anyway. So this guy spies Buck. He walks through the crowd going out of his way to get to Diego here and he said to Bucky, 'Dude, the purpose of surfing is to see how long you can stay up on the board, man. I don't think anyone's ever told you that'." There was light laughter in the room.

Bucky said, "I thought it was a compliment. I was like thank you, thank you." Then the room exploded with laughter.

"Didn't you guys get nicknames?" Tony said to Natalie and Steve.

"After Buck got his, we decided we needed cover names so we continued the pattern of local towns. I picked Catalina and Steve picked Ventura. Later I spontaneously got Daisy and Cap got Ace, so we were set."

"Ace Ventura?" Tony laughed.

"What's so funny?" Steve asked.

"It's a movie from the 90s – you guys aren't even done with the 70s yet." Nat sprang up for her turn.

Steve looked at Bucky with a question mark in his eyes.

"Beats me. Put it on the list." Buck said.

"One day the most unusual troublemaker Steve Rogers –" Steve cut her off. "You're not going to tell about that day are you?"

"Steve, you don't even know what happened that day. Not really. You'll be hearing it for the first time."

Steve gave up.

"This was a day I'll never forget. It was heavy out there." She told the story like telling a ghost story around a campfire.

"The kind of gray day where you can't tell where the sky ends and the water begins. No one was out. That should've given us a warning but we were newbies and thoroughly addicted. I remember
Steve saying how we beat everyone out. Well, we set out. Buck and I came back in. You just
couldn't surf. The wind blew you right off the surfboard if you managed to get up at all. You couldn't
see a thing. We stood on the shore looking out for Steve. There was no sign of him. We waited past
the point of comfort. It seemed an eternity. Luckily, Steve's board had bright orange writing on it and
I saw a flash of orange. Buck swam out to it and by some miracle found him. He was underwater but
still tethered to his board. He dragged him to shore. He was not breathing. We started CPR.” Natalie
and Bucky looked at Steve for a reaction. He had his hands up, palms up, and a shocked look on his
face.

"On the pulse check his heart was beating but, irregularly, and Buck activated the defibrillator feature
on his arm. The feature said to shock him so we gave him the 360 joules required.

"Thank you, Tony. God bless you Tony, for having the foresight to think beyond this prosthesis as a
weapon. Thank you.

"We resumed CPR. The minutes were ticking by into the permanent brain damage range. We just
kept going. We were like robots weren't we Angel?” She said to Bucky who was reliving the day by
the emotions on his face.

"We were trained. We kept our heads. I remember the wind had picked up and blew gusts of
stinging sand over us, in our eyes. Remember that Angel? It turned dark. It was cold. We shook.
Steve was blue and so were you. I remember your lips were blue. We wouldn't give up. We would
try anything. Finally, he began to breathe. We hovered around him. It was a long time before he was
conscious. We try to warm him with the only thing we had – our bodies. He started to come around a
bit. He shoved us off him." Her dramatic tone changed.

"He got up, picked up Buck's board and started back out.” Natalie imitated Steve pushing his way
back out to the waves.

"I stood in front of him. I blocked him." She demonstrated her body stance.

"He walked around me. Buck stood in front of him." She showed Bucky's body stance.

"Steve started to try to get by Buck and Buck tackled him, held him face down in the sand and gave
him a sand facial. He would not have been able to control him if Steve had not been so weak. He
flipped him over. Steve still fought him. Buck gave him three or four good slaps until Steve grabbed
his hand and said, 'okay, okay'.

"Another bit of luck, no one was on the beach to witness this incident. Bucky straddling over Steve,
of course, he had to deactivate the human hologram on his arm to use the defibrillator and shock him
with his fist and the bright arc of light and the seizure like reaction of Steve's body. Definitely against
many of Dandalo's 44 rules for Time Travelers. There's more. We felt Steve should be in an ICU
somewhere but he wouldn't hear of it. The rest of the day and evening we wouldn't take our eyes off
of him. I felt like he was a bomb about to go off. Finally, poor Steve had enough, and he said,
'You're looking at me like I'm a bug and now you're following me to the bathroom? What's up with
you guys?' He had no idea. Well now you do."

"I don't see what's such a big deal?" Steve's face was flushed with embarrassment. "Bucky drowned
every day."

"That's true. I did."

"Yes, you did." Natalie bounced onto Bucky's lap.
He felt her weight and her warmth on him. Steve watched Buck as he ran his human hand slowly up his own thigh, up her back, and repeated the gesture.

"Oh." Buck arched his back.

When Steve saw this, he knew the evening was over.

"Well," Steve slapped both hands on his knees. "Let's call it a day."

Bucky sprang to attention.

"Midnight Banner?"

"Midnight Bucky."

The next morning Steve found Bucky reading on the Internet. He scrolled fast – brain computer interface something – it went by too fast for Steve to read.

"Are you reading that fast?"

"Oh . . . Yeah . . . I took a speed reading tutorial on YouTube. Wanna work out?" Buck stopped what he was doing and clicked off.

Buck made it his business to know when Tony slept. He slept the same four hours each night and when he put in his four hours he slept soundly. Bucky waited for this time to try something daring; something he thought Tony may put the nix on. If it worked, it could make all the difference. If his plan did not work, he would only have himself to blame.

Bucky gained access to the accessories closet by voice activation of the door. Inside he found the appliances and adapters used for his cybernetic arm and some new things, some things he could not identify. He located the hand adapter used to disrupt large electrical equipment, like a satellite dish, or a small nuclear weapon. He quickly changed the regulator to except rather than discharge. He turned on the computer, removed his cybernetic hand at the wrist – bayonet mount – and hooked himself to the hard drive. From there he was able to bypass his optic nerve and accept information, data, the ones and zeros, directly into his brain. Just like speed reading only faster.

Later that evening Steve saw Bucky back on the Internet in Tony's accessory closet. He saw Bucky's hand and the wires connected to the main frame.

"Are you still reading?"

"I don't have to read anymore."

"What do you do now?"

"Download."

Steve was shocked but didn't want to show his shock.

"What are you downloading?"

"Millions – hundreds of millions of items – data – everything." Bucky jerked. His eyes fluttered as another huge amount of data entered his brain. His bottom lip and chin trembled.

"You have to stop this," Steve pleaded, "stop and rest." Those statements got no reaction. "When will you stop?"
"I'll stop at the end."

"There is no end."

"You're wrong. There is an end."

"You're mind can't hold all that."

Bucky glanced up at Steve like he was imbued with the knowledge of the universe – which he was.

"Oh yes, it can."

Steve could no longer disguise his horror. Bucky's eyes look like the Children of the Damned.

"I'm getting Tony." Steve had panic in his voice.

"It's too late for that." Vapor trails rushed across Buck's blue iris as he jerked and his eyes fluttered again.

When Tony arrived Bucky sat motionless with his cybernetic arm detached from his body on the table with the cyborg hand along side. He held himself up with his human hand on his head. His elbow rested on the desk. He jerked oddly, like an electrical jolt was passed through him.

"Steve said you downloaded the Internet?

"No," Bucky held his head and acknowledged Tony peripherally. "80% of the Internet is virus laden. I can't corrupt myself with that."

"Well, what did you download then?" Tony tried to sound cool and casual.

"Oh, technical information, scientific data, research, a few more languages – like – all of them. All the rest I didn't have. I have them all now, even Xhosa." Bucky smiled at Steve and clicked his tongue on the X of Xhosa and said Xhosa again. "I can talk to her. I can teach you."

"What else?"

"Other things I'm interested in like oceanography, marine biology, etymology, molecular genetics, bio mechanics, bio chem, ecology, evolutionary biology, and of course biorobotics, neurorobotics and brain computer interface, I had to do that first..."

"Okay, okay."

"I tried to go into geopolitics but it was all contaminated." Bucky sounded so disappointed. He glanced in Tony's direction. Tony touched Bucky's chin and lifted his face for a closer look. Having poor boundaries Buck let him. Buck's eyes whirled like two fidget spinners. Tony did not look up but signaled to Steve.

"Go get Banner." Tony pulled a chair up beside Bucky. He made a conscious decision to relax his shoulders, to take a deep breath – a few deep breaths – he made sure his voice sounded calm and casual without any hint of how much Tony was freaked out. Tony looked over the hardware. He looked over Bucky's cyborg hand laying there, detached, on the table.

"Ah hum. Well, if you're done, Buck. I can unhook you if you like. Give you back two hands?"

"Yeah sure, thank you." Bucky was distracted. He seemed to breath in only; a series of short inhalations in rapid succession.
Even though Tony's hands shook, he calmly, slowly proceeded to disconnect Bucky from the computer and re-connect his cybernetic hand. Bucky payed no attention. Every second a burst of light flashed across his cornea. His eyes and head jerked in a bizarre way.

"What's going on in there?" Tony said nonchalantly.

"Oh," Bucky said. "Making connections, ah, organizing, moving things, so many connections, new pathways. I . . . I may have to shut down." Bucky relaxed his body and let his head fall against the back of the chair. His face fell in the direct line of sight with Tony's.

Buck's eyes flashed open. "Tony, don't be afraid," Bucky said, but Tony was afraid. Tony was white with fear.

"I think this will work," Bucky broke eye contact with Tony, shut his eyes and let out all his air. He did not move.

Steve returned with Banner. Tony noticed Banner's tranquilizer gun in his pocket. Tony motioned them to calm with a hand that trembled. Bucky resumed huge, deep, long, breaths, in his mouth and out with a haaaa.

"What's happening?" Banner whispered.

"I think he overloaded himself."

"I hope you know none of this is even possible." Banner shook his head.

Tony reset Bucky cybernetic arm. The hand did a few involuntary movements.

"He said whatever he's up to is working so we wait. Banner, can you do an assessment without touching him?"

"Sure, he's obviously breathing, but if he continues that kind of breathing he will become acidotic, but oh well. He's pink so he's oxygenated. Look at his neck. His heart rate can be counted by his bounding carotid arteries. He's taching right along. I can see from across the room he is mentally not on the same planet with the rest of us. Want to know anything else?"

Buck's eyes opened and he sat straight in the chair. He glanced around the room and a broad smile crossed this face.

"Well," he shrugged, "I'm operational."

Tony raised his hand to keep Banner and Steve at bay. He relaxed himself again and made eye contact with Barnes. Buck's eyes looked glazed but no volcanic activity noted.

"Why did you take such a risk?"

"I can't be weak, sick or dumb anymore. I can't cry out in the night. It would wake our baby."

Tony checked Steve's reaction to the statement. He knew as Steve knew, Buck was a desperate man. He had been a desperate man since the knowledge of his fatherhood exploded in his brain. But none of them knew just how desperate Bucky really was.

"What was your inspiration for this act?"

"It was my ILLUMINE."
"Your ILLUMINE?" Tony threw his palms skyward and glanced at the boys.

"Yes Tony, it seemed illogical to me that some scientist would give me something as powerful as ILLUMINE without a way for me to use it. And I needed to use it. I needed the power. I was moving the nanite strings but at the rate I was going it would take forever. I needed energy now, so I tried the simplest thing first. What if my ILLUMINE activates only when I really need it, like when I fell from the train, like when they - when they- you know, hurt me. Like, like what if I was trying to out run a cheetah or something, like it would take my whole body's physiology to activate it. Like a sustained effort. I tried the physical but I'm not easily challenged that way. Then I thought of this."

"Did it work?"

"If your mitochondria can be felt. If you can feel the Krebs cycle kicking into high gear, then yes, I'm fully operational. Nanite string movement can be seen on PET scan. I suggest that test be done now. That would give us empirical proof. When is the neurologist coming? She may have ideas."

"Two days. We will run the test."

"Yes, I need every test you can give."

"Why didn't you come to me if you wanted to do this? We could have proceeded under a controlled laboratory experiment."

"On the chance that you'd say no and restrict me. Then I'd never have another chance."

"You thought I'd say no?"

"Sure, why would you let me do something you can't do? But believe me Tony, you don't want to go there. If I entered the wrong domain – made one small error - stay in one place too long – a virus would have shut me down. I wouldn't be able to function. It was really dangerous. What I did was really dangerous. Don't worry. I won't go back. I'll have to get updates and upgrades manually."

Tony laughed. A chuckle at first, then Tony went a little hysterical. Tears filled his eyes and smeared on to his face.

Bucky laughed along – at first. He stopped when the realization swept over him that Tony, Tony's hysterics, Tony's laughter to tears could only mean one thing . . . Tony cared. Tony cared about him. Not his arm, not his rehabilitation, but him. Despite himself Tony cared. Over insurmountable obstacles Tony cared.

Buck glanced at Steve. Steve had seen a look like that on Bucky's face once before, 90 years ago, by the river, the day Bucky saw his father cry. Steve knew from this moment on, Bucky would be devoted to Tony the rest of his life and not because he had to make amends.

"Yeah, it was dangerous. Don't do it again." Tony laughed and wiped his eyes.

Everyone at Solaris needed sleep. Natalie headed under the covers for 12 hours, at least, she said. Bucky need 12 hours on BARF and the whole place shut down.

All residents of Solaris worked together to complete testing on Barnes and Romanova. Even with the help of Tony's army of robots and Jarvis the human crew put in a long day's work. That evening they ate together in the cinema room. Too tired to put on a movie they ate, drank and relaxed in silence.
"What do we know about this neurologist coming tomorrow?" Steve asked Bruce.

"Quite a lot. She was hand-picked. Her name is Dr. Trine Haugen. She's young. She's brilliant. She's Norwegian."

"Do you speak Norwegian?" Steve smiled at Bucky.

"As of yesterday, I do."

"Her father was a renowned neurologist – wrote the text books. Her mother is a not too shabby neurosurgeon that invented the Sonic Separator, the Tri-lazer Connector and the Back Brain Stimulator. The story goes, Trine knew neuroanatomy before the ABC's."

"I like her," Nat chimed in.

"She is impressive. She's an original thinker. She's not confined by the box."

"Then she won't be shocked by a cyborg?" Bucky always cautious, always aware of what he considered his freak status.

"She won't be shocked by anything. Her hobby is the neuropathology of the criminal mind."

"They have a pathology? I didn't know . . . that wasn't available knowledge for download," Bucky said.

"No one knows yet. She just discovered it. She's not yet published."

"You're saying criminals can be cured?" Steve said.

"We're going to have some interesting conversations. She can stay all week. She has no practice. She just does consultations like this."

Banner staffed the bar and took orders. Buck was first up.

"Why do you always make the drinks?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because I'm originally a chemist. What can I get you?"

"Tequila . . . Something."

"How about a Tequila Sunrise?"

"What's in it?"

"You mean you don't know."

"Come on, that wasn't on the top of my priority list."

"Want to learn?"

"Really? Yeah! Sure!" Buck's face brightened.

Banner picked up The Ultimate Bar Book and laid the book in front of Barnes with a whack. "I don't think you downloaded this."

"Bucky flipped through each page as he sipped his tequila sunrise. When he reached the end, he closed the book and handed it back to Banner."
"Got it," he said.

Banner removed himself from behind the bar. He motioned Bucky to take the reins.

"Wait a minute there – I'm not ready to solo. Memorizing formulas is one thing. I'm sure there's more to bartending than that."

Banner stayed close, watched, and made comments like, 'always put a napkin down first – no not with a can – use coarse salt for this, fine salt for that'.

Within 90 minutes of Barnes bartending everyone slurred their words. Seems Bucky's thinking went like this; if the drink called for 2 ounces of alcohol, 4 ounces would be twice is good.

All residents of Solaris learned a good lesson this night; increased intelligence does not in any way mean improved judgment. It was time for Steve to call it a night, but Steve was in no shape to remember, instead he had Tony cornered, bending his ear.

"When you are out there on the waves a while," Steve waxed nostalgic. "Day after day. All day. It takes a while. When I felt it for the first time – when I let myself feel it. I'll never forget the moment. The struggle to stay up. Your battle to control the board. To dominate the wave. Your desire to tame the wave to beat it into compliance with your board – to submit to your board. Maybe I just got tired. Maybe I just gave up for a second. Just one moment but in that moment you see the truth like a flash." Uncoordinated, Steve waved his hands around.

"The wave, the board, myself were all one. I know, I know this sounds like I was high on drugs or fatigue substances but there are many paths to the truth. And that truth changed everything. I was the board. I was the wave. I was nature. I was a part of nature. I was connected to nature. Me, Steve Rogers. I wasn't separate. Do you know what that means? To belong? There was no fight. No struggle. No need to master, or control, or dominate because it's you. You are nature. That's when you become a surfer. That's when you become a human being. This happens to all surfers. It's all they talk about, in one way or another. It's all you think about. And there is no going back. You're changed forever. It changes you. It changes your values. Your opinions. Your relationships. Your relationship with the world. Your relationship with your own body. I always treated my body like it was a machine that I fueled up and beat into a performance. I never allowed my body to feel pleasure, like with a girl, or even food, or the pleasure of movement, or the pleasure of sleep, or even companionship.

"And I changed. I allowed myself to feel the love I have for Bucky and Nat, and even you Tony. I know you guys tease me about my beach bunnies, but I never had that. And when I say I'm jonesin' for a wave, what I'm really saying is that I want to feel that feeling again. I want to commune with nature. I want to belong, as ridiculous as that sounds. I want a reminder. I want to remember what I really am. I want to go home. So Tony, I'm asking you with all my heart. Have mercy on me. Order me a wetsuit and a board. I've got to go out."

"Yeah you're going out all right. Come on Ace. You need to sleep it off." Natalie handled one of Steve's arms, Bucky took the other, and they headed him for the door.

"He knows he can't go in the water here. He knows it's too polluted. He'll be okay." Buck said to Tony as they passed out the door.

"I thought he couldn't get drunk," Tony said to Bruce.

"He never had Bucky for a bartender. You know, he memorized that bartenders guide in like four minutes."
"Damn."

The lights automatically shut off as Tony and Bruce left the room.

Dr. Trine Haugen M.D., PhD, ABNS, FCPS, FACS, MRCS, was not at all what anyone expected. She was shockingly young, shockingly tall, shockingly blonde. Her white hair was wild, shoulder length, curly in spots, straight in spots, darker at the roots and more blonde as it reaches the white tips. Her eyebrows were bushy, white and never plucked. She wore no makeup. She was carelessly dressed, and carelessly coffered. She wore a perpetual frown on her brow, always appeared irritated, and never made direct eye contact. She looked the stereotypical absent-minded professor; a perfect example of a mad scientist.

Banner, Buck, and Tony readied the lab. All Buck's tests displayed, all results at her fingertips. She took a long look at Bucky's PET scan.

"What is this? You call me here for a joke? You call me all the way to play a trick on me? Is this an American style practical joke?"

"No, no what is it?" Tony could not hide the shock in his voice.

"There is indication of neurogenesis in this brain. That is impossible."

"I assure you, this is legitimate."

"Is this an embryonic brain? Does anyone in this room see an embryonic brain – no – this is an adult brain. Everyone out. I have to study this. Out. Out. Out."

Tony and Bruce and Bucky sheepishly left the room.

"Let's go to my spy center. We can at least watch her."

"Not me. I can't stand the suspense. I'm crinkling. I'll be in my therapeutic room. Maybe Natalie can smooth me out."

SIXTEEN HOURS LATER

Tensions were so high at Solaris that the team spontaneously congregated in the cinema room. Barnes attempted to ease the tension by dressing up for his job behind the bar. He wore a white sleeveless Under Armour T-shirt and a black lightweight jogging suit, also Under Armour. Natalie shaved him as close as humanly possible, and she slicked his hair back into a picturesque knot. He smiled as he snapped a black bowtie across his collarless neck. He had done all the bar back and was open for business. Natalie curled up on the sofa with the beautifully photographed Fritz Lang German language masterpiece "M" on low-volume in the background. Steve sat at her feet reading William L. Shirer's "Rise and Fall of the Third Reich". Banner hung at the bar with a drink in his hand. He encouraged his student. Tony plopped down on the barstool by Banner with the sigh. When Tony got a load of the bartender he laughed large. Tony laughed his authentic laugh. The laugh everyone loved to hear. The laugh everyone loved to laugh along with.

"What can I get you, sir?" Bucky puffed out his chest.

"A Singapore Sling."

Barnes remove the appropriate glass and started the nine ingredient drink.
"You can't throw him." Now, Bruce puffed his chest, proud of his prodigy.

"Okay, okay, stop, I changed my mind. Scotch on the rocks."

"What brand, sir?"

"Chevis Regal will do." Tony turned to Banner and spoke low. "16 hours, she's been in there 16 hours with Jarvis and the robots. I've sent in food, drinks, more food, more drinks. What can she be doing?" Buck delivered the drink.

"Anything else?"

"Yes, I'd like a large glass filled with ice and sparkling water."

"Perrier?"

"No. No. No. Something else. Anything else."

Buck had to leave the room and go to the main kitchen for the anything else.

"Oh, Tony. What did we miss?"

"AH, we knew the guy had some permanent damage done but 16 hours? What could we have possibly missed?"

"I am feeling fear." Banner finished a drink.

"I have not been this on edge in years."

"Maybe we should've had him in some conventional rehab center in Switzerland or something. Maybe our arrogance . . . "

"You mean MY arrogance. Damn . . . I've treated him like a machine – like he's one of my personal robots."

Buck returned and poured the Badoit. Natalie slid a stool across the floor and pushed it between Banner and Tony. Buck leaned on the bar, looked out at the movie and waited for the next order. He rested his hands on the bar.

"Angel," Natalie said, "your hand." She placed her hand on his cybernetic hand.

Tony and Bruce glanced at Bucky's hand – his metal hand - and his large expanding pupils. Buck tucked his hand under the bar and lowered his eyes from view.

"It started happening . . . on its own . . . about an hour ago."

"What's the matter?"

"I'm . . . afraid." Buck stood at attention behind the bar. He held his human hand over his mechanical arm like a shield. Tony, Bruce and Nat stared at him with sympathetic eyes. They were afraid too. They were afraid of what the doctor was going to say about Buck's brain.

"It's going to be bad. I feel it. I'm going to get a bad diagnosis. It has to be. They did too much – "

Dr. Trine Haugen led by two of Tony's personal robots entered the cinema room. All eyes were on her.
"Is every member of the treatment team present?" She said loudly. Tony shot out of his seat, followed by Banner, Nat and Steve.

"Dandalo is not here but will come if needed." Tony said followed by a tense silence.

"Can I serve you a drink?" Bucky attracted her attention behind the bar.

"What kind of vodka do you have?"

"We have stocked Vikingfjord for you ma'am."

"Straight up," she said. She addressed the room in a loud voice. "Please be seated in your usual casual way. There is so much tension in this room," she shuttered. "Please, there is no reason for all this apprehension. Where is my patient, James Barnes?"

"Here, ma'am."

Trine pointed to Tony and Bruce.

"He's your lab assistant? He's your bartender?"

"No!" shot Bruce.

"No, it's just a joke. I mean, it's not a joke. I can explain." Tony stammered.

"I'm just learning," Bucky snapped off his tie and slipped off his jacket. He came from around the bar to reveal his cybernetic arm fully metal. He carried it with the hand in a fist.

"Your James Buchanan Barnes?"

"Yes I am."

"Date of birth, August 10, 1917?"

"Exactly right."

Dr. Trine Haugen shut her eyes a moment. She took a deep breath. Even as young as she was, as a neurologist, she had consulted on cases that ranged from the odd, to the strange, to the bizarre. This was by far the strangest case she had consulted on, she thought, as she looked at a 100 + year old man that did not look a day over 21 years of age. She looked at his face and his terrifying cybernetic arm.

"You are as pale as a ghost, my man. I strongly suggest you sit."

"Yes." Bucky sat at the table by the doctor.

"There is no reason for despair. No reason whatsoever. Your issues are complex, yes, but not desperate. I repeat this is not a desperate situation. I am not leaving here until all issues are dealt with. I am not leaving until an action plan, agreed-upon by all, is in place. Okay?"

Buck nodded affirmative.

"Now, I want to instruct YOU. Watch." Trine walked to the bar. She picked up the bottle of Vikingfjord vodka. She picked up the shot glasses. She set the vodka and glasses in front of Buck with a snap.
"This is all you need to know to be a bartender."

Laughter broke the ice in the room like global warming.

"I see some I have not met."

"My apologies. This is Natalia Romanova, my lover, and Steve Rogers, my best friend."

"Nat or Natalie is fine."

Trine stood and shook Natalie's hand. She touched her shoulder and said, "Very nice to meet you." She turned to do the same with Steve, but she stopped. She stared into his face as their matching blue eyes met. She literally scanned his form down to his feet and back up to his face. Her mouth was in the shape of an O. Steve appeared to have been hit in the head with a lightning bolt as he stood dumbfounded. Trine mobilized herself and completed the formalities. The pause was only a few seconds. No one even noticed . . . except Natalie.

"Now, please, everyone to their customary comfort spaces."

Bucky filled all the shot glasses which were picked up immediately. Natalie took the sofa, Buck joined her there. Banner sat on four big pillows stacked on the floor by Nat. Steve sat in his straight chair. Dr. Haugen sat on the opposite end of the sofa from Nat and Buck. Tony did not sit on the floor by Banner, instead he sat on his million dollar coffee table. Steve flipped off the movie and pulled his chair close in by Trine. They made a cozy circle.

"SKAL!" Trine Haugen toasted and she downed her vodka.

"I know the talk, the ominous brain damage, brain damage. These are more correctly brain injuries. Injuries to the brain. They come in three kinds: traumatic brain injury, concussive brain injury, and hypoxic brain injury. I am sorry to inform you, James, you have all three types. Now, let me say you also have one hundred million neurons in your brain to play around with. So, if you happen to lose a few, what's the big deal, right? A lot depends on where the brain injury occurs. If you have ever considered yourself lucky, you are lucky in this area. If the extent of your brain injury had been in other areas you would be in a desperate situation. And you are functioning, right? Here you are in front of us all, with a working brain. After all, you're a bartender, you work in the lab, right? Brain injuries like yours are very hard to predict in outcomes. But I will try. First I need more information."

Bucky and Natalie sat cockeyed on the sofa. He sat with his back against the sofa arm, she tucked up against him. They faced his doctor. His human arm stretched over the back of the sofa. His cybernetic arm laid across her lap. She held his clenched metal fist in her hands.

"I realize you have limited knowledge of events, but you may have some knowledge of the hypoxic brain injury. This type is caused by oxygen deprivation to the brain. Can you remember any incident that could cause oxygen deprivation? This would be a cardiac arrest, respiratory arrest, an accident, an injury, a situation where you were cut off from oxygen, James, anyone?"

"Maybe I can," Buck said. Natalie turned to look at him with big eyes. "Natalie, I'm sorry I never told you this before. I meant to tell you but there has just been so much."

"There was a rumor I hung myself and died and they brought me back. I really didn't believe that. I didn't believe that I would do that. Then there was the counter rumor that they had played too rough with me, I died and they brought me back. The counter rumor seemed more likely true. It was common practice to cover the death of a prisoner, someone in interrogation, someone being tortured, or someone being used by the medical division, to cover the death with a suicide story."
"That's a highly likely explanation." Dr. Haugen flipped her papers to move on.

"Oh," said Natalie. "There was another incident. This was many years ago. I was 14 years old. I was in training, and they defrosted this one." She jiggled Bucky's cybernetic arm. "They defrosted him to instruct me in some special skills he was expert in, close quarters combat grappling, a technique known today is Systema and the silent kill. Things like that. This was before the Winter Soldier program, before the bionic arm." She jiggled Bucky's arm again. "He was known only as Soldier. He did not know his name. He had complete amnesia for anything before that moment and believe me they wanted to keep it that way." She turned to Bucky. "I couldn't help loving him." She looked back at Bucky her eyes moistened. They embraced. She held him in the embrace. "We were forced to try an escape. Quite by accident he was shot twice in the chest. I watched him die."

"Yet, here he is."

"When the medical helicopter arrived the team put him on a ventilator, and a machine that did cardiac compressions. He was dead. I saw their assessment. His pupils were dilated. He was not breathing, he had no heartbeat. But the commander ordered everything to be done. That's the last I saw. I was taken away."

"I see, that would explain the test results. Thank you. I can see everyone is emotional over this tragic story. We can break."

"No, I'm fine."

"Let's go on."

"Any questions so far?"

"If concussive brain injury can only be diagnosed on autopsy. Why are you sure he has that also?" Dr. Banner asked.

"The extent of injury dictates such a high probability for me to be sure. Some, or all of what you're calling PTSD symptoms may be caused by CBI."

"Wait, you're saying . . . but concussive brain injury is chronic. It gets worse over time. Those people. Those poor people go mad. PTSD gets better over time even cured, I . . . ."

"Yes, but in your favor again. Your treatment for PTSD has been working? Correct?"

"Why yes it has."

"There's no way to know for sure. This is an unknown. It takes courage to face the unknown. More questions? If not, we move on. Well then. How does one get out of a predicament like you're in? Well, it's already happening. Your brain has made a nice job of making fine connections around the injuries creating the neuroplasticity that is so desirable. This process is extensive throughout your brain, another stroke of luck in your favor. I'm leaning towards a hypothesis that even though in stasis your time in cryo-freeze rested your brain in some way, but that's another five years of research. Then I come to your big break. The ILLUMINE in your blood, in your body, has been activated."

Tony jumped to his feet. "I have to call Dandalo." Tony discreetly set a message to Dandalo.

"The ILLUMINE has been activated by your own physiology and has been active to some extent for some time. The ILLUMINE has permeated the cell membrane and is being used in the powerhouse of the cell. Should I be more technical?"
"Please don't," Steve said.

"And here is the most astonishing – when the ILLUMINE is used by the cell as energy this process produces a by-product. The waste material is excreted by the cell, combines with metal ions abundantly found in the body to make more ILLUMINE. This re-uptake feedback loop will provide an unlimited power source, an unending fuel source, for the cell."

"Fuel for the cell to do what?" Natalie asked.

"To do what the chromosomes command. Repair, repair, repair. This process is repairing your damaged neurons right now. I know what I just said is impossible, this is all impossible, but nevertheless, neurogenesis is happening right now in your brain." She tapped her hand on the desk in cadence with the last seven words.

"Is this why he doesn't scar?"

"Yes, Nat, excellent deduction."

"This process, this reuptake of the ILLUMINE can go on indefinitely?" Tony said.

"Yes."

"Do you realize what that sounds like?"

"What's that sound like? What's that sound like?" Steve said.

"Are you saying immortality?" Banner suggested.

"I'm trying not to," Trine turned to Barnes. "If you are damaged enough to need stitches. How long before the scar is completely gone?"

"About three months."

"And that was before – " Dr. Haugen waved her arms around the room. "What you did last night with the computer interface accelerated the process. I don't know how much at this point. We could retest in one week and see. But immortality? If he were decapitated, he would die. If eviscerated - he'd die – dismembered - he'd die - cut an artery without any support - he'd die – any extravagant damage - he'd die - but given enough time to repair – immortality?"

"Natalie has ILLUMINE in her blood. The fetus . . . double!" Bruce exclaimed.

"My first thought on that subject is the ILLUMINE is sexually transmitted . . . Now, of course that's just a starting point . . . Okay. People. Let's focus. Let's look at one another. We are the team. We, here in this room, and Dandalo. We are IT. We will sit here at Solaris, in this paradise, until we get an understanding of this remarkable discovery. I know the wild thoughts you are having right now. I had them for sixteen hours in your lab. Let's keep our heads. I don't have to tell you how top-secret this is until we have all the facts and a clear path to move forward. We may be thinking that we are not the best ones to do this. We may think we are not smart enough, strong enough or moral enough. We are. We have to be. We are the brains, right here, right now, that have been given this monumental task. We will rise to the occasion. Are we together?"

Bucky poured the shot glasses full. The team agreed on one subject; they downed the shot of vodka.

"I am unable to form any more coherent sentences. I must sleep. I know I've given you all a lot to digest." Dr. Trine Haugen said. "One last thing. James, I need a semen sample. Now."
"Are you kidding me? I have never been this tense in my life."

"Here is the collection condom and container. Now, use all your amazing powers. You have a mechanical arm, for Christ sake's, so fill it up." The doctor slapped the container into Bucky's human hand.

"I would never use my..." Buck protested.

"And James?" Trine interrupted him. "As part of my assessment I would like to follow you all day tomorrow on your normal routine. You do have a normal routine around here, don't you?"

"Yes! We do. We certainly do. We'd love to have you join us." Steve smiled big and literally batted his eyes.

"Well then. Can someone please show me to my room?"

"I am your man." Steve stood tall.

"James, when you're done, take the container to the lab for analysis."

Dr. Trine Haugen picked up the Vikingfjord bottle and left the room with Steve. Tony, Banner, Natalie and Buck stared at the empty shot glasses and the shot glass rings all over Tony's exquisite table.

Natalie's gaze wandered to Buck. The hologram had activated on his cybernetic arm his face looked less distressed. She waved her hands up and down his countenance without touching him.

"Look at you. You're not desirable enough as you are, as is – you have to add sexually transmitted immortality?"

"Yeah, dude." Banner cozied up to Buck playfully. "Wanna stop by the lab and look at my etchings?"

"You can't be joking about this."

"Come here, handsome." Tony teased.

"That's enough." Buck snapped his bow tie around his neck and stood behind the bar. "Come up – bar's open."

Natalie, Tony and Banner milled around, sat at the bar and had a few. Bucky, not drinking, stood behind the bar. His mind wandered. He stared off into space.

"Bucky?"

"I know you're joking but it's just not true. It can't be true. I'm gonna die. I can't live. I have to die. I have to die a horrific death. I'm going to die a gruesome, violent, painful death. That's the one sure thing I've always known."

Tony jumped on that. "It's just speculation, man."

Natalie did not like the way Buck sounded. She did not like the way he looked. She did not like his tone of voice. She did not like what he said. She walked behind the bar for a closer look.

"We're going home now."
Down the hall Natalie touched Bucky's cybernetic arm and noticed the arm was metal again.

"Oh no, not again." Buck tried so hard to control his emotions.

Natalie muscled his human arm. She stopped him dead in his tracks. She held him by the shoulders. She shook him.

"I'm going to fix this. Look at me. I will fix this. Come on."

Bucky entered their room first. She slammed the door.

"Take off your clothes."

"Now?" Buck was shocked.

"Talking will not get you out of the headspace you're in." She had seen this before on the plane from Wakanda. Conventional methods did not work then. She had not been able to reach him. She would have to get drastic.

"But, I - "

"The time for talking is past. Take off all your clothes. NOW."

Buck did not hesitate. He was given a direct order. He complied and took off all his clothing. He sighed with relief, not the relief of been nude, even though, somehow that did make him feel better. This was more the relief of not having to think for himself. The relief of following orders.

"Sit in your chair."

Again, Buck did what he was told.

"Put your arms down the back of the chair."

He did. Natalie tied his arms above the elbows with a silk rope. She worked toward his shoulders, circling the rope again and again and again and she pulled the rope tight, forcing his chest to expand and his back to bow. She did the same with his arms below the elbow. She circled the rope many times. She did the same with the wrists. She worked quickly. She worked expertly. She tied his arms to the back of the chair. His cybernetic arm looked human already.

"Ha." She said. She circled his chest with the rope starting at his nipple and worked up over his pecs. She circled around many times and pulled tighter with each circle. He watched her. His breathing deepened as the muscles of his chest pushed against the rope.

"Ah . . . " he sighed.

She slid her hands between his thighs.

She spread his legs.

"Ahhh um . . . " he moaned.

She tied his thighs to the chair, above the knees and circled them with the rope. He moaned again. A second later he moaned a third time. She taped his calves above the ankles to the chair leg with duct tape. He watched her rip off a short piece of tape. She placed the tape over his eyes.

"Oh . . . " he said. He flexed his muscles against the restraints and growled softly. He forgot
everything. He made a soft noise from the back of his throat. His breathing quickened with
anticipation.

She let him sit like that for a long time. He heard the bathwater rush out of the faucet and hit the tub
full force. The room telephone rang.

"Hello," Natalie said in her gravelly smoky voice. "Yeah, Steve sure. I know. He wants to talk to
you too, badly. But um – he's tied up right now. Okay - yeah. He'll call you. Oh yeah? Ha ha Ha.
Okay bye." Bucky heard the phone tap the table.

He inhaled her scent. The air rushed around her activity. He tensed up. She ran something sharp
slowly over his thighs above the rope. All his muscles contracted. He could not help but cry out. He
knew he would feel blood running down his legs but he never did. She touched him with the sharp
ice many more times.

She straddled over him. She touched his face, his neck, his lips, his mouth. She opened his mouth
with her hands. But did not give him any satisfaction. She touched his tongue. He involuntarily
moved his mouth and tongue with a jerk.

"Oh, oh," he repeated many times.

She untied the knot of hair she so carefully fixed on the back of his head. She ran both hands over
his temples, into his hair. She shook his hair out free. She didn't let go. She controlled his head by the
wad of hair she gripped. She pulled his head back by his hair. She did nothing for a few minutes. His
mouth remained open. His mouth searched the air like a bird. His mouth reached at the air. He
searched with his tongue. He breathed in and out through his mouth. She touched his jaw and held
his head. She touched his lips and tongue, but she did not kiss him. He contracted his muscles and
pulled at the ropes to test their limits. He pushed his chest muscles into the restraint with his breath.
With each breath he pushed the ropes and sighed. She held his head by his hair and lowered herself
onto his lap but only for a moment. She brought her love to him like that many times and took it
away many times – give – take away – give – take away. She took her time.

She was the sea, he was the shore and she washed over him. It was sublime. He reached such a
heightened state of arousal he became ecstatic. He moaned nonstop. He trembled. She saw tears
escape the duct tape over his eyes. His muscles were so taut, so tightly stretched; his penis, so
engorged with blood, it looked like it could split open. It looked beautiful like that. He looked
beautiful tied like that. She knew she was home. He panted for air. He could not control his verbal
serenade. She could have held him in that state indefinitely. She was tempted to do just that but his
human hand was blue. She had tied him too tight. Out of practice, she thought. She untied him and
nature took it's course.

45 seconds. In 45 seconds she ran the full specimen container to the lab and returned to her lover. He
was laid out. He was softened. He was pliable. She filled his mind. She filled the world. They did
what lovers do.

"You're better than Tranquility," he whispered in her ear. They took their time satisfying their
passions.

"Why did you turn on the water like that?"

Inches from his face she smiled, "to cover your screams."

"You little devil."
And so this went on for hours until the clock struck midnight. They packed up and headed to the BARF machine.

On their way they knocked at Steve's door – no answer – they knocked louder– no answer.

"Jarvis, locate Steve Rogers."

"Steve Rogers resides in the room assigned to Dr. Trine Haugen room number 12."

"Seriously? A year of beach bunnies and now he's a womanizer?" Bucky threw his hand in the air.

"He's hardly a womanizer."

"I thought he was in love with Xhosa?"

"Didn't you see the way they looked at each other when they met?"

"Yeah, I thought he looked pretty stupid there for a minute." He did notice.

She put her hands under his arms and slid them up his back. She peered into his sweet face.
"It happened to us like that." Her voice rumbled with emotion.

He encircled her with his arms. He held her head against his chest so she could not see his face. He squeezed his eyes shut tight. At last, he remembered. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her eye lids, her forehead and all around her face.
"It's happening to me like that right now." He kissed her passionately on the lips.

Banner warmed up the BARF machine as soon as they rounded the corner. They went right to sleep.

Around 3 AM Banner jolted awake to the sound of Bucky who yelled out. Banner rushed in to find him sitting on the gurney covered in perspiration. He was still asleep but Natalie was waking beside him.


"What? I, I was dreaming," he wiped the sweat from his face.

"Can you recall the dream? The machine recognized one minute of a blur."

Natalie was awake and eager to hear. Buck's breathing slowed. He looked puzzled.

"I was in the bay of a large spacecraft, not Dandalo's. The bay door was open to this vast black space. I was weightless. I floated. I looked out the bay door at the expanse. I felt a snap and a crack appeared on the shoulder of my cybernetic arm. I tried to stop the crack but it spread. I yelled out but the crack got bigger and I yelled louder and louder and the arm cracked off. My arm broke off. It floated away from me. I heard another snap and a crack appear on the shoulder of my human arm. I yelled out. I woke up. It was so real. I could draw every detail of that ship." Buck checked his cybernetic arm for cracks.

"You guys can get your things and go sleep in your own bed. You are cured. Well, of this part – your dream treatment, at least. That was a normal, human, regular old nightmare. Very interesting but unrelated to PTSD or your past. You have graduated, my man, your dreams are your own. I've been waiting for this day. What else you have to go through now is not from your dreams. You can go. I've got to power down."

Natalie and Bucky thanked Bruce 1 million times, hugged and kissed him and went home.
For the morning run on the beach it was found that Trine was not the caliber of athlete Xhosa was but she did biathlon. She cross country skied, downhill skied, ice skated and was a vicious ice hockey player.

The day was overcast, damp and cold. It was obvious Steve and Trine were twitterpated. They were sickening.

Buck and Steve pulled ahead of the girls.
"You were in her room all night?" Bucky said.

"Yeah, I called to tell you." Steve looked guilty.

"You cheated on Xhosa? You said you were in love with her."

"Buck, you've gotta come on board the modern world, man. Xhosa is married, separated, yes, but we had no agreement."

"Well, I've got news for you. Bruce released me from BARF. So, I won't be staying sick just to keep you in medical professionals to sleep with." He slowed his pace to join the girls.

"Bucky, come back." Steve yelled and Buck sped up.

"That's great news. Congratulations, but um, what do you think of her? What do you think of Trine?"

"What do you think I think of her? She's my Neurologist, she scares the Holy sh - "

"Come on, man. What do you think of HER, the person?"

"She's a – she's like the wild Arabian ponies we saw in Ben Hur."

"Yeah," Steve would not have thought of her like that, but it was an accurate description.
"Ever play ice hockey?"

"No, but Natalie does."

Natalie caught up with Buck and Steve. "Banner just texted me our tests are ready to be discussed. He said no hurry. We can finish."

"No way. Let's go now."

Danado arrived at Solaris with two scientist friends in tow. Two experts in the study of the mysterious element found in the blood of James Barnes. The element they named ILLUMINE. Both scientists were Androgyns like Dandalo from the planet Torn.

Thabre, was a cousin of Dandalo's. A molecular biologist. Thabre's expertise lay in the area of WMD's, all radiological weapons, cobalt bombs, neutron bombs, subatomic weapons, sonic bombs, fusion and nuclear and of course chemical and biological weapons. Thabre got on board the ILLUMINE bandwagon as a consultant investigating ILLUMINE's possible use as a weapon.

The third member of the delegation was Blixa a close friend of Thabres, a geneticist, embryologist, neonatologist: a highly regarded field. Reproduction on Torn was a complex endeavor. Blixa also consulted on the ILLUMINE enigma.
Dandalo, Thabre and Blixa considered their interest in ILLUMINE similar to a hobby that bordered on obsession. Dandalo, Captain of a large science space craft, answered directly to the government of Torn, refrained from sharing Tony's news of the activation of the ILLUMINE. Instead Dandalo chose to ask for and was granted a personal leave of absence. Blixa and Thabre had done the same with their respective medical and military superiors. Tony was heartened to learn no one in the galaxy wanted to turn over such information to their governments without first letting scientists discover the true nature and magnitude of the mysterious element, ILLUMINE.

Tony was fascinated with the new arrivals. Thabre and Blixa had many characteristics similar to Dandalo. Same androgyny same small muscular humanoid body with feline grace. You could study them for 50 years and not decide if they were male or female.

Thabre was a good half foot taller than Dandalo with cedar colored, tentacled, chin length hair and caramel toned skin color. The eyes were blue, many shades of blue travel across those eyes. When emotion was on the creature, as it frequently was, the eyes exploded with greens and silver.

Blixa was attractive like a shiny diamond in a sea of pebbles. One of the smallest of the Torn race, Blixa was delicate, with honey colored shoulder length hair the consistency of corn silk that seemed to wave around even in the slightest breeze. A rich wheat colored skin and the most striking large golden eyes. Bright yellow sparks shot across the iris, like solar flares. They both had the same round face, broad mouth, and the same sharp little teeth. They wore similarly styled clothes, nature colors with fabrics patterned of flora. Blixa wore many shades of yellow that lit up the room. They were fascinating organisms.

The attractiveness of these beings cannot be overstated. All Androgyns from Torn possessed a powerful sexuality. Tony learned of this firsthand from Dandalo. Their ability to seduce was unmatched in the known Milky Way. They secreted a number of fragrances from their pores that acted like pheromones to some species, as catnap to others or just a pleasant attractive scent. This bait had been known to be so strong, the scent could intoxicate like alcohol to the point of making their intended giddy, uncoordinated, and even stagger and fall. Their scent may draw one near, but their eyes hypnotized. The color change in their large cornea created a kaleidoscope of patterned movement that amazed then dazzled the viewer and drew them into the patterns. The closer one got the stronger the fragrances. The Androgyns possessed empathetic skills to some degree, some extremely so. They adjusted their emotional responses to their intended's perceived attraction to masculine/feminine traits to such an extent the intended was unaware. This process was micropsychic. They were not above using all their considerable skills to seduce an enemy and kill them with their bared teeth in the throes of passion.

Tony called a soirée in the living room with the big fireplace. Steve had not been in this room since his first arrival at Solaris approaching two years ago. The fireplace raged, and the ocean beat out its song, just as before. Tony and Dandalo stood by a great table spread with assorted ethnic hors d'oeuvres, each dish label with the name of the food, and country of origin. Thabre and Blixa stood by the glass wall that looked over the sun and sea.

They were curious folk. Their behavior was friendly and open. Their large eyes shined and they had baby faced smiles. They were calm, relaxed, courteous and polite.

Steve read how vicious Dandalo’s race could be in a fight. They fought on all fours. Their jaw expanded making their sharp-toothed bite deadly. They had the ability to excrete a venom, at will, that would paralyze their victims as they, effectively, chewed them up. Steve held this image in his mind as Tony introduced him to Thabre and Blixa. Their large luminous eyes show their emotions physically. As they studied Steve, little explosions of color crossed their corneas.
Thabre said to Dandalo. "A male?"

"Yes," Dandalo replied and explained further to Steve. "I have been all around the galaxy. I have seen many things. Thabre and Blixa have not been off our home planet. Tony was the first male they had ever seen. You're the second. They are scientist, they are extremely curious about male and female. Please pardon their overzealousness."

"No problem, they're charming."

Bucky entered alone. He wore a large smile, black warm up slacks and a blue long sleeved Under Armour shirt with a gold rim at the neck and wrist: the blue, the same blue color of his eyes. His shining hair, unrestrained, waved every which way. The setting sun hit him like a warm beacon. His skin glowed and he seemed to radiate warmth. His smile and clear blue eyes flashed in the sun. At this sight Thabre inhaled a huge amount of air and showed a bit too much tooth and too many colorful explosions danced around the large expressive eyes.

"Is that another male?" Thabre held Dandalo's arm. "Now, that is beautiful."

"I think the correct word for the male is handsome. Beautiful is for the female."

"That is beautiful and handsome," Thabre read Steve's reaction and added, "is that yours?"

Steve could not tell if Thabre wanted to have dinner with Bucky or to have Bucky for dinner. Steve stammered:

"What? That?" he pointed to Bucky, "Oh, yeah, you want to do mischief, and you want that? – Yeah - you have to go through me." Steve puffed his chest and blocked Thabre's view of Bucky.

"Well, well, well," Thabre backed down but moved to look around Steve and restored the sight line of Bucky. "I may not be speaking of pain, per se, but pleasure?"

"What? Oh, that, well, he can use all the pleasure he can get. But for that you'd have to go through Black Widow, so it's the same difference." Cap stood firm and added hands on hips to his puffed out chest.

"And there she is."

Blixa grabbed Thabre's arm, "look, a female."

"Is that a female?" Thabre said to Steve.

Dr. Bruce Banner walked in right behind her, "and another male?"

Dr. Trine Haugen entered, "and another female?"

"Now you're cooking," Cap answered sarcastically then added for intergalactic relationships. "Yes, Thabre, you are correct on all counts," Steve said politely.

Steve made a beeline to Trine. His eyes all warm and pathetic. Thabre made the same beeline to Bucky with the same mooning eyes.

"Before we have formal introductions, we have an announcement that can't wait . . . Nat?" The host, Tony Stark, said.

Natalie and Bucky stood side-by-side with their arms around each other.
"In about four months, four short months, Natalie and I will be the proud parents of a daughter."

"And a human baby," Thabre said, "how much good luck."

"You're carnivores, aren't you?" Steve learned the answer at dinner. The aliens were particularly fond of the pheasant. They ate bones and all.

After dinner the party moved to the cinema room. They played games, socialized and drank. As the evening wore down to a close the couples paired off. Steve and Trine sat at the game table and played around with the chess set. They did not play chess. They used the pieces more like bumper cars - they slid the pieces around the board and bumped into each other's pieces and laughed, picking bigger pieces each time. They talked in low voices, touched hands, and touched feet under the table.

Natalie and Bucky half laid on a sofa and played around with each other's limbs. Thabre sat at the other end of the sofa and was touched by a stray foot, or hand, or bit of conversation from the pair.

Tony and Dandalo sat at a table with five or six devices going. Did they work or play? No one could tell. They each operated all devices and communicated through them. Occasionally they made eye contact, vocalized some response and answered by manipulating a machine. This method of communication looked natural and well-established.

Banner and Blixa sat on the adjacent sofa, relaxed and tired, full of food and drink. Blixa made some observations.

"Can I assume all males in this room are exceptional to all other males on your planet?"

"I'd say that's fair. Tony Stark is peerless, well, maybe Elon Musk or Steve Jobs when he was alive, Bill Gates – maybe five others. Steve Rogers – maybe two or three others. I don't think there's another Bucky on this planet."

"And yourself?"

"Realistically? I'd say none. I am a singular entity on this planet."

"I realize a sample of four is small but there seems to be two distinct types, one type is tall with . . . " Blixa made curved signs in the air with it's hands.

"Muscular?"

"Yes, muscular bumps."

"Oh, I see where this is going and the other male shorter and less muscled?"

"Yes, but are the brainiacs. I note the tall muscular male who is not a brainiac has the exceptional females. I am confused. What type is most desirable in your societies?"

"The tall muscled one without a doubt. The smaller male is forced to develop other body parts to make up for the fact that they are not physically the ideal."

"That makes perfect sense now," Blixa said playfully. "So for desirability, to rank – Bucky would be first, then Steve, then Tony, then you?"

"That's pretty much how I'd cut it. How about in your culture?"

"It's very clear with us. Let me try to translate the name for our sex. We are Androgyns. The one who possesses the closest to half masculine and half feminine traits is the most desirable. Dandalo is
one. Very desirable by all and at the top professionally. This is the strongest person. If you lean feminile like myself, this is the next strongest. Leading masculine is the least desirable in our society and the further one leans masculine the worst things are for you."

"That is fascinating. Why is that?"

"Again, let me translate what masculine and feminine literally mean on Torn, masculine = ME, feminile = WE. As our race developed over the eons we, of course, thought we needed the ME as the different branches fought to possess the land and resources of our planet. As our population spread, we pushed out other species. Once Torn was fully populated by our race the ME became a destructive force that threaten to destroy our planet. The ME took it to the brink. Only then did our race begin to revere the WE. Now people like Dandalo are seen as having the best judgment, and they are the leaders. We value cooperation and nurturing over domination and submission, compromise over winning, nonviolence over armed conflict. We have become caretakers of our planet out of necessity. When domination, violence and the mentality of winning at any cost threatened the ecology of our planet."

"Fascinating," Banner watched as Blixa's eye color changed to match the emotion of the talk.

"The others seem preoccupied," Blixa held eye contact with Bruce.

Bruce sniffed the air deeply a few times. He tried to identify the scent. He could not. He followed the scent and leaned closer to Blixa who stared at Bruce and spoke.

"I am curious about your personal space. I would love to see inanimate objects around your room that you cherish. I would like very much to see your sexual organs unclothed and anything else of interest, family photos, artifacts and things like that."

"Blixa, your eyes . . . "

"Yes, I know."

"They're hypnotic."

"Shall we go?"

Blixa and Banner left the cinema room.

Steve and Trine liked the idea of leaving and stopped to talk to Natalie and Bucky on the way out. Thabre jumped at this opportunity and slid up close to Bucky to make room for Steve and Trine to sit. Obvious to all was Thabre's interest in Bucky. The creatures breathing quickened as it's body touched the side of Bucky's muscular and divinely shaped thigh.

"So, what's on the docket for tomorrow?"

"Work in the lab."

"Bucky, I do need to interview you. I see how things spin out of schedule here. So, first thing in the morning? Even before exercise?"

"Most definitely."

The party broke up. Bucky routinely avoided prolonged eye contact with people. He knew what his eyes looked like. No matter how good he felt - his eyes showed everything - all 75 years of it. Buck took a chance. He let Thabre have a look right there on the sofa. What Bucky got back astonished
him. What he felt in Thabre's eyes: the acknowledgment, the acceptance, the understanding, the non-judgment, made him linger there. And he felt something more, things he could not readily identify but they were nice things, nice feelings. Bucky's face softened and he did not look away.

"We're going to bed now," Bucky said, "I'm looking forward to seeing you tomorrow." Once he made eye contact with Thabre he was reluctant to break off. Natalie guided Buck along.

"What a delightful being," she said.

When he opened the door to their therapeutic room, a gush of sea air rushed out and knocked the door out of his hand. The door hit the wall with a bang. Natalie ran in and grabbed the French doors as they blew wide open and flapped in the breeze. The smell of the sea air, the warmth of the room, the blue colors, relaxed any person immediately. Buck kicked off his shoes and slipped off his shirt. He stood by the fish tank and touched the glass. He talked to his fish. He fed them. He watered the plants, he talked to them and pruned them. Natalie knocked around the bathroom and they wound up on the bed.

Natalie never knew what kind of a night she would have with her lover but he fell asleep. She curled up beside him. She felt his heart pulse and his warm breath on the back of her neck. She held his human hand with both her hands. She held his hand next to her mouth. She kissed his fingertips and fell asleep. She fell asleep and dreamed. She dreamed of a house, a house with an upstairs, and a downstairs, a basement, and an attic - a still, warm house. A house with all the windows open. A house filled with the sounds of the evening crickets and frogs, the rustling of wind through corn stocks and the distant rumbling of road traffic. She stood in the doorway of a bedroom. The window was open in the room and the night breeze lifted the sheer curtain and it billowed and relaxed and billowed and relaxed again. A night light lit the room with a soft peach glow. On the bed snuggled three children in fresh sleepwear and crisp white sheets - their chubby faces flushed with their own dreams. He came from behind her, wrapped his arms around her and kissed her neck. She touched his hands and felt the calluses on his fingers.

"They look like angels now, don't they," he said. She turned to look into his warm inviting blue eyes. And they gazed at their children, it seemed an eternity.

"Why are they all in the same bed?"

"They were playing and fell asleep."

"I'll carry them to their own beds."

"No," she said and she led him by the hand to the bed. She scooted the kids together and laid beside them. He followed her lead. They scrunched their three children between them and they stared into each other's eyes. Eternity passed.

She woke with a sharp inhalation of air. She could not imagine what came over her. She had never dreamed anything like that before. She never even allowed herself to think of anything like that. She had never been in a house like that house. She had never even seen a picture of that kind of house. Not anything even close. If she was honest with herself, from time to time, she had looked in the windows of other people's lives. On Sundays or on holidays she had walked or rode and looked. She had looked. She told herself she was happy for them, for their domestic bliss, and she was, she really was. But she knew it was simply not for her.

Darkness came into her mind as she thought of another house. This house she knew. This house was a small dark house. She thought of the house and she thought of the day her parents sold her to the KGB. She thought of the day they came to the ugly house and took her. She told herself she must
not think of either of these houses.

She pulled Bucky's arm around her tight and ran his hand along her chest to her belly and held it there.

Buck and Trine met at the lab door.

"Do you want an advocate?"

"No, I don't think so." They entered a glassed in room inside the lab that held computers and communication devices if anyone needed to escape the noise of the lab. Tony, Banner, Dandalo, Blixa and Thabre worked in the lab and took no notice. Trine and Buck sat comfortably on yellow office chairs.

"Thank you for the timely and generous specimen. The ILLUMINE is present in massive amounts in your semen, in your sperm, actually."

Buck jumped from the chair. "Can this harm them?"

"Sit down please. You've had this in your blood since 1943. I see no harm in you."

"Will what you said last night, the feedback loop, will that happen in Natalie's body? And the babies?"

"Yes, yes it will."

"Okay, then. I have to except it?"

"It would be best if you could."

Buck sat in the chair. "Does everyone know?"

"Only the two of us. I haven't charted yet."

"Thank you for some time," Buck touched his forehead. "Go ahead and chart. They all need to know as soon as possible. This will affect the work." He took a deep breath.

"That's thoughtful of you." Dr. Haugen pressed send and the news traveled to the team.

"They know everything about me anyway. They might as well know what's in my sperm." Buck held his hand over his eyes and sighed.

"Do you want a support person?"

"No, I figured that's how it was." But he noticed this was the second time she asked for a witness. Maybe she would feel more comfortable, he thought.

"I need a thorough list, an exhaustive list of all your sexual contacts since 1943 when you were given the ILLUMINE. I can find no record of anyone asking you about this subject, which is odd. The potential for abuse of prisoners is so great."

"I was trying to keep all this secret. Private. You know." Buck sighed. "But I can see that's not going to be practical now. I mean it's going to be impossible."
An alarm buzzed on Tony's private cell phone. He answered. Jarvis alerted him that Barnes had spoken one of the keyword searches Tony programmed to be notified of immediately and that word was 'secret'. With cell phone to his ear, Tony looked in the glassed in room, at the Trine interview.

"Are you sure you don't want Natalie in here?"

"No way."

"Steve?"

"Absolutely not."

"Bruce?"

"No, no, no." Buck looked out at Tony looking in, "but . . . let's ask Tony to come in for this - he may understand."

"Alright."

Buck had eye contact with Tony. He waved him in with his hand. Tony closed the door and stood by the door with his back up against the glass and his hands behind his back.

Dr. Trine Haugen commenced what had to feel like an interrogation. "In all the years you were a captive were you ever sexually abused or used?"

"Men coming on to me? Yes, God, yes. It was a constant battle some places, to fight off my attackers, and keep . . . as far as I know. It got so bad one place . . . This is one of my first clear memories after I escaped. I remember it in detail - they must've kept me off machines for some period of time because for a long period, I remembered. Because of this I think it was recent. I had my bionic arm. I was being held in a very isolated facility in Siberia. Not the one you were at Tony, another place. I was attacked like that daily. Sometimes multiple times in one day. When they started coming at me two or three at a time I got desperate. It was a desperate situation. They had treated me like an animal for so long they became like animals themselves. I knew how it was going to end. I knew if I was pushed I would fight to the death to protect that from happening to me, but I also knew if I was forced like that it would be the end of me. At that time where my head was at . . . It would just be the end, just too much – I was in such a position of submission. If I had to submit to that, I submitted to so . . . Anyway, I feared being used like that. I thought I'd try some crazy idea. I tried to make a deal with them, they seemed so interested in me – my body – my arm – my hair. I told them I would allow them to look me over, they seemed so curious about me, to touch me, hold me - Jesus God in heaven I'd rather walk out the back door and into the ocean then to continue this –"

"It's a human story."

Buck foot shook. He regained himself and went on.

"Well, do whatever, but I didn't want to be penetrated or forced. I told them if anyone tried to force penetration on me the deal would be off and it would be back to the daily battles and . . . I would hurt them."

"These men are criminals. Why did you think they would keep a deal like that?"

"Criminals? These men were the security. The Russian military security. Russian military officers. Enlisted men had no access to my cell unless they were told to do something. I was a prisoner of war. I was not with criminals or regular prison population. In that one way they followed the Geneva
"I'm so sorry – I'm so naïve in many areas. Please forgive me and continue."

"Well, it worked, it worked like a charm. These men, Russian men we're so isolated so deprived just looking at me or watching me take off my shirt, they'd, uh, I don't want to sound crude –"

"They'd climax?"

"Yeah, that's the word for it alright. Thank you, climax over practically nothing. One man just stroked my hair. One man ran his hand over my chest and climaxed, " Buck illustrated this by rubbing his hand across his chest. "One man put his arm around me from behind and climaxed. Both fully dressed. They were lined up down the hall to see me."

"And it never went further than that?"

"Oh yes, it did. After about a month it took more to get them off. They would touch me, hold me or kiss me on various parts of my body."

"What did you get out of this relationship?"

"Well, I wasn't attacked. I was not penetrated – well, once. One man came to me and told me he was a homosexual, you know, gay. He said the other men didn't know this and he wanted to keep it that way. He was a tall man, a strong man and a tough fighter. That's all they should be concerned about, really. He said he belong to a secret society and what straight society knew about homosexuals was just the tip of a glacier sized iceberg below - in Hollywood - in politics - in business - all secret. He said he would teach me everything about it - everything. He said it was useful knowledge that only an insider knew and it may come in handy someday. May even save my life. He said he would let me in on secrets of sexual passion. He said he would tell me and he would show me and he wouldn't have to penetrate me to do it. So I consented. Now, this guy knew how to pleasure a man. Everything he did was to please me. I relaxed and let him. Half the stuff he showed me I would never have thought of. Almost all the stuff he taught me could be used with a woman. The oral stuff is easy to show a woman – how to extend sexual pleasure, easy to show a woman. Then one day he did anally penetrate me. Just slightly for one second and he stopped. He said it was an accident that he was carried away but he stopped himself. He asked me if he had hurt me. I said no. He asked me if it felt good. I was shocked. I was surprised but I didn't want him to know that. So I said yes it had felt good, and it had. He asked me to forgive him. He promised he it would never happen again."

Buck laughed. "Oh yeah, then he said I could avenge my honor and get even with him if I wanted."

Buck laughed again. "He said that was a gay joke . . ." Barnes turned dark. "I shouldn't have told that. I'm wrong to speak like this. It's not appropriate. I shouldn't be telling any of this."

"That's not true. You should've told what happened to you long ago. Please go on."

"Well, as you can see, I did have some good feelings about some of it. The youngest one, also a tough fighter, but very young, came to me. He stood there looking at his shoes. He stood for a very long time like that. Then I saw tears rolling down his face. I went to him. I kissed him like Russian men kiss each other. I hugged him like a relative. I held him like that awhile until his arms went around me. People just die inside without human touch."

"The position you were in . . . and you were thinking of others?" Trine said.

Buck shrugged that off. "I don't know that I was thinking. I wasn't thinking at all."

"Go on."
"He came back again and again. Well, that's all he ever seemed to want. Human touch. He would let himself into my cell, sleep with me, just hold each other, and sleep. That was nice. I never saw he was sexually aroused by any of that. I knew I wasn't. I felt like a therapist, I guess. After a time they were so appreciative they wanted to give me money. I'd laugh at that. But I'd say something like wouldn't it be nice if you came in here and I didn't smell like an animal living in a barn or would you like to see me clean-shaven or would you like to look at my body if it was fed food regularly."

"So, these things were given to you?"

"Yes, Dr. I debased myself. I sold sexual favors for a bath, a shave and some food." Bucky did not know if he would ever be able to look Tony in the eye again. "But I got a lot more out of it than food. Yeah, sure I was pleasured. Yeah, sure I was used. I was used for sex. Granted. But it was human. I felt that kind of pleasure was human. So I didn't feel bad about it at the time. I think of that gay guy often. His name was Alyosha. I wish I could've thanked him. Oh, don't get me wrong. I knew he used his position. I know he used to me, too. I was treated like an object, yes, but a human object. Not an animal. Not a machine. Not a thing. Not a possession, but a human. Believe me it was a huge step up. I think it saved my life. They quit their physical abuse of me. They stood up to the scientists. They protected me from the scientists. The men talked to me like I was a human being. They touched me sometimes with kindness, tenderness even. I would've taken that from anyone – anything – a dog to lick my face." Bucky looked at his cybernetic arm anticipating a change. In his peripheral vision he saw Tony's hands move to his face.

"And you wanted to keep this a secret? This is what you were hiding?" Tony said.

"God in heaven yes. Natalie knows but Steve would never understand this."

"We can take a break."

"You don't have to - "

Bucky brushed them off. "Just let me get it out. Just let me get it out of me. Jarvis can record it all and then I can be done with it."

"No, Jarvis is not gonna record this. These statements will be expunged from the record." Tony said.

"You'll see. It has to be this way. This has to be in the record. Let me finish. I don't know. I have to think this is what happens to prisoners, war or no war. These are the states of mind that overtake you. I don't think I'm a freak in that regard. It's a desperate situation for everyone. Imprisoning others, torturing, doing what they did to me . . . maybe was just as corrosive to their soul as it was to mine. I don't know. I just don't know."

"How did this arrangement end?"

"A man I didn't know came to me. He was a little intoxicated - a lot intoxicated. He tried to take me down, well, he did take me down. I had to stop him. My intention was to hold him until he was unconscious, then drag him out of the cell. I didn't hold him long enough to kill him. If there's one thing I know about, it's how to kill. In that area I know what I'm doing, no matter my state of mind, I know how to kill. So, I know I didn't hold him long enough to kill him. He must've been defective in some way. He died. He was dead. I had . . . I had killed him. So the thing I did all that to prevent happened anyway."

"What happened after that?"

"I have no memory after that. They must've done something to me."
"Now then, what you did. Did this include oral sex?"

"Yes."

"Anal sex? Did you penetrate them?"

"No."

"Did your sperm get into these men?"

"Yes, at first, yes - later I had more control. I was highly motivated to get control. I didn't want them to see me like that . . . " Barnes shrunk under the pressure of these questions.

"Did you know them?"

"Yes." Buck could no longer look at Trine.

"Do you know their names?"

"Yes."

"Can you make me a list."

"Yes."

Tony was captured. He was pulled into the swirling vortex of Bucky's emotions. Tony removed his hand from his mouth and placed his hand behind his back again. He shuffled from one foot to the other. His gaze never left Barnes but the way he saw him changed forever. He saw him clearly for the first time. Tony heard Steve's words as clear as if Steve stood next to him and whispered in his ear. 'It wasn't him'. Tony relaxed. His shoulders fell away from his ears. The tension in his neck washed away. He was at peace, at peace for the first time in years.

"Should we break?"

"No, I know I was lucky. I consider myself lucky, really. I could've been drugged, and sodomized, or restrained, and sodomized daily, but when I was examined here, no evidence of that was found. No, let's go on." Buck continued to look down. He didn't know if he could ever hold his head up like a man again. Yet he felt a strange relief. Keeping secrets takes a lot of energy.

"Let's shift gears. Let's try this. We start at the present and work back, following the sperm." Trine said lightheartedly.

"Okay, follow the sperm." Bucky lightened up a bit, impressed with Trine's ability to make a joke at exactly the right moment.

"Your partner has been Natalie for the last . . . ?"

"One year three months."

"While in 1963?"

"None other than Natalie."

"What about Bucharest – you were there two years and free."

"I was there a few months and free. From DC I went to Canada then Greenland, Iceland, Finland,
Poland, Slovenia, oh, um, Serbia, Turkey and then Romania. And every place I stayed I had women, yes."

"How many about?"

"Many. It seemed when I was locked up all I could think about was escape. As soon as I escaped all I could think about was getting a girl. Maybe the men stirred me up in some way. But I didn't want a man. I wanted a woman. I wanted a soft, sweet woman to hold me, to touch me. I wanted to be by the womb. Hell, I think I wanted to just crawl back in there. If I couldn't crawl back in, I wanted to feel the womb. I wanted to feel that sweet button of a cervix and I wanted to come there . . . sorry Doctor. But, that image was the only thing in my mind. I wanted to create something for the future. I wanted a sweet warm home. I wanted the soft hands and the big heart of a woman. I wanted a woman to accept me. I thought I could heal. I thought that would heal me. I wanted a relationship. I wanted a girl to stay with me. I was convinced if I had that I would be myself again. I wanted this badly. I was kind of mad about the subject.

"But, at that time I couldn't hold onto a conversation. I couldn't follow a train of thought. Getting a girl to look at me – easy. Getting a girl to talk to me – easy. Getting a girl to sleep with me – easy. Getting a girl to stay – impossible. If by some miracle they were able to get by the arm . . . I'd say prosthesis. They'd understand that but my arm didn't look like or move like any fake arm they had ever seen. Even so, if I could get past that. If they stayed after one night of violet nightmares thinking maybe I just had a bad night. But, every night was a bad night, and that would be the end of that and I'd try again.

"I would've done anything to keep a girl. One girl tied my arm to the bed frame it. I broke out. Another took me into her home and said her father would control me. I knocked him out cold without any memory of doing it. They asked me to leave. Another girl had an uncle who was a doctor, of course, he wanted to know my name, what war I was in and where I had been a prisoner.

"From Canada on I made detailed writings of all I did, thought, felt, dreamed, remembered, every girl I had. I wrote everything about them, their names, where they lived, descriptions, how we met, where we met, everything they said, what we did together, everything."

"How many girls are we talking about?"

"Well, I . . . 50-60 . . . maybe more over the two years." Out of the corner of Bucky's eye he saw Tony's reaction and he glanced at him, shrugged and said. "I was highly motivated."

"Any men during this time?"

That question sobered up Bucky's face in a flash. He squeezed his forehead with his human hand. "Well, I was propositioned many times. I don't know why I was approached like that but I said no. It felt wrong to say no. I felt like I should've done what these men wanted me to do." Out of Bucky's peripheral vision he saw Tony tense up, shake his head no, and make fists with his hands. Buck continued. "I don't know why I felt like that. I . . . I don't have that all figured out yet . . . but the answer is . . . no men."

"And these girls? You had vaginal intercourse with ejaculation, correct?"

"Most definitely."

"Did you use condoms?"

"That would have been contrary to my driving purpose."
"You mean you intended to impregnate these girls?"

"I dreamed of nothing else, night and day. If that happened someone would stay . . . with me. They would have to . . . Was that wrong too?" Bucky held his head in his hands. "It seemed the right thing to do at the time. That was all I had to give."

"Where did you do all this writing?"

"In composition notebooks."

"And where are these composition notebooks?"

"In my backpack."

"And where is your backpack?"

Bucky turned to look at Tony.

"I didn't know of a backpack. This subject is not in your records."

"The backpack was taken from me in Berlin. Steve was probably the last person to see it."

Tony opened the door of the glassed in room and called to a personal robot to find Steve Rogers and bring him into the interview.

"What else was in the backpack?" Tony asked.

"Maybe a dozen notebooks. Assorted sticky grenades, and other weapons. Money - Euros - a forged passport. A clean shirt."

"You wrote your dreams?"

"Yes, I did."

"And your dreams were of . . . ?"

"It was like a compulsion, Tony. I didn't know what was real or what they wanted me to think was real. What I had done or not done. What they had implanted in me or not so I wrote everything."

"You do realize that notebook is a confessional."

"I wanted to confess. I was guilty! Hell, I thought I was guilty of everything. Everything I've heard about. Everything I read. I was flooded with images. They seemed to quiet down once on paper. I wanted to know what was real. What I had done. Who I was. I thought I could figure it out. If it was on paper. Maybe I could see a pattern or something. Maybe it all would become clear. Basically, I just did not care. I didn't think I would live through the next day. I could've been captured any moment. I was running on instinct."

"Did you write in English?"

"I coded them Tony."

"Huh?" Tony was shocked.

"I had a lot of time. I coded them and used five languages. It was nothing they couldn't break but I made it so they would have to decode it by hand. I made it so it would be a pain in the ass to do."
"Ah ha, Steve great, we need to retrieve Bucky's backpack as soon as possible. Where's the backpack?"

"Last I saw it was on his back. The backpack wasn't with our stuff. We have a receipt for our things. It wasn't on that list."

"Your buddy kept the diary." Tony crossed his arms.

"In the backpack?" Steve's eyes got big.

Tony nodded affirmative.

"Did you write about the inner workings of HYDRA or U.S.S.R.?"

"Yes, most definitely – whatever I remembered I wrote – tons of stuff."

"Oh, brother."

"Let's get all brains in on this. Call Natalie. How do we retrieve this backpack?"

Tony shut down the lab temporarily and the team moved into a bigger space.

"We go get it. We know where it is." Steve said.

"You know where it was." Natalie said.

"How do we break into a maximum security detention center?" Banner added.

"They are designed to not break out of."

"We can do a search. We could do a search electronically. Jarvis?"

"Initiated."

"A quiet search."

"Understood."

"You could get yourselves arrested." Trine obviously watched movies in her spare time.

"Then how do we get out?" Buck played along.

"You broke out before, James."

"We're all too recognizable." Cap reasoned.

"We could do like the movies. Disguise ourselves as janitors, or repair men and go in like that." Buck smiled at Trine.

"You have a time machine." Dandalo reminded everyone.

"Yeah, we could go back and get it from Bucky. Before he's arrested." Banner said.

"Oh, I'd think twice about that. I wouldn't want to put anyone in that kind of jeopardy. Bucky's state of mind at that time – that's something I'd not want to deal with - I would not want to try to take that backpack away from him." Steve said.
"You were in his apartment? You know where it was stored?" Trine asked.

"We'll just go when he's out." Banner said.

"I'd rather be caught stealing by the German police than to be caught by Bucky. Keep thinking."

"I threw the bag out the window."

"All we need is someone there to catch it."

"Would that affect your escape?" Tony said.

"We didn't escape we were caught." Cap enlightened.

"I did use a sticky grenade out of the backpack."

Cap thought about that for a moment. "I don't think that affected the outcome."

"That sticky grenade stopped Black Panther from killing me. It gets tricky really fast. Doesn't it?"

"Is the Time Machine that accurate to the minute – Dandalo? Tony?" Hulk said.

"The accuracy decreases proportionate to the length of time. When was this?" Dandalo said.

"Around two years ago," Tony said.

"That's nothing. I can run some figures but off the top of my head I'd say, plus or minus, 3 or 4 minutes."

"That would work. Would something like this be against the 44 Rules of Time Travel?"

"Again, I could run it by professionals but I would say this expedition, considering its significance, would qualify under the 'acute need for the greater good cause'."

"Well, somebody go. Can I have it today?" Doctor Trine Haugen said with some naïveté.

"This isn't UPS," Tony quipped.

"No, they deliver," Buck said.

"Who's going?" Banner said.

"Well, Barnes and Rogers are already there." Dandalo said.

"I would love to go get Bucky's possession for him," Thabre eyed Barnes.

"You're a noncombatant. That's out of the question." Tony barked.

"I would not rule out Thabre's skills," Dandalo said.

"No offense but the Romanian army, the Bucharest SWAT team, and special forces were coming down on that apartment."

"Don't forget Black Panther," Bucky smiled.

"Yeah, and Black Panther. If anyone goes I'm the one most qualified to go get Bucky's backpack. I was there. I saw it. I know where he hid it. I'm going."
"You can't go Steve. They told you that. I'm the one to go get Bucky's backpack. No one is after me. If anything goes wrong I can get out of any mess," Natalie said emphatically.

"You're not taking any risk like that. I'll go, that simple," Hulk said.

Buck placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled loud and shrill. "Stop the press. I appreciate all your generous offers, but if anyone travels back in time to get my backpack it will be me. What risk is there anyway? So I run into myself for a few minutes."

"Allow me a moment to explain. If you did go, Bucky, and you did confront yourself at your apartment, or on the street, or on the rooftop, one of you would cease to exist." Dandalo made direct eye contact with Bucky. "If you - no Bucky would come back to us and no backpack. If the other, you would come back with the backpack and the other timeline would extinguish. All that happened to you from then till now would not have happened. I think something major - something remarkable happened - your miracle pregnancy."

"I can't go." Buck looked at Natalie.

"I could retrieve the bag with my ship in the same manner we collect samples. Then no one goes," Dandalo offered.

"You're on leave," Tony said.

"I have friends."

"I don't know -" Tony's tablet signaled, "here comes the Jarvis inquiry." Tony read, "Oh, the Germans couldn't break your code." Buck looked as astonished as Tony. "So, since Barnes is a U.S. citizen they sent the backpack, minus all the sticky grenades, to the CIA. Well, what do you know - they couldn't break your code either – no, no, they could. They saw it would be hard. Many man hours. So they kicked it down the road to the FBI where it has been for the last six months. What a break."

Tony turned to Trine. "Give me 72 hours. I know some people. If I can't get anywhere we'll plan the heist – much easier here – should be fun. Barnes, we may use your janitor idea, yet."

The team milled around the area. Some members wandered off into the lab and returned to their work.

Buck joined Natalie at the door. He cozied up to her. After all that talk his body ached for her. He touched her back to draw her near.

"50-60! 50-60. Really?" Natalie crossed her arms over her chest and blocked his advance. He did not stop the seduction. He raised his cybernetic arm in the air and rested it on the door frame above her head. He did not try to touch her again but he leaned over her. His eyes twinkled and he grinned like a fox. His cheek brushed her cheek. He allowed his hot breath to fall on her neck and he whispered in her ear.

"Even that . . . even all that . . . did not prepare me for you." He opened his mouth as if to take a nibble of her ear, but he spread his lips and laid them on her temple. She dropped her arms to her side and reached for him.

"Ah hum," Trine spoke. The lovers separated themselves from each other.
"Can you stay James? I'm not done. Steve and Natalie can you stay also? The rest can return to work."

The three sat down and Trine closed the door.

"I have some test results to review with you. James, you have had a significant spike in your IQ score. You were tested on arrival at Solaris, around two years ago, and a few days ago. I want to make this perfectly clear, this spike does not in anyway promise, predict or cause emotional stability. What were you after when you interfaced with the computer?"

"More I wanted more – more strength – more power – more stamina – more knowledge, and yes more intelligence."

"For what purpose? What goal? Did you think it would help your emotional . . . "

"My mental disability? You can say it. I know I have it. You're right, I did think I could get more control over this, this . . . wild ride I've been on." Buck motioned around his head with both hands. "To be more stable in my brain . . . yes. Most definitely."

"What is your brain telling you about yourself?"

"Oh man, really? What's it saying right now?"

"Yes. Say with the brain is telling you."

"Oh, mainly that I'm going to be captured again. That's a constant. That's always there."

"What else?"

"Oh, it's no use. All this is no use. I can't be helped. I'm too far gone. I'm too broken, too damaged. That I have been ruined. All I'm good for now, is to be an object for someone else to use and abuse. I'm wasting everyone's time. You don't deserve kindness. Your arm's a weapon. How do you think you could ever hold a child." Buck said loudly. "You'll kill again. Everyone knows that." Buck talked faster and louder. "You're wrong. Every cell in your body is wrong. That ILLUMINE makes you a FREAK! You can't be trusted." He yelled. "You should be punished. You should be locked up. You're bad. You're a killer. You're a killer. You're a monster. Your a mons - "

"STOP!"

Bucky did stop and he shut his eyes. He opened his eyes and glanced at Natalie to see her reaction. He was as shocked as anyone to hear what came out of his mouth. He had not intended to be so graphic, but all that mess played in his brain, played, and started over again. He tried to ignore it, but sometimes it was so loud it dominated reality.

"What if I told you, James, you have brain damage. Your brain is a real mess and your brain will always do just what it's doing right now?"

"I'd believe you. I know that's the truth."

"Now, what if I told you that you are not your brain."

"What?"

"You are not your brain that is true. You are much more than any one organ in your body. You are not your brain. Your mind chooses and decide about the messages you receive from the brain. Are
the messages you are receiving from the brain true?"

Natalie jumped into the conversation, "none of that is true."

Steve added his two cents. "None of what he said is true. Not one thing."

"Do you think what your brain is telling you is true?"

"I think it's true. Maybe it's not true. Honestly, I don't know."

"There is an easy way to tell. Are these messages in line with your goals and values in your life? You do have goals?"

"Okay, it's really basic. I don't want to kill anyone again. I want Natalie's life to be better because I'm in her life. I want to raise our daughter with her and do a good job. Steve has always needed me his whole life – forget that look on your face, Steve, you know it's true- I want to be a good friend to him. I know I can't make up to Tony the harm I've done to him but I'm determined to spend my life trying. When we first came back he mentioned some trouble – maybe there something I can do to help him."

"Those are clearly defined. Now, are any of the litany of things your brain is saying to you, of productive value in reaching your goals?"

"How do I judge? My judgment seems subpar."

"It takes no judgment. Just logic. Will any of the things your brain said to you logically lead you to your goals?"

"Not one damn thing."

"Well, there you have it. Then these messages are defective and your mind must decide to accept a defective message or reject it. The brain is extremely powerful. Like a machine in many ways. The brain can easily overpower the mind, and the circuits can run automatically. Like your messages sounded like a recording."

"Yes! That's it. It plays like a recorded message."

"The mind decides your goals and what you value. The mind decides what messages are useful and productive. What messages are defective and must be ignored. Dr. Banner can be a sounding board for this type of therapy."

Buck downloaded all therapies and particularly liked the idea of a therapy called Positive Disintegration. This therapy was created by a survivor of medical experiments and medical torture by the Nazis in World War II. He particularly liked the auto education and auto psychotherapy aspects of this therapy. The exercise Trine spoke of seemed to fit right in.

Bucky and Natalie took a break in their room before everyone met for dinner. The inlet was peaceful this time of day with a swish sound of cool clear water, an occasional bird call, and the warm breeze that blew through the open French doors from the balcony.

Buck kicked off his shoes and took off his shirt, which was his habit upon entering the therapeutic room Tony made for him. Natalie stripped in record time. She changed into her silky shorts and crop top PJs. They laid on the bed, emotionally exhausted. He untied her hair and spread its beauty out on
the pillow. He ran his hand through its silkiness. He held her small slinky body next to his bare chest and they fell asleep for an hour or so.

They were awakened by a knock at the door. Dr. Trine Haugen stood in the doorway and glanced down the hall each way.

"Can I talk to you a minute. Person to person. Off the record?"

"Come in." Not knowing why, Buck looked down the hall each way, also. "There's no cameras or recording devices in this room."

Buck and Natalie sat against the headboard propped up with pillows. Trine sat at the foot of the bed. Buck held a pillow over his chest, suddenly shy.

"I'm embarrassed to ask you but I'm desperate. I don't even know how to start. I know I come off as a know it all, and I do know it all about some subjects, but other subjects I am, so deficient, so naïve. When you spoke of your experiences with Alicia I think you said his name."

"Aloysha?" Buck corrected her.

"When you spoke of your experiences with Aloysha . . . I . . . You know, and all he taught you . . . I . . . I need you to teach me." Trine blurted out and she looked at her hands.

"What? Why?" Bucky and Natalie could not have been more shocked.

"I have very little experience with these matters. I want to pleasure Steve like that. I want to please him."

"Oh, I'm sure you please him just as you are," Bucky said.

"But I feel so inadequate. I am a scientist. I want to know all there is to know about a subject. About this subject."

"You'll learn naturally."

"I want to know now. You said he taught you things you would've never thought of on your own. I want to do things like that to him now. Tonight."

"I'm known around here for my poor judgment, but I can tell you right here and now, there is no way I could teach you. NO WAY."

"Can't you make a video?"

"No. It has to be hands-on."

Trine's mouth turn down. She was dejected. She stared at her hands and pouted. Bucky looked at Natalie and they communicated with eyes only. Natalie nodded affirmative.

"But . . . there may be a way," he said and Trine brightened.

"Natalie is an expert in all of Aloysha's tricks and techniques and much, much, much more. She's like ten Aloyshas. She would be happy to instruct you."

"Really? But there's no penis?" Trine whinned.

"Well, you girls will have to make do. Steve's in love with you Trine. You can't touch my penis.
And that doesn't begin to address how unethical – "

"But . . ."

"You cannot touch my penis." Bucky glanced at Natalie for support.

"What if – "

"You CANNOT touch my penis."

"The penis is not essential, Trine, I mean for this . . . if you have an open mind," Natalie suggested.

"I do, I do, I do."

"We'll see."

"Now, how about this. I'll find Steve and Steve and I will take a run or something for a few hours and you can have instruction with Natalie. You can try it all out on Steve this very night."

Trine left Buck and Nat's bedroom. They quickly resumed their position on the pillows.

"Can I touch your penis?" Natalie said in a little gravelly voiced whisper.

Bucky laughed. "Oh, all this talk of the penis."

"Can I touch you here?"

"Oh . . . oh . . ."

"Or here."

"Oh."

"Here."

"Ah, ah, oh, mm aaaaa."

Another tentative knock was heard at the door.

"Am I hearing things?"

"Maybe she forgot something."

Buck opened the door and Steve Rogers stood in the doorway. He glanced down the hall each way.

"Oh, I'm so glad you guys are here. Can I talk to you, off the record?"

Bucky and Natalie glance at each other with big eyes.

"Sure Steve. You know these rooms are not monitored. Come in."

Bucky and Natalie resumed their position on the pillows at the head of the bed only now Steve Rogers sat at the foot of their bed.

"I've just received a message from Xhosa. She's on her way here."
"What?"
"Oh my God."
"She said she has something to talk over. But she wants to talk to me in person."
"Damn."
"Holy shit."
"That's right. I've had no girlfriend for 100 years. Now I have two girlfriends. What do I do?"
"What do you want to do?" Natalie took the lead.
"I did love Xhosa. I really did. I really thought I did. But I LOVE Trine. I am head over heels in love with her. I want to spend the rest of my life with her. I would die for her."
"Well, that's really clear. Don't you think, Angel?"
"It sounds like you know what you want."
"But what if Xhosa is pregnant? What if that's what she wants to talk about?"
"Now who's going over the deep end."
"I know. I know. I'm freaked out."
"Your mind is made up and you'll know exactly what to say when the time comes. I have every confidence in you." Natalie's calm and reassuring manner did exactly that. She calmed and reassured Steve.
"That's true Steve. You have tact. When's she coming?"
"She'll be here for dinner."
"What?"
"Tonight?"
"Yeah, I know."
"You'll have to talk to her alone before dinner."
"Yeah, yeah but what do I tell Trine?"
"Why don't you guys go for a nice long run and leave this to me." Nat's soothing voice relaxed almost everyone in the room.
"Really? That would be perfect. I feel like I'm in high school."
"You never had any girlfriend in high school. Anyway, I'll change. A long run is just what I need." Buck pulled at the front of his slacks.

Steve arranged to meet Xhosa in the living room with the fireplace ablaze and a bottle of non-truth serum wine.
"I don't think there's any reason to delay. Steve, I have to tell you right off I've reconciled with my husband. I know. I cared deeply for you. I still care deeply for you. Oh, it's so complex. It's been long standing in our culture that a royal, like my husband can have 2, 3, 4 wives. I, being a modern woman said no when he took the second wife. It was a long process but he has given her up. He has committed to be a modern man. So I am happy about that."

"I'm happy for you and I have to say that I've moved on also. You'll meet her tonight. It happened very unexpectedly but very dramatically. I am overwhelmed by it all."

"I don't want to lose our closeness. Our friendship. I will be here or wherever Sergeant Barnes is, every six months for the rest of his life. It can't be awkward or unpleasant between us."

Steve held Xhosa in his arms. "I hear lovers come and go. That love comes, so strong like it has for me and then it fades or dies, but that friendships can last a lifetime. Let's last a lifetime."

"A committed friendship? We would be creating something new. But it feels good."

"Yes, a committed friendship."

"I'm glad you said this because there's more. There's one thing more. I'm pregnant. I know what you're going to ask. I don't know. And I may never know, unless it is obvious in a few months. We are forbidden from testing like that. Another holdover from the patriarchy."

"It doesn't matter, Xhosa. I will be here for you and the child regardless of its heritage for the rest of my life."

"Committed friendship."

"Committed friendship. Oh, and I have an official communiqué from the King."

"Can it wait until morning? Can't we just be together tonight? We should join the others. We should join the party. I want you to meet her. She's waiting."

"Yes, if it was emergent he would have called you. I think it can wait a few hours."

The delegation from the planet Torn and Tony's team worked so hard, put in so many long hours studying the ILLUMINE, that Tony set up a seafood, foul, and vegetable barbecue on the beach for the evening's festivities. The personal robots displayed all the hardware needed: lounge chairs, pillows and blankets; tables and chairs; a canopied bar with barstools and the elaborate barbecue itself. The robots made a fire pit for after the sunset. The sun blazed and a cool breeze blew through the area. The scene was set.

Tony desired to show Dandalo and friends something of the beauty of earth. The weather cooperated. Dandalo, Blixa, Thabre, Bucky, Natalie, Bruce, Steve, Trine, Xhosa and Tony lounged around the area, sipped cocktails and flirted with the tide. Where the sea meets the shore has fascinated mankind since the beginning of mankind. Visitors and earthlings alike danced around the foam on the cool sand, played with the rocks and seashell, and poked sticks into the dead fish that dotted the area. A high bacteria count in the water prevented anyone from going further.

The Torns especially delighted to watch the fish and foul cook on the open flame. As the flesh shrunk and crinkled and changed color their eyes shot colorful emotions around their large iris, and they grinned their sharped tooth grin.
They ate, probably too much. They drank, probably too much, and they all probably got too much sun.

There is a time in every day when the sun remains bright but fails to warm the skin. When this happened to Bucky he became watchful and restless; he had been out in the open many hours. Always hyper-vigilant, he grabbed the binoculars, climbed some nearby rocks to the very top and scanned the ocean, the seashore, and land for anything that looked suspicious. He saw nothing that was an immediate threat, but he did see what looked like an oil slick out in the distance with many ships around the perimeter. He called Tony for a looksee. Tony looked and did not like what he saw. He sent for his telescope and liked it even less. He checked in with a tablet. It was not an oil slick. It was a plastics slick headed for his beach. His town. His state. His country.

At least a mile in diameter, this plastics gathering was full of dead fish, dead birds, dead bugs and live bacteria intertwined in the plastic garbage. Live bugs, live birds and fish picked and ate at the remains like it was a huge animal carcass. This was an environmental disaster of the highest magnitude.

The sunset was spectacular. At dusk they lit the bonfire. Humans and Aliens began to experience bug bites. Many slaps of skin and face and neck until the area was covered with a black veil of bugs that heralded the impending arrival of the plastic slick. Everyone ran into Solaris and were happy to shut the door. The party was spoiled, but Tony being a thoughtful host asked the Torns what they did in the evening.

The Androgyns from Torn were industrious. They did not waste time with games or watching anything or socializing for the sake of socializing. They socialized for sexual reason. They did play games of physical skill and strength like arm wrestling. Tony invited everyone into the boxing ring. They opened the bar and everyone sat in the overstuffed leather chairs. Cap and Buck gave a demonstration and the Androgyns tried their hand. The Androgyns laughed and laughed at Jarvis's overly dramatic call of the action. The Androgyns exaggerated their behaviors and laughed and laughed. All this laughter helped to digest their dinners.

They moved into the weight room with the mats and Bucky showed his wrestling skills by pinning the whole company one by one. The Androgyns loved this. The pinning took no more than five seconds each person. Thabre went three times. Steve gave him the most problem but even then it was over in 10 seconds. Everyone was happy to return to their own quarters. Except Tony who suited up and flew out to the plastic slick.

The next morning a message from Steve circulated around, to meet in Tony's ready room. When Bucky and Nat arrived Banner and Tony sat together on one side of the large table that filled the room. They pulled up chairs opposite from them.

"What's this about?" Buck asked Tony.

"No clue."

Steve arrived a few minutes later with four standard folders and one large folder.

"Great. You're all here. I'll get right to it," he said as he gave a standard folder, that held 20 or 30 pages of paper, to each person.

"I called you here to share with you an astounding – extraordinary correspondence I received from King T'Challa. Your copies are in front of you. You can read but let me summarize. Seems the King
and country were very impressed with you." Steve pointed to Bucky. "They were impressed with your restraint and your reparation, they said, they went on to praise you with a few pages of formal, flowery speech." Steve handed the papers out. "Here's another page or two of the same stating how impressed they were with Tony and Tony's 'rehabilitation program' and how you," Steve pointed to Tony. "Rehabilitated the irreparable and the irredeemable. Sorry Buck. That the whole world would have put Barnes to death or discarded him as human garbage and on and on . . .

"Looks like Zemo has recovered in all ways except his desire for revenge. The Wakandans have decided to expunge him – that's a kind of banishment, I guess – but since they have no relationship with any other country they are requesting, hold onto your chair, they are requesting expungement into the custody of James Barnes for the purpose of rehabilitation under the supervision of Tony Stark."

Steve threw his hands up in the air. Some of the papers he held flipped out of his hands and flew around like little paper airplanes that crash landed on the massive marble table. All eyes followed the papers till the last one sailed to a stop.

"This has to be some kind of joke," Buck hoped against hope.

"No, this is what these good people believe. That every life has a purpose. That every life is on the earth to do good and people must be given every opportunity to do so. Did you tell Zemo you wanted to be friends?"

"Well – I . . . I said . . . I said we could have been friends as I was squeezing the life out of him. He was unconscious!" Buck flipped his hands around.

"Well, he heard you and he wants to take you up on your offer. Here's an enclosed letter to you from Zemo."

Steve passed a sealed envelope to Buck. He picked up the letter and turned to Natalie. He held the letter up to her and then did the same to Tony.

"Tony?" Steve asked.

"How long did they say the expungement would take legally?"

Bucky stood by the side of the table, "you can't be seriously thinking – "

Steve interrupted, "about a year in court but it would most likely be approved."

All eyes rested on Tony for more.

"This is not going to be decided right here, right now. Let's hear some questions."

"How do we know he can be rehabilitated?" Bucky babbled.

Tony laughed, "we figured you were hopeless . . . that was not a consideration when I took you on."

"Yeah, of course not or I wouldn't be here." Bucky was the worst offender. He considered himself hopeless many times, even as recently as a few weeks ago. He took his seat.

"Isn't he wanted by other countries?"

"I didn't consider that with you either. Did you operate in other countries besides the United States and Russia?"
"Yes I did."

"And did you commit crimes in these other countries?"

"Well, yes . . . yes I did."

"And at any time, even now, one of these incidents can come back to haunt you? And this would affect me?"

Buck felt like a fly Tony swatted, and he was still stuck to the fly swatter, squirming, and buzzing, with juices flowing; the broken body waiting to be finished off by a toss into the garbage can.

Buck shifted gears. "Doesn't he have brain damage?"

"Again, I figured you probably had some physical damage to your brain and I took you anyway."

Buck cracked. He put his hands to his head. "I'm having a moment here." A painful moment. A painful moment of insight. Buck had come face to face with his own principles. He reeled. Was this it? Was this the flash of future he experienced locked in the bathroom of Tony's Learjet? Was this the future he had seen for himself?

"But, I had a friend to vouch for me."

"Looks like that's what he wants you to do."

"What if all this is a trick to get here and damage us?"

"The thought entered my mind that you may be programmed to do just that."

Natalie could not take it another minute. "He's not completely done with his own rehab."

"This is a meaningful question but he'll be done by next year, easy." Dr. Bruce Banner shrugged his shoulders.

Jarvis was heard on the overhead. "James Comey on the phone for you, sir. I told him you were in a meeting. He will not be put off."

"As I said this won't be decided in one meeting. Organize your thoughts and we'll talk again." Tony left to talk to the X-FBI director.

Tony's 72 hours passed with tireless work in the lab by all. The first layer of the mystery of the ILLUMINE was uncovered. Barnes was promoted to lab technician to Thabre, Natalie technician to Blixa and Steve became the low man on the totem pole, the funky lab assistant. Xhosa became intrigued by the research and worked closely with the other big brains: Trine Haugen, Tony, Banner and Dandalo. The lab had been closed with lights out for only four hours over the last three days. Everyone was tired.

Bucky was the only occupant of the cinema room when Tony entered. Buck was behind the bar setting up for customers.

"You know you don't have to do that." Tony took a stool at the bar.

"I love bartending." Bucky laid a napkin in front of Tony.
"You've worked three days nonstop in the lab."

"I love doing that, too. Can I take your order?"

"Alright, how about a vodka gimlet and I'll take the Vikingfjord, but don't tell Trine I put lemon in her vodka."

"A bartender never tells."

Buck sat the drink in front of Tony and Tony drank. He emptied the glass in three swallows. Like any good bartender who assesses their customers emotional state as soon as they entered the bar, Buck had the foresight to make a triple. He filled Tony's glass out of the shaker.

"When we came back . . . what, was it just two weeks ago? The first thing you said to us was you were in some trouble."

Tony choked on his drink. He did not answer.

"Maybe you'll tell your bartender what you won't tell a . . . a . . . fr . . . another person." Buck stammered over the word friend.

"What trouble are you in Tony?"

Tony appeared as closed mouthed as a Aldeberon shellmouth.

Buck continued, "you know that movie you love so much? Where the hero is just about to buy it, and the posse arrives just in the nick of time? Well, Tony the posse has arrived. What's the trouble?"

Tony finished off the second drink. He set the coupe on the bar and looked at his bartender.

"You won't like it."

Bucky filled Tony's glass again without breaking eye contact.

"Yeah I will. I will like it. I'll like it because I know, whatever it is, I can do something about it." Bucky stared straight into Tony's face.

Tony stared back, "what can you do?"

"The things I do best."

Tony took a drink and shook off Buck's stare.

"What the hell. It's going to be on the news any day now anyway."

Steve walked in with Trine and Xhosa. Tony showed some relief but they went to a sofa.

"Tony?"

"It has to do with some things," Tony gestured all over with his hands, emphasized the word things, "I had to do over the last year."

Buck figured as much. Tony was in trouble for helping him.

Bruce Banner arrived and sat by Tony at the bar.

Tony said aside to Buck, "you're the only one that's asked."
Tony turned to face Banner. Tony spoke with Banner awhile. He finished his third drink and wandered away from the bar. He laid himself out on the sofa, cuddled a pillow, and fell asleep.

"Been a long day," Bruce said. Bucky served Banner his call.

"Trine has asked me to start seeing you professionally again. Is that what you want?" Dr. Bruce Banner asked Bucky.

"Would that even be, uh, ethical, I mean . . ."

"You mean the Tranquility? I'm not using it. I haven't since we talked in the bathroom."

"But how? Why?"

"Oh, hearing how stupid I sounded. A drug created petite Hulk, no I created petite Hulk by my own emotional control. I've acknowledged emotions other than anger in myself, other strong emotions like the desire to save, to rescue, to help. That's why I became a Doctor in the first place. A drug can't do that. Tranquility made me guilt free? No, I resolved some issues. A drug made me work like the devil? No, I did that. I did it all. I'm clean, Buck. Do you want me to drop a urine?"

"No, Bruce, I don't," Buck laughed. "Can you make time for me tomorrow? I'd love to talk to you about some things I downloaded."

"Sure thing."

Dandalo, Thabre and Blixa joined Banner at the bar. Blixa engaged Banner and they moved to a table. Dandalo sat on the sofa, at Tony feet. Thabre looked Buck up and down.

"How can you look rested without resting?" Thabre searched every inch of Buck's face as if witnessing the birth of a planet. Thabre was smitten. Thabre followed Bucky. Thabre's eyes were always on Bucky. It was Thabre who requested Barnes be promoted to lab technician and Thabre gave Bucky work way beyond his pay grade to try to impress him, which it did. Bucky loved the challenge, and the fact someone thought him capable. Thabre taught Bucky everything known about ILLUMINE, which was considerable and useful. Thabre looked dreamingly at Bucky and blatantly flirted, not caring if Natalie was around or not.

Buck was fascinated by the creature. Thabre was fascinating. Thabre had immediate intense emotional responses that played out in a constant shuffling of the birth and death of color in the eyes. Barnes struggled with his own floods of emotion, and he marveled at the alien's ability to flow seamlessly from one emotional event to another, effortlessly, without judgment, without pain. Buck watched Thabre to gather clues on how this was done. Bucky would love to process his own emotions that fluidly.

Buck was friendly, kind and patient with Thabre. He seemed to enjoy the attention, and to legitimately like the alien. When Steve asked Bucky about what was obviously a serious infatuation on Thabre's part Buck replied:

'Who wouldn't want a friend from another planet'. Steve heard this before. Buck said it in the 1940s. Who wouldn't want a Marxist for a friend or a Freudian for a friend so this was nothing new.

Thabre had not tried to hypnotize Bucky with the eyes or push sexual curiosity as Blixa had done with Banner. Thabre was expert at reading Bucky's responses and adjusted masculine/feminine depending on Buck's tone of voice and body language. Thabre watched and waited for a turn in Bucky that would indicate authentic passion in a relationship Thabre consider true love.
Natalia Romanova shot into the room, grabbed the remote and turn on MSNBC.

"There's something about Tony in the news."

The flash of light and color, loud rapid voices, and canned rock music entered the peaceful inner sanctum of the cinema room. It could only be one thing – the irritating sounds of the News. Tony opened his eyes but did not move. Alarms from Jarvis added to the chaos that fill the room up fast.

Andrea Mitchell spoke. She told the world a source familiar with the proceedings reported that the Justice Department would soon file charges against Tony Stark for:

- Fraternizing with an Alien
- Withholding military secrets
- Violation of eminent domain
- Reckless endangerment
- Compromising national security
- Violation of allegiance

No one moved. All eyes were fixed on the screen. All faces were in a state of shock except Thabre who's eyes remained on Bucky wondering how Bucky's lips could forever be that deep pink color and his blue eyes so crystal clear.

"What does it all mean, Tony?" Steve asked.

"It means the government is trying to appropriate my Alien and my Alien Technology."

Dandalo glanced at the wrist band on its wrist. Apprehension showed on the Alien's face.

Bucky stood by Tony. He was silent. His dilated pupils spoke 1000 words but he only needed seven, 'who do you want me to kill'.

Natalie join Bucky, "Tony, no one is going to take your machine or your Alien."

Tony instructed Jarvis to call an emergency Avengers meeting for 48 hours.

The buoyancy in the room deflated. The warm feelings of an evening of relaxation were over. Fatigue set in with the dark realization of the news and the fight ahead.

"I'll have to call my lawyers." Tony bounced to the door.


Natalie cornered Bucky behind the bar. She noted his dilated pupils and said, "let's go home."

Bucky laid the bar towel on the bar and focused on the reassuring eyes of Thabre.

"Sure."

His limbs grew heavier with each step he made towards their room. When he reached the bed he could not hold himself up right.

"Will you come to bed as soon as you can?"
"Two minutes," she said.

He watched her in the bath as she undressed.

"Why don't you look pregnant? Are you sure you're pregnant? Or is someone playing with my mind?"

Natalie's heart skipped a beat. She stared at the brush she held in her hand. Darkness descended over he at this paranoid statement from Barnes. She held her breath but made a decision to ignore it.

"Banner said I will show anytime now Angel."

"Why do you call me Angel? You know I'm no angel." His voice rattled.

Natalie laid on the bed beside him in her underwear. He sighed. He held her. He petted her hair. He ran his hand down her body and drew her to him. She stroked him and peered into his dark eyes. His pupils were large and black.

"I've called you Angel for a year and you've said nothing."

"You know I am El Diablo. You know I'm the devil. You know I'll do the devil's work. Tony went to extremes for me. For all this. And now, here comes the consequences. You know I will go to extremes for him. I'm trapped . . . but there's no bars. Tony will order me to kill . . . and I will."

"I'm sure you will not."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because you didn't kill Zemo."

"Only because they asked me not to."

"Oh really? Is that the truth?"

"It felt like I was gonna kill him . . . I'm not sure."

"That's right. You're not sure are you? But I AM sure. I'm sure of you. I call you Angel because I'm sure."

To her tiny hands his head seemed as big as a bear's. She pushed his thick wavy hair back from his face with both hands. Her hands luxuriated and his lion's mane.

"Look at you. I imagine what you must have looked like as a small boy. I do that a lot. I can see you in my mind as clear as I see you right now. Your youth, your laugh, your innocence, your shinning eyes. I can see you with your mother; how she must have loved you. She played with you. I hear her call you Angel."

Massive tears sprung from his eyes and bolted down his cheeks.

"She did call me Angel. My sisters were Baby, Toots and Sugar. I was Angel, always Angel. How did you know?" Another stream of tears flowed. Natalie kiss the salty tears off his lips and brushed them from his face.

"Because I know the truth about you and so did she. You're an innocent, Buck, nothing you've done was malicious or premeditated. You did not decide to harm anyone. I call you Angel to remind you of your true self, of how you were born, a perfect being."
"Say it again."

"Angel."

"Again."

"My angel."

Aroused, he kissed her passionately.

"Let me lead you." Natalie kissed the remaining tears from his face.

"You know, they're probably full of ILLUMINE."

"All this is a little much. Isn't it?"

"I'm separated from everyone . . . everyone on earth."

"Not from me."

"I've infected you."

"Whatever that means. Whatever it brings. We'll go through it together. That's what I want."

Another wellspring of huge tears flowed down his face. This time he shook them off. "Aha." He growled and moved on to her.

"You'll get out of this quicker if I lead you."

"I am out." His tears had washed the darkness from his eyes. "Tonight, I lead."

"I'll fight ya for it," she teased.

"Well, Honey. Do what you can – you're trained."

And she did.

"What's a fellow have to do around here to stay on top?"

"Okay, I think you could use some time up there."

He held her. He kissed her. She surrendered to him.

They laid together in an altered state. She was fascinated with his hair. Her hands were in his hair to stay. She scrunched his hair and shut her eyes. If his hair was the same color as it felt, she thought, it would be green. The lush green of cool leaves or tall thick grass – as sensual and alive as a rain forest. She rocked his head gently back-and-forth by her grip. She went in for a deep look: deep into his eyes.

"The way you look at me." He took it in. He'd give his life for that look.

They laid like that until he slid down her chest. He stretched his human arm between her legs and up her back. His face on her abdomen, his ear pressed to her belly, he searched for sounds of the five-month-old fetus within her.

"This baby is a miracle," he said softly.
"That would be a good name," she whispered, her hands still in his hair.

"Miracle Barnes?"

"Miracle Romanova."

"Miracle Barnes."

"Miracle Romanova."

"Miracle Romanova Barnes?"

"Yes, Miracle Romanova Barnes."

First thing the next morning the Torn delegation was slated for departure. All involved were sad to see them go. Banner, Bucky and Tony walked to the Time Machine with the three Androgyns. Thabre was visibly upset. Dandalo was not.

Beyond Thabre's obvious infatuation with Bucky they had become close friends. Thabre's look of distress was the most pathetic ever seen. Being empathetic with Thabre, Bucky was moved emotionally as well. Thabre's eye colors circled dark blue and black – like liquid swirling in anticipation of a cataclysm. Thabre, the tallest of the Torn race looked shrunken, deflated, like a failure. Bucky was unsure how to respond. Thabre gave so much to Bucky, and Bucky gave so little back. Bucky opened his arms to Thabre, something he had never done and Thabre gladly excepted. They held each other a good long time.

Bucky spoke, "I know we'll meet again."

"I know it too," and Thabre believed it.

Bucky stood back and looked into the mysterious eyes of Thabre. The hug, the statement, did not seem enough, and without much thought, Bucky took off his shirt and gave it to Thabre. The Alien acted as if Bucky had given a diamond mine. Thabre held the shirt. Thabre hugged the shirt. Thabre kissed the shirt.

"This is the shirt you wore the first time I saw you," the emotional Thabre said to Bucky.

Deeply touched that Thabre would remember such an insignificant thing; Bucky opened his arms again to Thabre.

Thabre stood unable to move. Unable to respond. Unable to process the possibility of hugging Bucky's bare chest.

The onlookers, Tony, Dandalo, Banner and Blixa were moved by the depth and beauty of Thabre's love for Bucky and the display of emotion by the pair.

Thabre could not stand another second of sorrow, signaled to Blixa and Dandalo. They nodded with their eyes to each other and the delegation from Torn stepped through the time portal together. A hum – a click – a swirl of gas and they were gone. Bucky stood with his arms outstretched and watched as the dust from the passing swirled about his feet. The winds of time blew through his mind, and he was stung with regret.

"Why wouldn't Thabre hug me again?" Bucky turned to the others with his empty arms still waiting.
"Brother, can he really be that dense?" Tony said flippantly to Banner.

Tony flipped a glance Bucky. "You need a talking to."

Tony answered a beep from his messenger. "Comey is on the phone... gotta go. Bruce, take care of this will ya?"

All 6'5" of James Comey sat in Tony's office. He looked like a grasshopper folded up in Tony's small yellow desk chair.

Tony was perched behind his desk like an owl. They talked for hours reviewing Tony's personal files. Comey closed his laptop.

"Mr. Stark, you should never use Romanova and Barnes as simple combatants. They should be used only as spies."

"And assassins?"

"That too. Your male's price skyrockets after that Zemo incident. They're calling it a soft kill – you can get rid of your opponent and not have to worry about murder? Gruesome." Comey shuttered his shoulders, head and hands.

"He's paying for it. He's not a sociopath, you know." Tony played with a paperclip in his hand, twisted it into shapes.

"I heard that. That's tough. That's tragic, really."

"So, what kind of money are you talking about?" Tony put the paper clip on the desk.

"Per job or ownership?"

"First one then the other."

"Per job would be target based, of course. Say, head of state – 7 to 10 million – out right ownership – 40 to 50 million. Are you thinking of selling?"

"No... no... just curious. We've had a hard time coming up with a cover for 'em."

"Oh! I have a cover. I have a cover no one could break and a mission of the upmost importance. If I can have them?"

"How much are you willing to pay?"

"What?" Comey said shocked.

"Joke – of course you can have 'em. If they'll go. You know we have a complication."

"Well, yes I do know. They will penetrate Putin's inner circle."

"Oh, they'll go." Tony said emphatically. "When?"

"Six months of training which can be done here at Solaris. One month of actual work if all goes well."
Tony counted around on his fingers. "That might work." He picked up the paper clip again. "But six months training. What cover could take six months?"

"Dancers. They'll be dancing with the Avant-Garde Modern Dance Troupe in Australia. We have an excellent operative already embedded. A native. Aboriginal. Great dancer. Swell fellow. Putin can't resist dancers . . . of either sex, I hear."

"You're right. They're perfect for it."

Bruce and Natalie, Steve and Bucky sat in the interview room around the great marble table. They were joined by Jane Foster who came as proxy for Thor who needed more travel time. She lived and worked in Death Valley and made the short trip. She sat by Natalie. They were in deep conversation. Sam Wilson made the trip from Seattle. Clint Barton hopped a plane and was present. Wanda flew in. All other voting Avengers sent their votes electronically, by Skype or conference call. Tony took the stage.

"My embrace of the Sokovia Accords was predicated on the supposition there would always be a sane POTUS sitting in the oval office. Well, that theory is shot to shit. I have rescinded my signature. If the Accords were presented to me today I wouldn't even consider signing. All in favor of pulling out of the Sokovia Accords signify by saying aye." The vote was unanimous.

"All in favor of reconstituting the Avengers. Signify by say aye." Again, all voted yes.

"I'm kinda done with revenge." Tony mumbled offhand. "Maybe we need a new name. Maybe . . . The Admonishers. Well . . . that's for another time."

"Next order of business. James Barnes has been asked by me to join the Avengers. All in favor say aye." All the Avengers in the room and remotely said yes.

"The aye's have it. James Barnes welcome officially to the Avengers."

"Thank you."

"The last item is not an Avengers issue. This is a personal individually based decision." Tony stood tall and stuck out his chin.

"I have been engaged in high treason on every level possible to overthrow the current administration."

As the last syllable of the word treason lingered in the air, Bucky jumped out of his seat and stood at attention by Tony's side, alert and cautious . . . like sentry. Tony acknowledged his presence with a look of surprised acceptance. Surprised acceptance looked very similar to pride. The crew summarized after this display that Bucky would dispatch anyone Tony named off the planet.

With his eyes still on Barnes, Tony said. "Anyone else want to help me?"

"Hey! Klaatu!" Clint said to Tony. "If you've got Gort here. What do you need me for?"

"Clint. We are trying to overthrow the administration legally. Like by impeachment." Tony said.

Bucky did not believe that for one moment.

"Oh. Right . . . sorry. My alleged criminal mind was working overtime. Well, I'm in."
"Thor abstains from politics but I'd love to help. I'm totally in. There's a lot of things I can help you with." Jane said.

"I think you can. Thank you."

"Yeah. The guy's a bully of the highest order, so yes," Cap said.

"That's a yes for me. I just do whatever Cap does," said Falcon.

"Yes, can't wait." Natalie made her decision.

"Yes, I am in," Wanda said.

All remotes were affirmative.

"Thank you. Thank you all. Now I want to introduce James Comey."

The man a dichotomy of letters, overly tall and overly shy he entered the room like a giraffe in a Winnebago. He walked right to Bucky and plopped Bucky's backpack on the table in front of him.

"I think this is yours?"

"Holy shit."

"Buck?" Said Cap.

"I mean holy smokes. How did you? Oh yeah – thank you." Bucky shook Comey's hand too strongly. "Nice to meet you – sir."

"I have to take it with me when I leave. I have to put it back. You know what I mean. You have two days, son. You can do what you like with the notebooks. Copy them, forge new books, black out, tear out any incriminating evidence. No one has looked at them seriously yet. It's gibberish to them."

"I'll get right on it. Thank you." Bucky let go of Comey's hand.

"Can we all move to the briefing room and I'll go over the plan."

Natalie and Steve stood by Bucky as the rest of the crew walked by congratulated him and welcomed him to the Avengers team. They shook his hand and slapped him on the back.

Sam Wilson walked by without speaking to Bucky. Out of the corner of his eye Sam saw the frown on Cap's face. He turned back.

"Don't screw up." Sam gave Buck the eye.

"Thank you Sam." Bucky smiled. Sam Wilson took a few steps from Barnes, stopped and turned back again.

"Hey, look dude. That was harsh. I apologize. I know you've worked hard. I know you've gone through a lot of pain to get as good as you are. I admire that. I really do. So, I sincerely congratulate you, man."

Bucky gave Falcon a big hippie man hug, and Bucky did not let go.

Falcon resisted and called out: "Hey! Somebody! Get him off me!"
Everyone in the room laughed out loud including Barnes. Bucky stepped back from Falcon.

"Really man. Just don't screw up." Sam said.

Bucky lunged at Sam to hug him again. Sam ran from the room.

"Now I know how to get rid of 'em." Buck laughed.

Steve shook his head. "Well done, Buck. Well done."

Natalie laughed. She hugged and congratulated her lover as any colleague would.

Buck whispered in her ear. "I fit in... I can feel it." His eyes twinkled and his smile was so bright it filled the room with light.

"You have something here. You really have something." She whispered back.

Slowly people left the room leaving Tony and Bucky last. Buck made a move toward the door. Tony took hold of Bucky's human arm at the elbow and held him. Bucky glanced at Tony's hand on his arm—his human arm—on the flesh of his human arm. His eyes glanced at Tony's face. Buck's lips parted in awe.

"Welcome to the team." Tony said.

"Thank you." Again, Buck headed for the exit.

Tony held tight.

"Wait... I think you deserve an explanation. All this. Everything that happened here between us was for good reason. I had to be sure." Tony made eye contact with Buck for a deep look. "I had to be sure of you. You may be asked to do much more than the others."

There it was. Buck knew this was coming and here it was. It was real. It wasn't paranoia. Buck knew the next words out of Tony's mouth would be the mission, the assassination, who he wanted Buck to kill. Buck glanced at Tony's hand on his human arm. Now that it was here. It was time for a decision. Buck grabbed a good hold of Tony's arm at the elbow with his human hand; the old Roman hand shake.

"Well, if I can't do what you ask. I think we both know someone who can." Bucky glanced at his cyborg arm and watched the two seconds it took the arm to turn metal and become full strength. He made a fist. He flipped his eyelids open to reveal the black eyes of the Winter Soldier. He made sure Tony got a good look; a good look at what he was prepared to give. Buck glanced away for a few second. One. Two. Three. Four. He raised his eyelids again and looked at Tony. His eyes were azure blue. His arm looked human.

Tony did a double take.

"You can control like that? In a split second?"

"I've been working on it."

"Do it again." Tony held Buck's arm. His voice sounded excited.

Buck took a slow breath. A wave moved over him. Tony saw his pupils dilate fully open and his arm turn metal. Buck exhaled and his pupils became normal and the human hologram appeared on his
"Amazing control! Amazing! Now, you've knocked MY socks off." Tony said as he gazed into the baby blue eyes of Bucky Barnes.

"Yeah, I've got control. I've got control of it. All of it . . . The Winter Soldier works for me now. He works when I say. And he's not killing anyone. I'm telling you NO, Tony. I'm not going to kill anyone for you." Buck did not break eye contact with Tony or loosen the grip he had on Tony's arm.

"Eureka! Brother, you just slid into home."

"What?"

"Four years of work. Four long years." Tony glanced at the ceiling. "You just graduated!"

"Huh?"

"Look, I don't want you to kill anyone." Tony said.

"Then what the hell were you talking about – do more than the others?"

"The Putin Caper!"

"Putin?"

"Come on my man. You need filled in." Tony tugged on Bucky's arm.

"Not so fast." Bucky removed himself from Tony's grip.

"Okay, okay." Tony's hands flew off Bucky like he was too hot to handle. "So you're standing on your own. I acknowledge your personal space, Dude."

"My name is Buck."

A huge smile covered Bucky's face, it lit the room.

"And I'm an AVENGER."

Bucky smiled at Tony. Tony smiled at Bucky.

Bucky laughed. Tony laughed.

Their laughter rang out through the empty room.

Tony opened the door and waved his hand into the future. He beckoned Buck to enter.

"Would you care to join me for the briefing?"

Buck stepped through the doorway. Still laughing he stopped and made eye contact with Tony.

"Yes, I don't mind if I do. Thank you."

Tony laughed loud. He touched Buck on the shoulder.

Laughing, Buck touched Tony on the back.

They glanced at each other.
"This looks to be the beginning of a beautiful alliance, Buck."
The door slammed shut.

THE END . . . of part one.

If anyone would like to contact me privately for questions or comments please do so by email:
buckrogersmd2419@yahoo.com.
I hope you had as much fun reading as I did writing.

When Bruce Banner join the others, Natalie instructed Tony on how to spring up on the surfboard, Tony, doing a good job of it. Banner sat by Steve and looked at Bucky who focused on Natalie, as usual.

"I don't know what to make of your friend Bucky. Is he a genius or an idiot?" Bruce said in all seriousness.

Steve burst out a laugh.

"Well said. I have the same problem." Cap whistled his military whistle to shak

"Buck! Are you an idiot or a genius?" Steve asked.

Buck thought before he answered and said:

"Yes. Yes I am." He joined Natalie and Tony on the floor popping up.

"Well, there you have it – the answer of a true disciple," Cap said.

"Disciple of who?"

"Timothy Leary."

Natalie and Bucky went as far as taping off an outline of a surfboard on the floor with masking tape to teach Tony some footwork. For a man his age Tony was in top physical shape. He was well balanced, coordinated and flexible. He was tenacious. He would make a good surfer. After Natalie, Bucky and Tony popped up 300 times Steve was exhausted and went to the bar to make drinks. Bruce noticed Steve's awkwardness and approached the bar.
"Need some help?"

"What's a stinger? How do you make a stinger?"

"Cognac and Creme De Menthe."

"Oh. That sounds terrible." Steve made a sour face.

"How about some very dry very dirty Martinis?"

"Great."

"I'll tell you how to make a virgin Margarita for Natalie. Get the blender."

They turn the sound off on the surfing competition, hit the sofas to relax and tell stories. The subject? Surfing. They told the tall tales of surfers. They imitated the cadence and colloquialisms and surfing slang of the times. They sounded like they were speaking a foreign language. Steve was up first:

"One day we ran into Branch Gleason, the most famous surfer around in 1963. Everyone genuflected to this guy. He walked on the beach like he owned the world. He did. We were impressed. We stood around with goo-goo eyes and our mouths hanging open and here's Bucky."

Steve imitated Bucky standing by his surfboard stuck in the sand.

"Now, Bucky was known. Since day one he had a rep. Even before he went in the water he had folklore. That first day he was sunning his chest wounds on the beach, you remember how bad they looked and that slash across his face – brutal. Well, they looked even more gruesome the next day. A group of young surfer boys maybe 12, 13-year-old Mexican kids saw him and one was like 'dude'."

Steve imitated the kids body posture and language.

"Dude, what happened to you?" Bucky was all stoic and said, 'knife fight'. The kids said, 'Well, gee whiz, what's the other guy look like'? Bucky says totally straight faced, intense eyes and all, 'He's dead', he said. Well, the kid froze right in his tracks and Bucky seeing this quickly said, 'I'm joking'. Then they all got loosened up and Bucky blows it and says, 'He's only brain-dead'. They were like 100 times more scared and backed away from him. There he was all white and slashed up and those scary eyes. They looked at him like he was an escaped psychopath or something. One kid asked Buck in Spanish his name and Buck said, 'Diego'. The kid ran away from the scene and said, 'Diego El Diablo'. " Steve said this with a pretty good Spanish accent.

"Diego the devil. And I'm afraid it stuck – so this guy knew the story of Diego Diablo and Buck's reputation as a hotdog, an aggro. And, you know, Buck stands out on the beach. There's a maturity about him or something I don't know . . . but anyway. So this guy spies Buck. He walks through the crowd going out of his way to get to Diego here and he said to Bucky, 'Dude, the purpose of surfing is to see how long you can stay up on the board, man. I don't think anyone's ever told you that'."

There was light laughter in the room.

Bucky said, "I thought it was a compliment. I was like thank you, thank you." Then the room exploded with laughter.

"Didn't you guys get nicknames?" Tony said to Natalie and Steve.

"After Buck got his, we decided we needed cover names so we continued the pattern of local towns. I picked Catalina and Steve picked Ventura. Later I spontaneously got Daisy and Cap got Ace, so we were set."

"Ace Ventura?" Tony laughed.
"What's so funny?" Steve asked.

"It's a movie from the 90s – you guys aren't even done with the 70s yet." Nat sprang up for her turn.

Steve looked at Bucky with a question mark in his eyes.

"Beats me. Put it on the list." Buck said.

"One day the most unusual troublemaker Steve Rogers –" Steve cut her off. "You're not going to tell about that day are you?"

"Steve, you don't even know what happened that day. Not really. You'll be hearing it for the first time."

Steve gave up.

"This was a day I'll never forget. It was heavy out there." She told the story like telling a ghost story around a campfire.

"The kind of gray day where you can't tell where the sky ends and the water begins. No one was out. That should've given us a warning but we were newbies and thoroughly addicted. I remember Steve saying how we beat everyone out. Well, we set out. Buck and I came back in. You just couldn't surf. The wind blew you right off the surfboard if you managed to get up at all. You couldn't see a thing. We stood on the shore looking out for Steve. There was no sign of him. We waited past the point of comfort. It seemed an eternity. Luckily, Steve's board had bright orange writing on it and I saw a flash of orange. Buck swam out to it and by some miracle found him. He was underwater but still tethered to his board. He dragged him to shore. He was not breathing. We started CPR." Natalie and Bucky looked at Steve for a reaction. He had his hands up, palms up, and a shocked look on his face.

"On the pulse check his heart was beating but, irregularly, and Buck activated the defibrillator feature on his arm. The feature said to shock him so we gave him the 360 joules required.

"Thank you, Tony. God bless you Tony, for having the foresight to think beyond this prosthesis as a weapon. Thank you.

"We resumed CPR. The minutes were ticking by into the permanent brain damage range. We just kept going. We were like robots weren't we Angel?" She said to Bucky who was reliving the day by the emotions on his face.

"We were trained. We kept our heads. I remember the wind had picked up and blew gusts of stinging sand over us, in our eyes. Remember that Angel? It turned dark. It was cold. We shook. Steve was blue and so were you. I remember your lips were blue. We wouldn't give up. We would try anything. Finally, he began to breathe. We hovered around him. It was a long time before he was conscious. We try to warm him with the only thing we had – our bodies. He started to come around a bit. He shoved us off him." Her dramatic tone changed.

"He got up, picked up Buck's board and started back out." Natalie imitated Steve pushing his way back out to the waves.

"I stood in front of him. I blocked him." She demonstrated her body stance.

"He walked around me. Buck stood in front of him." She showed Bucky's body stance.
"Steve started to try to get by Buck and Buck tackled him, held him face down in the sand and gave him a sand facial. He would not have been able to control him if Steve had not been so weak. He flipped him over. Steve still fought him. Buck gave him three or four good slaps until Steve grabbed his hand and said, 'okay, okay'.

"Another bit of luck, no one was on the beach to witness this incident. Bucky straddling over Steve, of course, he had to deactivate the human hologram on his arm to use the defibrillator and shock him with his fist and the bright arc of light and the seizure like reaction of Steve's body. Definitely against many of Dandalo's 44 rules for Time Travelers. There's more. We felt Steve should be in an ICU somewhere but he wouldn't hear of it. The rest of the day and evening we wouldn't take our eyes off of him. I felt like he was a bomb about to go off. Finally, poor Steve had enough, and he said, 'You're looking at me like I'm a bug and now you're following me to the bathroom? What's up with you guys?' He had no idea. Well now you do."

"I don't see what's such a big deal?" Steve's face was flushed with embarrassment. "Bucky drowned every day."

"That's true, I did."

"Yes, you did." Natalie bounced onto Bucky's lap.

He felt her weight and her warmth on him. Steve watched Buck as he ran his human hand slowly up his own thigh, up her back, and repeated the gesture.

"Oh." Buck arched his back.

When Steve saw this, he knew the evening was over.

"Well," Steve slapped both hands on his knees. "Let's call it a day."

Bucky sprang to attention.

"Midnight Banner?"

"Midnight Bucky."

The next morning Steve found Bucky reading on the Internet. He scrolled fast – brain computer interface something – it went by too fast for Steve to read.

"Are you reading that fast?"

"Oh . . . Yeah . . . I took a speed reading tutorial on YouTube. Wanna work out?" Buck stopped what he was doing and clicked off.

Buck made it his business to know when Tony slept. He slept the same four hours each night and when he put in his four hours he slept soundly. Bucky waited for this time to try something daring; something he thought Tony may put the nix on. If it worked, it could make all the difference. If his plan did not work, he would only have himself to blame.

Bucky gained access to the accessories closet by voice activation of the door. Inside he found the appliances and adapters used for his cybernetic arm and some new things, some things he could not identify. He located the hand adapter used to disrupt large electrical equipment, like a satellite dish, or a small nuclear weapon. He quickly changed the regulator to except rather than discharge. He turned on the computer, removed his cybernetic hand at the wrist – bayonet mount – and hooked himself to the hard drive. From there he was able to bypass his optic nerve and accept information, data, the
ones and zeros, directly into his brain. Just like speed reading only faster.

Later that evening Steve saw Bucky back on the Internet in Tony's accessory closet. He saw Bucky's hand and the wires connected to the main frame.

"Are you still reading?"

"I don't have to read anymore."

"What do you do now?"

"Download."

Steve was shocked but didn't want to show his shock.

"What are you downloading?"

"Millions – hundreds of millions of items – data – everything." Bucky jerked. His eyes fluttered as another huge amount of data entered his brain. His bottom lip and chin trembled.

"You have to stop this," Steve pleaded, "stop and rest." Those statements got no reaction. "When will you stop?"

"I'll stop at the end."

"There is no end."

"You're wrong. There is an end."

"You're mind can't hold all that."

Bucky glanced up at Steve like he was imbued with the knowledge of the universe – which he was.

"Oh yes, it can."

Steve could no longer disguise his horror. Bucky's eyes look like the Children of the Damned.

"I'm getting Tony." Steve had panic in his voice.

"It's too late for that." Vapor trails rushed across Buck's blue iris as he jerked and his eyes fluttered again.

When Tony arrived Bucky sat motionless with his cybernetic arm detached from his body on the table with the cyborg hand along side. He held himself up with his human hand on his head. His elbow rested on the desk. He jerked oddly, like an electrical jolt was passed through him.

"Steve said you downloaded the Internet?"

"No," Bucky held his head and acknowledged Tony peripherally. "80% of the Internet is virus laden. I can't corrupt myself with that."

"Well, what did you download then?" Tony tried to sound cool and casual.

"Oh, technical information, scientific data, research, a few more languages – like – all of them. All the rest I didn't have. I have them all now, even Xhosa." Bucky smiled at Steve and clicked his tongue on the X of Xhosa and said Xhosa again. "I can talk to her. I can teach you."
"What else?"

"Other things I'm interested in like oceanography, marine biology, etymology, molecular genetics, bio mechanics, bio chem, ecology, evolutionary biology, and of course biorobotics, neurorobotics and brain computer interface, I had to do that first . . . "

"Okay, okay."

"I tried to go into geopolitics but it was all contaminated." Bucky sounded so disappointed. He glanced in Tony's direction. Tony touched Bucky's chin and lifted his face for a closer look. Having poor boundaries Buck let him. Buck's eyes whirled like two fidget spinners. Tony did not look up but signaled to Steve.

"Go get Banner." Tony pulled a chair up beside Bucky. He made a conscious decision to relax his shoulders, to take a deep breath – a few deep breaths – he made sure his voice sounded calm and casual without any hint of how much Tony was freaked out. Tony looked over the hardware. He looked over Bucky's cyborg hand laying there, detached, on the table.

"Ah hum. Well, if you're done, Buck. I can unhook you if you like. Give you back two hands?"

"Yeah sure, thank you." Bucky was distracted. He seemed to breathe in only; a series of short inhalations in rapid succession.

Even though Tony's hands shook he calmly, slowly proceeded to disconnect Bucky from the computer and re-connect his cybernetic hand. Bucky payed no attention. Every second a burst of light flashed across his cornea. His eyes and head jerked in a bizarre way.

"What's going on in there?" Tony said nonchalantly.

"Oh," Bucky said. "Making connections, ah, organizing, moving things, so many connections, new pathways. I . . . I may have to shut down." Bucky relaxed his body and let his head fall against the back of the chair. His face fell in the direct line of sight with Tony's.

Buck's eyes flashed open. "Tony, don't be afraid," Bucky said, but Tony was afraid. Tony was white with fear.

"I think this will work," Bucky broke eye contact with Tony, shut his eyes and let out all his air. He did not move.

Steve returned with Banner. Tony noticed Banner's tranquilizer gun in his pocket. Tony motioned them to calm with a hand that trembled. Bucky resumed huge, deep, long, breaths, in his mouth and out with a haaaa.

"What's happening?" Banner whispered.

"I think he overloaded himself."

"I hope you know none of this is even possible." Banner shook his head.

Tony reset Bucky cybernetic arm. The hand did a few involuntary movements.

"He said whatever he's up to is working so we wait. Banner, can you do an assessment without touching him?"

"Sure, he's obviously breathing, but if he continues that kind of breathing he will become acidotic,
but oh well. He's pink so he's oxygenated. Look at his neck. His heart rate can be counted by his bounding carotid arteries. He's taching right along. I can see from across the room he is mentally not on the same planet with the rest of us. Want to know anything else?

Buck's eyes opened and he sat straight in the chair. He glanced around the room and a broad smile crossed this face.

"Well," he shrugged, "I'm operational."

Tony raised his hand to keep Banner and Steve at bay. He relaxed himself again and made eye contact with Barnes. Buck's eyes looked glazed but no volcanic activity noted.

"Why did you take such a risk?"

"I can't be weak, sick or dumb anymore. I can't cry out in the night. It would wake our baby."

Tony checked Steve's reaction to the statement. He knew as Steve knew, Buck was a desperate man. He had been a desperate man since the knowledge of his fatherhood exploded in his brain. But none of them knew just how desperate Bucky really was.

"What was your inspiration for this act?"

"It was my ILLUMINE."

"Your ILLUMINE?" Tony threw his palms skyward and glanced at the boys.

"Yes Tony, it seemed illogical to me that some scientist would give me something as powerful as ILLUMINE without a way for me to use it. And I needed to use it. I needed the power. I was moving the nanite strings but at the rate I was going it would take forever. I needed energy now, so I tried the simplest thing first. What if my ILLUMINE activates only when I really need it, like when I fell from the train, like when they - when they- you know, hurt me. Like, like what if I was trying to out run a cheetah or something, like it would take my whole body's physiology to activate it. Like a sustained effort. I tried the physical but I'm not easily challenged that way. Then I thought of this."

"Did it work?"

"If your mitochondria can be felt. If you can feel the Krebs cycle kicking into high gear, then yes, I'm fully operational. Nanite string movement can be seen on PET scan. I suggest that test be done now. That would give us empirical proof. When is the neurologist coming? She may have ideas."

"Two days. We will run the test."

"Yes, I need every test you can give."

"Why didn't you come to me if you wanted to do this? We could have proceeded under a controlled laboratory experiment."

"On the chance that you'd say no and restrict me. Then I'd never have another chance."

"You thought I'd say no?"

"Sure, why would you let me do something you can't do? But believe me Tony, you don't want to go there. If I entered the wrong domain – made one small error - stay in one place too long – a virus would have shut me down. I wouldn't be able to function. It was really dangerous. What I did was really dangerous. Don't worry. I won't go back. I'll have to get updates and upgrades manually."
Tony laughed. A chuckle at first, then Tony went a little hysterical. Tears filled his eyes and smeared on to his face.

Bucky laughed along – at first. He stopped when the realization swept over him that Tony, Tony's hysteries, Tony's laughter to tears could only mean one thing . . . Tony cared. Tony cared about him. Not his arm, not his rehabilitation, but him. Despite himself Tony cared. Over insurmountable obstacles Tony cared.

Buck glanced at Steve. Steve had seen a look like that on Bucky's face once before, 90 years ago, by the river, the day Bucky saw his father cry. Steve knew from this moment on, Bucky would be devoted to Tony the rest of his life and not because he had to make amends.

"Yeah, it was dangerous. Don't do it again." Tony laughed and wiped his eyes.

Everyone at Solaris needed sleep. Natalie headed under the covers for 12 hours, at least, she said. Bucky need 12 hours on BARF and the whole place shut down.

All residents of Solaris worked together to complete testing on Barnes and Romanova. Even with the help of Tony's army of robots and Jarvis the human crew put in a long day's work. That evening they ate together in the cinema room. Too tired to put on a movie they ate, drank and relaxed in silence.

"What do we know about this neurologist coming tomorrow?" Steve asked Bruce.

"Quite a lot. She was hand-picked. Her name is Dr. Trine Haugen. She's young. She's brilliant. She's Norwegian."

"Do you speak Norwegian?" Steve smiled at Bucky.

"As of yesterday, I do."

"Her father was a renowned neurologist – wrote the text books. Her mother is a not too shabby neurosurgeon that invented the Sonic Separator, the Tri-lazer Connector and the Back Brain Stimulator. The story goes, Trine knew neuroanatomy before the ABC's."

"I like her," Nat chimed in.

"She is impressive. She's an original thinker. She's not confined by the box."

"Then she won't be shocked by a cyborg?" Bucky always cautious, always aware of what he considered his freak status.

"She won't be shocked by anything. Her hobby is the neuropathology of the criminal mind."

"They have a pathology? I didn't know . . . that wasn't available knowledge for download," Bucky said.

"No one knows yet. She just discovered it. She's not yet published."

"You're saying criminals can be cured?" Steve said.

"We're going to have some interesting conversations. She can stay all week. She has no practice. She just does consultations like this."

Banner staffed the bar and took orders. Buck was first up.
"Why do you always make the drinks?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe because I'm originally a chemist. What can I get you?"

"Tequila . . . Something."

"How about a Tequila Sunrise?"

"What's in it?"

"You mean you don't know."

"Come on, that wasn't on the top of my priority list."

"Want to learn?"

"Really? Yeah! Sure!" Buck's face brightened.

Banner picked up The Ultimate Bar Book and laid the book in front of Barnes with a whack. "I don't think you downloaded this."

"Bucky flipped through each page as he sipped his tequila sunrise. When he reached the end, he closed the book and handed it back to Banner.

"Got it," he said.

Banner removed himself from behind the bar. He motioned Bucky to take the reins.

"Wait a minute there – I'm not ready to solo. Memorizing formulas is one thing. I'm sure there's more to bartending than that."

Banner stayed close, watched, and made comments like, 'always put a napkin down first – no not with a can – use coarse salt for this, fine salt for that'.

Within 90 minutes of Barnes bartending everyone slurred their words. Seems Bucky's thinking went like this; if the drink called for 2 ounces of alcohol, 4 ounces would be twice is good.

All residents of Solaris learned a good lesson this night; increased intelligence does not in any way mean improved judgment. It was time for Steve to call it a night, but Steve was in no shape to remember, instead he had Tony cornered, bending his ear.

"When you are out there on the waves a while," Steve waxed nostalgic. "Day after day. All day. It takes a while. When I felt it for the first time – when I let myself feel it. I'll never forget the moment. The struggle to stay up. Your battle to control the board. To dominate the wave. Your desire to tame the wave to beat it into compliance with your board – to submit to your board. Maybe I just got tired. Maybe I just gave up for a second. Just one moment but in that moment you see the truth like a flash." Uncoordinated, Steve waved his hands around.

"The wave, the board, myself were all one. I know, I know this sounds like I was high on drugs or fatigue substances but there are many paths to the truth. And that truth changed everything. I was the board. I was the wave. I was nature. I was a part of nature. I was connected to nature. Me, Steve Rogers. I wasn't separate. Do you know what that means? To belong? There was no fight. No struggle. No need to master, or control, or dominate because it's you. You are nature. That's when you become a surfer. That's when you become a human being. This happens to all surfers. It's all they talk about, in one way or another. It's all you think about. And there is no going back. You're
changed forever. It changes you. It changes your values. Your opinions. Your relationships. Your relationship with the world. Your relationship with your own body. I always treated my body like it was a machine that I fueled up and beat into a performance. I never allowed my body to feel pleasure, like with a girl, or even food, or the pleasure of movement, or the pleasure of sleep, or even companionship.

"And I changed. I allowed myself to feel the love I have for Bucky and Nat, and even you Tony. I know you guys tease me about my beach bunnies, but I never had that. And when I say I'm jonesin' for a wave, what I'm really saying is that I want to feel that feeling again. I want to commune with nature. I want to belong, as ridiculous as that sounds. I want a reminder. I want to remember what I really am. I want to go home. So Tony, I'm asking you with all my heart. Have mercy on me. Order me a wetsuit and a board. I've got to go out."

"Yeah you're going out all right. Come on Ace. You need to sleep it off." Natalie handled one of Steve's arms, Bucky took the other, and they headed him for the door.

"He knows he can't go in the water here. He knows it's too polluted. He'll be okay." Buck said to Tony as they passed out the door.

"I thought he couldn't get drunk," Tony said to Bruce.

"He never had Bucky for a bartender. You know, he memorized that bartenders guide in like four minutes."

"Damn."

The lights automatically shut off as Tony and Bruce left the room.

Dr. Trine Haugen M.D., PhD, ABNS, FCPS, FACS, MRCS, was not at all what anyone expected. She was shockingly young, shockingly tall, shockingly blonde. Her white hair was wild, shoulder length, curly in spots, straight in spots, darker at the roots and more blonde as it reaches the white tips. Her eyebrows were bushy, white and never plucked. She wore no makeup. She was carelessly dressed, and carelessly coffered. She wore a perpetual frown on her brow, always appeared irritated, and never made direct eye contact. She looked the stereotypical absent-minded professor; a perfect example of a mad scientist.

Banner, Buck, and Tony readied the lab. All Buck's tests displayed, all results at her fingertips. She took a long look at Bucky's PET scan.

"What is this? You call me here for a joke? You call me all the way to play a trick on me? Is this an American style practical joke?"

"No, no what is it?" Tony could not hide the shock in his voice.

"There is indication of neurogenesis in this brain. That is impossible."

"I assure you, this is legitimate."

"Is this an embryonic brain? Does anyone in this room see an embryonic brain – no – this is an adult brain. Everyone out. I have to study this. Out. Out. Out."

Tony and Bruce and Bucky sheepishly left the room.
"Let's go to my spy center. We can at least watch her."

"Not me. I can't stand the suspense. I'm crinkling. I'll be in my therapeutic room. Maybe Natalie can smooth me out."

**SIXTEEN HOURS LATER**

Tensions were so high at Solaris that the team spontaneously congregated in the cinema room. Barnes attempted to ease the tension by dressing up for his job behind the bar. He wore a white sleeveless Under Armour T-shirt and a black lightweight jogging suit, also Under Armour. Natalie shaved him as close as humanly possible, and she slicked his hair back into a picturesque knot. He smiled as he snapped a black bowtie across his collarless neck. He had done all the bar back and was open for business. Natalie curled up on the sofa with the beautifully photographed Fritz Lang German language masterpiece "M" on low-volume in the background. Steve sat at her feet reading William L. Shirer's "Rise and Fall of the Third Reich". Banner hung at the bar with a drink in his hand. He encouraged his student. Tony plopped down on the barstool by Banner with the sigh. When Tony got a load of the bartender he laughed large. Tony laughed his authentic laugh. The laugh everyone loved to hear. The laugh everyone loved to laugh along with.

"What can I get you, sir?" Bucky puffed out his chest.

"A Singapore Sling."

Barnes remove the appropriate glass and started the nine ingredient drink.

"You can't throw him." Now, Bruce puffed his chest, proud of his prodigy.

"Okay, okay, stop, I changed my mind. Scotch on the rocks."

"What brand, sir?"

"Chevis Regal will do." Tony turned to Banner and spoke low.

"16 hours, she's been in there 16 hours with Jarvis and the robots. I've sent in food, drinks, more food, more drinks. What can she be doing?" Buck delivered the drink.

"Anything else?"

"Yes, I'd like a large glass filled with ice and sparkling water."

"Perrier?"

"No. No. No. Something else. Anything else."

Buck had to leave the room and go to the main kitchen for the anything else.

"Oh, Tony. What did we miss?"

"AH, we knew the guy had some permanent damage done but 16 hours? What could we have possibly missed?"

"I am feeling fear." Banner finished a drink.

"I have not been this on edge in years."

"Maybe we should've had him in some conventional rehab center in Switzerland or something. Maybe our arrogance . . . "
"You mean MY arrogance. Damn . . . I've treated him like a machine – like he's one of my personal robots."

Buck returned and poured the Badoit. Natalie slid a stool across the floor and pushed it between Banner and Tony. Buck leaned on the bar, looked out at the movie and waited for the next order. He rested his hands on the bar.

"Angel," Natalie said, "your hand." She placed her hand on his cybernetic hand.

Tony and Bruce glanced at Bucky's hand – his metal hand - and his large expanding pupils. Buck tucked his hand under the bar and lowered his eyes from view.

"It started happening . . . on its own . . . about an hour ago."

"What's the matter?"

"I'm . . . afraid." Buck stood at attention behind the bar. He held his human hand over his mechanical arm like a shield. Tony, Bruce and Nat stared at him with sympathetic eyes. They were afraid too. They were afraid of what the doctor was going to say about Buck's brain.

"It's going to be bad. I feel it. I'm going to get a bad diagnosis. It has to be. They did too much – "

Dr. Trine Haugen led by two of Tony's personal robots entered the cinema room. All eyes were on her.

"Is every member of the treatment team present?" She said loudly. Tony shot out of his seat, followed by Banner, Nat and Steve.

"Dandalo is not here but will come if needed." Tony said followed by a tense silence.

"Can I serve you a drink?" Bucky attracted her attention behind the bar.

"What kind of vodka do you have?"

"We have stocked Vikingfjord for you ma'am."

"Straight up," she said. She addressed the room in a loud voice. "Please be seated in your usual casual way. There is so much tension in this room," she shuttered. "Please, there is no reason for all this apprehension. Where is my patient, James Barnes?"

"Here, ma'am."

Trine pointed to Tony and Bruce.

"He's your lab assistant? He's your bartender?"

"No!" shot Bruce.

"No, it's just a joke. I mean, it's not a joke. I can explain." Tony stammered.

"I'm just learning." Bucky snapped off his tie and slipped off his jacket. He came from around the bar to reveal his cybernetic arm fully metal. He carried it with the hand in a fist.

"Your James Buchanan Barnes?"

"Yes I am."
"Date of birth, August 10, 1917?"

"Exactly right."

Dr. Trine Haugen shut her eyes a moment. She took a deep breath. Even as young as she was, as a neurologist, she had consulted on cases that ranged from the odd, to the strange, to the bizarre. This was by far the strangest case she had consulted on, she thought, as she looked at a 100+ year old man that did not look a day over 21 years of age. She looked at his face and his terrifying cybernetic arm.

"You are as pale as a ghost, my man. I strongly suggest you sit."

"Yes." Bucky sat at the table by the doctor.

"There is no reason for despair. No reason whatsoever. Your issues are complex, yes, but not desperate. I repeat this is not a desperate situation. I am not leaving here until all issues are dealt with. I am not leaving until an action plan, agreed-upon by all, is in place. Okay?"

Buck nodded affirmative.

"Now, I want to instruct YOU. Watch." Trine walked to the bar. She picked up the bottle of Vikingfjord vodka. She picked up the shot glasses. She set the vodka and glasses in front of Buck with a snap.

"This is all you need to know to be a bartender."

Laughter broke the ice in the room like global warming.

"I see some I have not met."

"My apologies. This is Natalia Romanova, my lover, and Steve Rogers, my best friend."

"Nat or Natalie is fine."

Trine stood and shook Natalie's hand. She touched her shoulder and said, "Very nice to meet you." She turned to do the same with Steve, but she stopped. She stared into his face as their matching blue eyes met. She literally scanned his form down to his feet and back up to his face. Her mouth was in the shape of an O. Steve appeared to have been hit in the head with a lightning bolt as he stood dumbfounded. Trine mobilized herself and completed the formalities. The pause was only a few seconds. No one even noticed . . . except Natalie.

"Now, please, everyone to their customary comfort spaces."

Bucky filled all the shot glasses which were picked up immediately. Natalie took the sofa, Buck joined her there. Banner sat on four big pillows stacked on the floor by Nat. Steve sat in his straight chair. Dr. Haugen sat on the opposite end of the sofa from Nat and Buck. Tony did not sit on the floor by Banner, instead he sat on his million dollar coffee table. Steve flipped off the movie and pulled his chair close in by Trine. They made a cozy circle.

"SKAL!" Trine Haugen toasted and she downed her vodka.

"I know the talk, the ominous brain damage, brain damage. These are more correctly brain injuries. Injuries to the brain. They come in three kinds: traumatic brain injury, concussive brain injury, and hypoxic brain injury. I am sorry to inform you, James, you have all three types. Now, let me say you also have one hundred million neurons in your brain to play around with. So, if you happen to lose a
few, what's the big deal, right? A lot depends on where the brain injury occurs. If you have ever considered yourself lucky, you are lucky in this area. If the extent of your brain injury had been in other areas you would be in a desperate situation. And you are functioning, right? Here you are in front of us all, with a working brain. After all, you're a bartender, you work in the lab, right? Brain injuries like yours are very hard to predict in outcomes. But I will try. First I need more information.

Bucky and Natalie sat cockeyed on the sofa. He sat with his back against the sofa arm, she tucked up against him. They faced his doctor. His human arm stretched over the back of the sofa. His cybernetic arm laid across her lap. She held his clenched metal fist in her hands.

"I realize you have limited knowledge of events, but you may have some knowledge of the hypoxic brain injury. This type is caused by oxygen deprivation to the brain. Can you remember any incident that could cause oxygen deprivation? This would be a cardiac arrest, respiratory arrest, an accident, an injury, a situation where you were cut off from oxygen, James, anyone?"

"Maybe I can," Buck said. Natalie turned to look at him with big eyes. "Natalie, I'm sorry I never told you this before. I meant to tell you but there has just been so much.

"There was a rumor I hung myself and died and they brought me back. I really didn't believe that. I didn't believe that I would do that. Then there was the counter rumor that they had played too rough with me, I died and they brought me back. The counter rumor seemed more likely true. It was common practice to cover the death of a prisoner, someone in interrogation, someone being tortured, or someone being used by the medical division, to cover the death with a suicide story."

"That's a highly likely explanation." Dr. Haugen flipped her papers to move on.

"Oh," said Natalie. "There was another incident. This was many years ago. I was 14 years old. I was in training, and they defrosted this one." She jiggled Bucky's cybernetic arm. "They defrosted him to instruct me in some special skills he was expert in, close quarters combat grappling, a technique known today is Systema and the silent kill. Things like that. This was before the Winter Soldier program, before the bionic arm." She jiggled Bucky's arm again. "He was known only as Soldier. He did not know his name. He had complete amnesia for anything before that moment and believe me they wanted to keep it that way." She turned to Bucky. "I couldn't help loving him." She looked back at Bucky her eyes moistened. They embraced. She held him in the embrace. "We were forced to try an escape. Quite by accident he was shot twice in the chest. I watched him die."

"Yet, here he is."

"When the medical helicopter arrived the team put him on a ventilator, and a machine that did cardiac compressions. He was dead. I saw their assessment. His pupils were dilated. He was not breathing, he had no heartbeat. But the commander ordered everything to be done. That's the last I saw. I was taken away."

"I see, that would explain the test results. Thank you. I can see everyone is emotional over this tragic story. We can break."

"No, I'm fine."

"Let's go on."

"Any questions so far?"

"If concussive brain injury can only be diagnosed on autopsy. Why are you sure he has that also?" Dr. Banner asked.
"The extent of injury dictates such a high probability for me to be sure. Some, or all of what you're calling PTSD symptoms may be caused by CBI."

"Wait, you're saying . . . but concussive brain injury is chronic. It gets worse over time. Those people. Those poor people go mad. PTSD gets better over time even cured, I . . . "

"Yes, but in your favor again. Your treatment for PTSD has been working? Correct?"

"Why yes it has."

"There's no way to know for sure. This is an unknown. It takes courage to face the unknown. More questions? If not, we move on. Well then. How does one get out of a predicament like you're in? Well, it's already happening. Your brain has made a nice job of making fine connections around the injuries creating the neuroplasticity that is so desirable. This process is extensive throughout your brain, another stroke of luck in your favor. I'm leaning towards a hypothesis that even though in stasis your time in cryo-freeze rested your brain in some way, but that's another five years of research. Then I come to your big break. The ILLUMINE in your blood, in your body, has been activated."

Tony jumped to his feet, "I have to call Dandalo." Tony discreetly set a message to Dandalo.

"The ILLUMINE has been activated by your own physiology and has been active to some extent for some time. The ILLUMINE has permeated the cell membrane and is being used in the powerhouse of the cell. Should I be more technical?"

"Please don't," Steve said.

"And here is the most astonishing – when the ILLUMINE is used by the cell as energy this process produces a by-product. The waste material is excreted by the cell, combines with metal ions abundantly found in the body to make more ILLUMINE. This re-uptake feedback loop will provide an unlimited power source, an unending fuel source, for the cell."

"Fuel for the cell to do what?" Natalie asked.

"To do what the chromosomes command. Repair, repair, repair. This process is repairing your damaged neurons right now. I know what I just said is impossible, this is all impossible, but nevertheless, neurogenesis is happening right now in your brain." She tapped her hand on the desk in cadence with the last seven words.

"Is this why he doesn't scar?"

"Yes, Nat, excellent deduction."

"This process, this reuptake of the ILLUMINE can go on indefinitely?" Tony said.

"Yes."

"Do you realize what that sounds like?"

"What's that sound like? What's that sound like?" Steve said.

"Are you saying immortality?" Banner suggested.

"I'm trying not to," Trine turned to Barnes. "If you are damaged enough to need stitches. How long before the scar is completely gone?"
"About three months."

"And that was before – " Dr. Haugen waved her arms around the room. "What you did last night with the computer interface accelerated the process. I don't know how much at this point. We could retest in one week and see. But immortality? If he were decapitated, he would die. If eviscerated - he'd die – dismembered - he'd die - cut an artery without any support - he'd die – any extravagant damage - he'd die - but given enough time to repair – immortality?"

"Natalie has ILLUMINE in her blood. The fetus . . . double!" Bruce exclaimed.

"My first thought on that subject is the ILLUMINE is sexually transmitted . . . Now, of course that's just a starting point . . . Okay. People. Let's focus. Let's look at one another. We are the team. We, here in this room, and Dandalo. We are IT. We will sit here at Solaris, in this paradise, until we get an understanding of this remarkable discovery. I know the wild thoughts you are having right now. I had them for sixteen hours in your lab. Let's keep our heads. I don't have to tell you how top-secret this is until we have all the facts and a clear path to move forward. We may be thinking that we are not the best ones to do this. We may think we are not smart enough, strong enough or moral enough. We are. We have to be. We are the brains, right here, right now, that have been given this monumental task. We will rise to the occasion. Are we together?"

Bucky poured the shot glasses full. The team agreed on one subject; they downed the shot of vodka.

"I am unable to form any more coherent sentences. I must sleep. I know I've given you all a lot to digest." Dr. Trine Haugen said. "One last thing. James, I need a semen sample. Now."

"Are you kidding me? I have never been this tense in my life."

"Here is the collection condom and container. Now, use all your amazing powers. You have a mechanical arm, for Christ sake's, so fill it up." The doctor slapped the container into Bucky's human hand.

"I would never use my . . . " Buck protested.

"And James?" Trine interrupted him. "As part of my assessment I would like to follow you all day tomorrow on your normal routine. You do have a normal routine around here, don't you?"

"Yes! We do. We certainly do. We'd love to have you join us." Steve smiled big and literally batted his eyes.

"Well then. Can someone please show me to my room?"

"I am your man." Steve stood tall.

"James, when you're done, take the container to the lab for analysis."

Dr. Trine Haugen picked up the Vikingfjord bottle and left the room with Steve. Tony, Banner, Natalie and Buck stared at the empty shot glasses and the shot glass rings all over Tony's exquisite table.

Natalie's gaze wandered to Buck. The hologram had activated on his cybernetic arm his face looked less distressed. She waved her hands up and down his countenance without touching him.

"Look at you. You're not desirable enough as you are, as is – you have to add sexually transmitted immortality?"
"Yeah, dude." Banner cozied up to Buck playfully. "Wanna stop by the lab and look at my etchings?"

"You can't be joking about this."

"Come here, handsome." Tony teased.

"That's enough." Buck snapped his bow tie around his neck and stood behind the bar. "Come up – bar's open."

Natalie, Tony and Banner milled around, sat at the bar and had a few. Bucky, not drinking, stood behind the bar. His mind wandered. He stared off into space.

"Bucky?"

"I know you're joking but it's just not true. It can't be true. I'm gonna die. I can't live. I have to die. I have to die a horrific death. I'm going to die a gruesome, violent, painful death. That's the one sure thing I've always known."

Tony jumped on that. "It's just speculation, man."

Natalie did not like the way Buck sounded. She did not like the way he looked. She did not like his tone of voice. She did not like what he said. She walked behind the bar for a closer look.

"We're going home now."

Down the hall Natalie touched Bucky's cybernetic arm and noticed the arm was metal again.

"Oh no, not again." Buck tried so hard to control his emotions.

Natalie muscled his human arm. She stopped him dead in his tracks. She held him by the shoulders. She shook him.

"I'm going to fix this. Look at me. I will fix this. Come on."

Bucky entered their room first. She slammed the door.

"Take off your clothes."

"Now?" Buck was shocked.

"Talking will not get you out of the headspace you're in." She had seen this before on the plane from Wakanda. Conventional methods did not work then. She had not been able to reach him. She would have to get drastic.

"But, I - "

"The time for talking is past. Take off all your clothes. NOW."

Buck did not hesitate. He was given a direct order. He complied and took off all his clothing. He sighed with relief, not the relief of been nude, even though, somehow that did make him feel better. This was more the relief of not having to think for himself. The relief of following orders.

"Sit in your chair."

Again, Buck did what he was told.
"Put your arms down the back of the chair."

He did. Natalie tied his arms above the elbows with a silk rope. She worked toward his shoulders, circling the rope again and again and again and she pulled the rope tight, forcing his chest to expand and his back to bow. She did the same with his arms below the elbow. She circled the rope many times. She did the same with the wrists. She worked quickly. She worked expertly. She tied his arms to the back of the chair. His cybernetic arm looked human already.

"Ha." She said. She circled his chest with the rope starting at his nipple and worked up over his pecs. She circled around many times and pulled tighter with each circle. He watched her. His breathing deepened as the muscles of his chest pushed against the rope.

"Ah . . . " he sighed.

She slid her hands between his thighs.

She spread his legs.

"Ahhh um . . . " he moaned.

She tied his thighs to the chair, above the knees and circled them with the rope. He moaned again. A second later he moaned a third time. She taped his calves above the ankles to the chair leg with duct tape. He watched her rip off a short piece of tape. She placed the tape over his eyes.

"Oh . . . " he said. He flexed his muscles against the restraints and growled softly. He forgot everything. He made a soft noise from the back of his throat. His breathing quickened with anticipation.

She let him sit like that for a long time. He heard the bathwater rush out of the faucet and hit the tub full force. The room telephone rang.


He inhaled her scent. The air rushed around her activity. He tensed up. She ran something sharp slowly over his thighs above the rope. All his muscles contracted. He could not help but cry out. He knew he would feel blood running down his legs but he never did. She touched him with the sharp ice many more times.

She straddled over him. She touched his face, his neck, his lips, his mouth. She opened his mouth with her hands. But did not give him any satisfaction. She touched his tongue. He involuntarily moved his mouth and tongue with a jerk.

"Oh, oh," he repeated many times.

She untied the knot of hair she so carefully fixed on the back of his head. She ran both hands over his temples, into his hair. She shook his hair out free. She didn't let go. She controlled his head by the wad of hair she gripped. She pulled his head back by his hair. She did nothing for a few minutes. His mouth remained open. His mouth searched the air like a bird. His mouth reached at the air. He searched with his tongue. He breathed in and out through his mouth. She touched his jaw and held his head. She touched his lips and tongue, but she did not kiss him. He contracted his muscles and pulled at the ropes to test their limits. He pushed his chest muscles into the restraint with his breath. With each breath he pushed the ropes and sighed. She held his head by his hair and lowered herself onto his lap but only for a moment. She brought her love to him like that many times and took it
away many times – give – take away – give – take away. She took her time.

She was the sea, he was the shore and she washed over him. It was sublime. He reached such a heightened state of arousal he became ecstatic. He moaned nonstop. He trembled. She saw tears escape the duct tape over his eyes. His muscles were so taut, so tightly stretched; his penis, so engorged with blood, it looked like it could split open. It looked beautiful like that. He looked beautiful tied like that. She knew she was home. He panted for air. He could not control his verbal serenade. She could have held him in that state indefinitely. She was tempted to do just that but his human hand was blue. She had tied him too tight. Out of practice, she thought. She untied him and nature took it's course.

45 seconds. In 45 seconds she ran the full specimen container to the lab and returned to her lover. He was laid out. He was softened. He was pliable. She filled his mind. She filled the world. They did what lovers do.

"You're better than Tranquility," he whispered in her ear. They took their time satisfying their passions.

"Why did you turn on the water like that?"

Inches from his face she smiled, "to cover your screams."

"You little devil."

And so this went on for hours until the clock struck midnight. They packed up and headed to the BARF machine.

On their way they knocked at Steve's door – no answer – they knocked louder– no answer.

"Jarvis, locate Steve Rogers."

"Steve Rogers resides in the room assigned to Dr. Trine Haugen room number 12."

"Seriously? A year of beach bunnies and now he's a womanizer?" Bucky threw his hand in the air.

"He's hardly a womanizer."

"I thought he was in love with Xhosa?"

"Didn't you see the way they looked at each other when they met?"

"Yeah, I thought he looked pretty stupid there for a minute." He did notice.

She put her hands under his arms and slid them up his back. She peered into his sweet face. "It happened to us like that." Her voice rumbled with emotion.

He encircled her with his arms. He held her head against his chest so she could not see his face. He squeezed his eyes shut tight. At last, he remembered. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her eye lids, her forehead and all around her face. "It's happening to me like that right now." He kissed her passionately on the lips.

Banner warmed up the BARF machine as soon as they rounded the corner. They went right to sleep. Around 3 AM Banner jolted awake to the sound of Bucky who yelled out. Banner rushed in to find him sitting on the gurney covered in perspiration. He was still asleep but Natalie was waking beside him.

"What? I, I was dreaming," he wiped the sweat from his face.

"Can you recall the dream? The machine recognized one minute of a blur."

Natalie was awake and eager to hear. Buck's breathing slowed. He looked puzzled.

"I was in the bay of a large spacecraft, not Dandalo's. The bay door was open to this vast black space. I was weightless. I floated. I looked out the bay door at the expanse. I felt a snap and a crack appeared on the shoulder of my cybernetic arm. I tried to stop the crack but it spread. I yelled out but the crack got bigger and I yelled louder and louder and the arm cracked off. My arm broke off. It floated away from me. I heard another snap and a crack appear on the shoulder of my human arm. I yelled out. I woke up. It was so real. I could draw every detail of that ship." Buck checked his cybernetic arm for cracks.

"You guys can get your things and go sleep in your own bed. You are cured. Well, of this part – your dream treatment, at least. That was a normal, human, regular old nightmare. Very interesting but unrelated to PTSD or your past. You have graduated, my man, your dreams are your own. I've been waiting for this day. What else you have to go through now is not from your dreams. You can go. I've got to power down."

Natalie and Bucky thanked Bruce 1 million times, hugged and kissed him and went home.

For the morning run on the beach it was found that Trine was not the caliber of athlete Xhosa was but she did biathlon. She cross country skied, downhill skied, ice skated and was a vicious ice hockey player.

The day was overcast, damp and cold. It was obvious Steve and Trine were twitterpated. They were sickening.

Buck and Steve pulled ahead of the girls.
"You were in her room all night?" Bucky said.

"Yeah, I called to tell you." Steve looked guilty.

"You cheated on Xhosa? You said you were in love with her."

"Buck, you've gotta come on board the modern world, man. Xhosa is married, separated, yes, but we had no agreement."

"Well, I've got news for you. Bruce released me from BARF. So, I won't be staying sick just to keep you in medical professionals to sleep with." He slowed his pace to join the girls.

"Bucky, come back." Steve yelled and Buck sped up.

"That's great news. Congratulations, but um, what do you think of her? What do you think of Trine?"

"What do you think I think of her? She's my Neurologist, she scares the Holy sh - "

"Come on, man. What do you think of HER, the person?"

"She's a – she's like the wild Arabian ponies we saw in Ben Hur."

"Yeah," Steve would not have thought of her like that, but it was an accurate description.
"Ever play ice hockey?"

"No, but Natalie does."

Natalie caught up with Buck and Steve. "Banner just texted me our tests are ready to be discussed. He said no hurry. We can finish."

"No way. Let's go now."

Danado arrived at Solaris with two scientist friends in tow. Two experts in the study of the mysterious element found in the blood of James Barnes. The element they named ILLUMINE. Both scientists were Androgyns like Dandalo from the planet Torn.

Thabre, was a cousin of Dandalo's. A molecular biologist. Thabre's expertise lay in the area of WMD's, all radiological weapons, cobalt bombs, neutron bombs, subatomic weapons, sonic bombs, fusion and nuclear and of course chemical and biological weapons. Thabre got on board the ILLUMINE bandwagon as a consultant investigating ILLUMINE's possible use as a weapon.

The third member of the delegation was Blixa a close friend of Thabres, a geneticist, embryologist, neonatologist: a highly regarded field. Reproduction on Torn was a complex endeavor. Blixa also consulted on the ILLUMINE enigma.

Dandalo, Thabre and Blixa considered their interest in ILLUMINE similar to a hobby that bordered on obsession. Dandalo, Captain of a large science space craft, answered directly to the government of Torn, refrained from sharing Tony's news of the activation of the ILLUMINE. Instead Dandalo chose to ask for and was granted a personal leave of absence. Blixa and Thabre had done the same with their respective medical and military superiors. Tony was heartened to learn no one in the galaxy wanted to turn over such information to their governments without first letting scientists discover the true nature and magnitude of the mysterious element, ILLUMINE.

Tony was fascinated with the new arrivals. Thabre and Blixa had many characteristics similar to Dandalo. Same androgyny same small muscular humanoid body with feline grace. You could study them for 50 years and not decide if they were male or female.

Thabre was a good half foot taller than Dandalo with cedar colored, tentacled, chin length hair and caramel toned skin color. The eyes were blue, many shades of blue travel across those eyes. When emotion was on the creature, as it frequently was, the eyes exploded with greens and silver.

Blixa was attractive like a shiny diamond in a sea of pebbles. One of the smallest of the Torn race, Blixa was delicate, with honey colored shoulder length hair the consistency of corn silk that seemed to wave around even in the slightest breeze. A rich wheat colored skin and the most striking large golden eyes. Bright yellow sparks shot across the iris, like solar flares. They both had the same round face, broad mouth, and the same sharp little teeth. They wore similarly styled clothes, nature colors with fabrics patterned of flora. Blixa wore many shades of yellow that lit up the room. They were fascinating organisms.

The attractiveness of these beings cannot be overstated. All Androgyns from Torn possessed a powerful sexuality. Tony learned of this firsthand from Dandalo. Their ability to seduce was unmatched in the known Milky Way. They secreted a number of fragrances from their pores that acted like pheromones to some species, as catnap to others or just a pleasant attractive scent. This bait had been known to be so strong, the scent could intoxicate like alcohol to the point of making their intended giddy, uncoordinated, and even stagger and fall. Their scent may draw one near, but their
eyes hypnotized. The color change in their large cornea created a kaleidoscope of patterned movement that amazed then dazzled the viewer and drew them into the patterns. The closer one got the stronger the fragrances. The Androgyns possessed empathetic skills to some degree, some extremely so. They adjusted their emotional responses to their intended's perceived attraction to masculine/feminine traits to such an extent the intended was unaware. This process was micropsychic. They were not above using all their considerable skills to seduce an enemy and kill them with their bared teeth in the throes of passion.

Tony called a soirée in the living room with the big fireplace. Steve had not been in this room since his first arrival at Solaris approaching two years ago. The fireplace raged, and the ocean beat out its song, just as before. Tony and Dandalo stood by a great table spread with assorted ethnic hors d'oeuvres, each dish label with the name of the food, and country of origin. Thabre and Blixa stood by the glass wall that looked over the sun and sea.

They were curious folk. Their behavior was friendly and open. Their large eyes shined and they had baby faced smiles. They were calm, relaxed, courteous and polite.

Steve read how vicious Dandalo's race could be in a fight. They fought on all fours. Their jaw expanded making their sharp-toothed bite deadly. They had the ability to excrete a venom, at will, that would paralyze their victims as they, effectively, chewed them up. Steve held this image in his mind as Tony introduced him to Thabre and Blixa. Their large luminous eyes show their emotions physically. As they studied Steve, little explosions of color crossed their corneas.

Thabre said to Dandalo. "A male?"

"Yes," Dandalo replied and explained further to Steve. "I have been all around the galaxy. I have seen many things. Thabre and Blixa have not been off our home planet. Tony was the first male they had ever seen. You're the second. They are scientist, they are extremely curious about male and female. Please pardon their overzealousness."

"No problem, they're charming."

Bucky entered alone. He wore a large smile, black warm up slacks and a blue long sleeved Under Armour shirt with a gold rim at the neck and wrist: the blue, the same blue color of his eyes. His shining hair, unrestrained, waved every which way. The setting sun hit him like a warm beacon. His skin glowed and he seemed to radiate warmth. His smile and clear blue eyes flashed in the sun. At this sight Thabre inhaled a huge amount of air and showed a bit too much tooth and too many colorful explosions danced around the large expressive eyes.

"Is that another male?" Thabre held Dandalo's arm. "Now, that is beautiful."

"I think the correct word for the male is handsome. Beautiful is for the female."

"That is beautiful and handsome," Thabre read Steve's reaction and added, "is that yours?"

Steve could not tell if Thabre wanted to have dinner with Bucky or to have Bucky for dinner. Steve stammered:

"What? That?" he pointed to Bucky, "Oh, yeah, you want to do mischief, and you want that? – Yeah - you have to go through me." Steve puffed his chest and blocked Thabre's view of Bucky.

"Well, well, well," Thabre backed down but moved to look around Steve and restored the sight line of Bucky. "I may not be speaking of pain, per se, but pleasure?"

"What? Oh, that, well, he can use all the pleasure he can get. But for that you'd have to go through
The Black Widow, so it's the same difference." Cap stood firm and added hands on hips to his puffed out chest.

"And there she is."

Blixa grabbed Thabre's arm, "look, a female."

"Is that a female?" Thabre said to Steve.

Dr. Bruce Banner walked in right behind her, "and another male?"

Dr. Trine Haugen entered, "and another female?"

"Now you're cooking," Cap answered sarcastically then added for intergalactic relationships. "Yes, Thabre, you are correct on all counts," Steve said politely.

Steve made a beeline to Trine. His eyes all warm and pathetic. Thabre made the same beeline to Bucky with the same mooning eyes.

"Before we have formal introductions, we have an announcement that can't wait . . . Nat?" The host, Tony Stark, said.

Natalie and Bucky stood side-by-side with their arms around each other.

"In about four months, four short months, Natalie and I will be the proud parents of a daughter."

"And a human baby," Thabre said, "how much good luck."

"You're carnivores, aren't you?" Steve learned the answer at dinner. The aliens were particularly fond of the pheasant. They ate bones and all.

After dinner the party moved to the cinema room. They played games, socialized and drank. As the evening wore down to a close the couples paired off. Steve and Trine sat at the game table and played around with the chess set. They did not play chess. They used the pieces more like bumper cars - they slid the pieces around the board and bumped into each other's pieces and laughed, picking bigger pieces each time. They talked in low voices, touched hands, and touched feet under the table.

Natalie and Bucky half laid on a sofa and played around with each other's limbs. Thabre sat at the other end of the sofa and was touched by a stray foot, or hand, or bit of conversation from the pair.

Tony and Dandalo sat at a table with five or six devices going. Did they work or play? No one could tell. They each operated all devices and communicated through them. Occasionally they made eye contact, vocalized some response and answered by manipulating a machine. This method of communication looked natural and well-established.

Banner and Blixa sat on the adjacent sofa, relaxed and tired, full of food and drink. Blixa made some observations.

"Can I assume all males in this room are exceptional to all other males on your planet?"

"I'd say that's fair. Tony Stark is peerless, well, maybe Elon Musk or Steve Jobs when he was alive, Bill Gates – maybe five others. Steve Rogers – maybe two or three others. I don't think there's another Bucky on this planet."

"And yourself?"
"Realistically? I'd say none. I am a singular entity on this planet."

"I realize a sample of four is small but there seems to be two distinct types, one type is tall with . . . "

Blixa made curved signs in the air with it's hands.

"Muscular?"

"Yes, muscular bumps."

"Oh, I see where this is going and the other male shorter and less muscled?"

"Yes, but are the brainiacs. I note the tall muscular male who is not a brainiac has the exceptional females. I am confused. What type is most desirable in your societies?"

"The tall muscled one without a doubt. The smaller male is forced to develop other body parts to make up for the fact that they are not physically the ideal."

"That makes perfect sense now," Blixa said playfully. "So for desirability, to rank – Bucky would be first, then Steve, then Tony, then you?"

"That's pretty much how I'd cut it. How about in your culture?"

"It's very clear with us. Let me try to translate the name for our sex. We are Androgyns. The one who possesses the closest to half masculine and half feminine traits is the most desirable. Dandalo is one. Very desirable by all and at the top professionally. This is the strongest person. If you lean feminine like myself, this is the next strongest. Leading masculine is the least desirable in our society and the further one leans masculine the worst things are for you."

"That is fascinating. Why is that?"

"Again, let me translate what masculine and feminine literally mean on Torn, masculine = ME, feminine = WE. As our race developed over the eons we, of course, thought we needed the ME as the different branches fought to possess the land and resources of our planet. As our population spread, we pushed out other species. Once Torn was fully populated by our race the ME became a destructive force that threaten to destroy our planet. The ME took it to the brink. Only then did our race begin to revere the WE. Now people like Dandalo are seen as having the best judgment, and they are the leaders. We value cooperation and nurturing over domination and submission, compromise over winning, nonviolence over armed conflict. We have become caretakers of our planet out of necessity. When domination, violence and the mentality of winning at any cost threatened the ecology of our planet."

"Fascinating," Banner watched as Blixa's eye color changed to match the emotion of the talk.

"The others seem preoccupied," Blixa held eye contact with Bruce.

Bruce sniffed the air deeply a few times. He tried to identify the scent. He could not. He followed the scent and leaned closer to Blixa who stared at Bruce and spoke.

"I am curious about your personal space. I would love to see inanimate objects around your room that you cherish. I would like very much to see your sexual organs unclothed and anything else of interest, family photos, artifacts and things like that."

"Blixa, your eyes . . . "

"Yes, I know."
"They're hypnotic."

"Shall we go?"

Blixa and Banner left the cinema room.

Steve and Trine liked the idea of leaving and stopped to talk to Natalie and Bucky on the way out. Thabre jumped at this opportunity and slid up close to Bucky to make room for Steve and Trine to sit. Obvious to all was Thabre's interest in Bucky. The creatures breathing quickened as it's body touched the side of Bucky's muscular and divinely shaped thigh.

"So, what's on the docket for tomorrow?"

"Work in the lab."

"Bucky, I do need to interview you. I see how things spin out of schedule here. So, first thing in the morning? Even before exercise?"

"Most definitely."

The party broke up. Bucky routinely avoided prolonged eye contact with people. He knew what his eyes looked like. No matter how good he felt - his eyes showed everything - all 75 years of it. Buck took a chance. He let Thabre have a look right there on the sofa. What Bucky got back astonished him. What he felt in Thabre's eyes: the acknowledgment, the acceptance, the understanding, the non-judgment, made him linger there. And he felt something more, things he could not readily identify but they were nice things, nice feelings. Bucky's face softened and he did not look away.

"We're going to bed now," Bucky said, "I'm looking forward to seeing you tomorrow." Once he made eye contact with Thabre he was reluctant to break off. Natalie guided Buck along.

"What a delightful being," she said.

When he opened the door to their therapeutic room, a gush of sea air rushed out and knocked the door out of his hand. The door hit the wall with a bang. Natalie ran in and grabbed the French doors as they blew wide open and flapped in the breeze. The smell of the sea air, the warmth of the room, the blue colors, relaxed any person immediately. Buck kicked off his shoes and slipped off his shirt. He stood by the fish tank and touched the glass. He talked to his fish. He fed them. He watered the plants, he talked to them and pruned them. Natalie knocked around the bathroom and they wound up on the bed.

Natalie never knew what kind of a night she would have with her lover but he fell asleep. She curled up beside him. She felt his heart pulse and his warm breath on the back of her neck. She held his human hand with both her hands. She held his hand next to her mouth. She kissed his fingertips and fell asleep. She fell asleep and dreamed. She dreamed of a house, a house with an upstairs, and a downstairs, a basement, and an attic - a still, warm house. A house with all the windows open. A house filled with the sounds of the evening crickets and frogs, the rustling of wind through corn stocks and the distant rumbling of road traffic. She stood in the doorway of a bedroom. The window was open in the room and the night breeze lifted the sheer curtain and it billowed and relaxed and billowed and relaxed again. A night light lit the room with a soft peach glow. On the bed snuggled three children in fresh sleepwear and crisp white sheets - their chubby faces flushed with their own dreams. He came from behind her, wrapped his arms around her and kissed her neck. She touched his hands and felt the calluses on his fingers.

"They look like angels now, don't they," he said. She turned to look into his warm inviting blue eyes.
And they gazed at their children, it seemed an eternity.

"Why are they all in the same bed?"

"They were playing and fell asleep."

"I'll carry them to their own beds."

"No," she said and she led him by the hand to the bed. She scooted the kids together and laid beside them. He followed her lead. They scrunched their three children between them and they stared into each other's eyes. Eternity passed.

She woke with a sharp inhalation of air. She could not imagine what came over her. She had never dreamed anything like that before. She never even allowed herself to think of anything like that. She had never been in a house like that house. She had never even seen a picture of that kind of house. Not anything even close. If she was honest with herself, from time to time, she had looked in the windows of other people's lives. On Sundays or on holidays she had walked or rode and looked. She had looked. She told herself she was happy for them, for their domestic bliss, and she was, she really was. But she knew it was simply not for her.

Darkness came into her mind as she thought of another house. This house she knew. This house was a small dark house. She thought of the house and she thought of the day her parents sold her to the KGB. She thought of the day they came to the ugly house and took her. She told herself she must not think of either of these houses.

She pulled Bucky's arm around her tight and ran his hand along her chest to her belly and held it there.

Buck and Trine met at the lab door.

"Do you want an advocate?"

"No, I don't think so." They entered a glassed in room inside the lab that held computers and communication devices if anyone needed to escape the noise of the lab. Tony, Banner, Dandalo, Blixa and Thabre worked in the lab and took no notice. Trine and Buck sat comfortably on yellow office chairs.

"Thank you for the timely and generous specimen. The ILLUMINE is present in massive amounts in your semen, in your sperm, actually."

Buck jumped from the chair. "Can this harm them?"

"Sit down please. You've had this in your blood since 1943. I see no harm in you."

"Will what you said last night, the feedback loop, will that happen in Natalie's body? And the babies?"

"Yes, yes it will."

"Okay, then. I have to except it?"

"It would be best if you could."

Buck sat in the chair. "Does everyone know?"
"Only the two of us. I have not charted yet."

"Thank you for some time," Buck touched his forehead. "Go ahead and chart. They all need to know as soon as possible. This will affect the work." He took a deep breath.

"That's thoughtful of you." Dr. Haugen pressed send and the news traveled to the team.

"They know everything about me anyway. They might as well know what's in my sperm." Buck held his hand over his eyes and sighed.

"Do you want a support person?"

"No, I figured that's how it was." But he noticed this was the second time she asked for a witness. Maybe she would feel more comfortable, he thought.

"I need a thorough list, an exhaustive list of all your sexual contacts since 1943 when you were given the ILLUMINE. I can find no record of anyone asking you about this subject, which is odd. The potential for abuse of prisoners is so great."

"I was trying to keep all this secret. Private. You know." Buck sighed. "But I can see that's not going to be practical now. I mean it's going to be impossible."

An alarm buzzed on Tony's private cell phone. He answered. Jarvis alerted him that Barnes had spoken one of the keyword searches Tony programmed to be notified of immediately and that word was 'secret'. With cell phone to his ear, Tony looked in to the glassed in room, at the Trine interview.

"Are you sure you don't want Natalie in here?"

"No way."

"Steve?"

"Absolutely not."

"Bruce?"

"No, no, no." Buck looked out at Tony looking in, "but . . . let's ask Tony to come in for this."

"Alright."

Buck had eye contact with Tony. He waved him in with his hand. Tony closed the door and stood by the door with his back up against the glass and his hands behind his back.

Dr. Trine Haugen commenced what had to feel like an interrogation. "In all the years you were a captive were you ever sexually abused or used?"

"Men coming on to me? Yes, God, yes. It was a constant battle some places, to fight off my attackers, and keep . . . as far as I know. It got so bad one place . . . This is one of my first clear memories after I escaped. I remember it in detail - they must've kept me off machines for some period of time because for a long period, I remembered. Because of this I think it was recent. I had my bionic arm. I was being held in a very isolated facility in Siberia. Not the one you were at Tony, another place. I was attacked like that daily. Sometimes multiple times in one day. When they started coming at me two or three at a time I got desperate. It was a desperate situation. They had treated me like an animal for so long they became like animals themselves. I knew how it was going to end. I knew if I was pushed I would fight to the death to protect that from happening to me, but I also I
knew if I was forced like that it would be the end of me. At that time where my head was at . . . It would just be the end, just too much – I was in such a position of submission. If I had to submit to that, I submitted to so . . . Anyway, I feared being used like that. I thought I'd try some crazy idea. I tried to make a deal with them, they seemed so interested in me – my body – my arm – my hair. I told them I would allow them to look me over, they seemed so curious about me, to touch me, hold me - Jesus God in heaven I'd rather walk out the back door and into the ocean then to continue this –

"It's a human story."

Buck foot shook. He regained himself and went on.

"Well, do whatever, but I didn't want to be penetrated or forced. I told them if anyone tried to force penetration on me the deal would be off and it would be back to the daily battles and . . . I would hurt them."

"These men are criminals. Why did you think they would keep a deal like that?"

"Criminals? These men were the security. The Russian military security. Russian military officers. Enlisted men had no access to my cell unless they were told to do something. I was a prisoner of war. I was not with criminals or regular prison population. In that one way they followed the Geneva Convention."

"I'm so sorry – I'm so naïve in many areas. Please forgive me and continue."

"Well, it worked, it worked like a charm. These men, Russian men we're so isolated so deprived just looking at me or watching me take off my shirt, they'd, uh, I don't want to sound crude - "

"They'd climax?"

"Yeah, that's the word for it alright. Thank you, climax over practically nothing. One man just stroked my hair. One man ran his hand over my chest and climaxed, " Buck illustrated this by rubbing his hand across his chest. "One man put his arm around me from behind and climaxed. Both fully dressed. They were lined up down the hall to see me."

"And it never went further than that?"

"Oh yes, it did. After about a month it took more to get them off. They would touch me, hold me or kiss me on various parts of my body."

"What did you get out of this relationship?"

"Well, I wasn't attacked. I was not penetrated – well, once. One man came to me and told me he was a homosexual, you know, gay. He said the other men didn't know this and he wanted to keep it that way. He was a tall man, a strong man and a tough fighter. That's all they should be concerned about, really. He said he belong to a secret society and what straight society knew about homosexuals was just the tip of a glacier sized iceberg below - in Hollywood - in politics - in business - all secret. He said he would teach me everything about it - everything. He said it was useful knowledge that only an insider knew and it may come in handy someday. May even save my life. He said he would let me in on secrets of sexual passion. He said he would tell me and he would show me and he wouldn't have to penetrate me to do it. So I consented. Now, this guy knew how to pleasure a man. Everything he did was to please me. I relaxed and let him. Half the stuff he showed me I would never have thought of. Almost all the stuff he taught me could be used with a woman. The oral stuff is easy to show a woman – how to extend sexual pleasure, easy to show a women. Then one day he
did anally penetrate me. Just slightly for one second and he stopped. He said it was an accident that he was carried away but he stopped himself. He asked me if he had hurt me. I said no. He asked me if it felt good. I was shocked. I was surprised but I didn't want him to know that. So I said yes it had felt good, and it had. He asked me to forgive him. He promised he it would never happen again.” Buck laughed. "Oh yeah, then he said I could avenge my honor and get even with him if I wanted." Buck laughed again. "He said that was a gay joke . . . " Barnes turned dark. "I shouldn't have told that. I'm wrong to speak like this. It's not appropriate. I shouldn't be telling any of this."

"That's not true. You should've told what happened to you a long ago. Please go on."

"Well, as you can see. I did have some good feelings about some of it. The youngest one, also a tough fighter, but very young, came to me. He stood there looking at his shoes. He stood for a very long time like that. Then I saw tears rolling down his face. I went to him. I kissed him like Russian men kiss each other. I hugged him like a relative. I held him like that awhile until his arms went around me. People just die inside without human touch."

"The position you were in . . . and you were thinking of others?" Trine said.

Buck shrugged that off. "I don't know that I was thinking. I wasn't thinking at all."

"Go on."

"He came back again and again. Well, that's all he ever seemed to want. Human touch. He would let himself into my cell, sleep with me, just hold each other, and sleep. That was nice. I never saw he was sexually aroused by any of that. I knew I wasn't. I felt like a therapist, I guess. After a time they were so appreciative they wanted to give me money. I'd laugh at that. But I'd say something like wouldn't it be nice if you came in here and I didn't smell like an animal living in a barn or would you like to see me clean-shaven or would you like to look at my body if it was fed food regularly."

"So, these things were given to you?"

"Yes, Dr. I debased myself. I sold sexual favors for a bath, a shave and some food." Bucky did not know if he would ever be able to look Tony in the eye again. "But I got a lot more out of it than food. Yeah, sure I was pleased. Yeah, sure I was used. I was used for sex. Granted. But it was human. I felt that kind of pleasure was human. So I didn't feel bad about it at the time. I think of that gay guy often. His name was Alyosha. I wish I could've thanked him. Oh, don't get me wrong. I know he used his position. I know he used to me, too. I was treated like an object, yes, but a human object. Not an animal. Not a machine. Not a thing. Not a possession, but a human. Believe me it was a huge step up. I think it saved my life. They quit their physical abuse of me. They stood up to the scientists. They protected me from the scientists. The men talked to me like I was a human being. They touched me sometimes with kindness, tenderness even. I would've taken that from anyone – anything – a dog to lick my face." Bucky looked at his cybernetic arm anticipating a change. In his peripheral vision he saw Tony's hands move to his face.

"And you wanted to keep this a secret? This is what you were hiding?" Tony said.

"God in heaven yes. Natalie knows but Steve would never understand this."

"We can take a break."

"You don't have to - "

Bucky brushed them off. "Just let me get it out. Just let me get it out of me. Jarvis can record it all and then I can be done with it."
"No, Jarvis is not gonna record this. These statements will be expunged from the record." Tony said.

"You'll see. It has to be this way. This has to be in the record. Let me finish. I don't know. I have to think this is what happens to prisoners, war or no war. These are the states of mind that overtake you. I don't think I'm a freak in that regard. It's a desperate situation for everyone. Imprisoning others, torturing, doing what they did to me . . . maybe was just as corrosive to their soul as it was to mine. I don't know. I just don't know."

"How did this arrangement end?"

"A man I didn't know came to me. He was a little intoxicated - a lot intoxicated. He tried to take me down, well, he did take me down. I had to stop him. My intention was to hold him until he was unconscious, then drag him out of the cell. I didn't hold him long enough to kill him. If there's one thing I know about, it's how to kill. In that area I know what I'm doing, no matter my state of mind, I know how to kill. So, I know I didn't hold him long enough to kill him. He must've been defective in some way. He died. He was dead. I had . . . I had killed him. So the thing I did all that to prevent happened anyway."

"What happened after that?"

"I have no memory after that. They must've done something to me."

"Now then, what you did. Did this include oral sex?"

"Yes."

"Anal sex? Did you penetrate them?"

"No."

"Did your sperm get into these men?"

"Yes, at first, yes - later I had more control. I was highly motivated to get control. I didn't want them to see me like that . . . " Barnes shrunk under the pressure of these questions.

"Did you know them?"

"Yes." Buck could no longer look at Trine.

"Do you know their names?"

"Yes."

"Can you make me a list."

"Yes."

Tony was captured. He was pulled into the swirling vortex of Bucky's emotions. Tony removed his hand from his mouth and placed his hand behind his back again. He shuffled from one foot to the other. His gaze never left Barnes but the way he saw him changed forever. He saw him differently. He saw him clearly for the first time. Tony heard Steve's words as clear as if Steve stood next to him and whispered in his ear. 'It wasn't him'. Tony relaxed. His shoulders fell away from his ears. The tension in his neck washed away. He was at peace, at peace for the first time in years.

"Should we break?"
"No, I know I was lucky. I consider myself lucky, really. I could've been drugged, and sodomized, or restrained, and sodomized daily, but when I was examined here, no evidence of that was found. No, let's go on." Buck continued to look down. He didn't know if he could ever hold his head up like a man again. Yet he felt a strange relief. Keeping secrets takes a lot of energy.

"Let's shift gears. Let's try this. We start at the present and work back, following the sperm." Trine said lightheartedly.

"Okay, follow the sperm." Bucky lightened up a bit, impressed with Trine's ability to make a joke at exactly the right moment.

"Your partner has been Natalie for the last . . . ?"

"One year three months."

"While in 1963?"

"None other than Natalie."

"What about Bucharest – you were there two years and free."

"I was there a few months and free. From DC I went to Canada then Greenland, Iceland, Finland, Poland, Slovenia, oh, um, Serbia, Turkey and then Romania. And every place I stayed I had women, yes."

"How many about?"

"Many. It seemed when I was locked up all I could think about was escape. As soon as I escaped all I could think about was getting a girl. Maybe the men stirred me up in some way. But I didn't want a man. I wanted a woman. I wanted a soft, sweet woman to hold me, to touch me. I wanted to be by the womb. Hell, I think I wanted to just crawl back in there. If I couldn't crawl back in, I wanted to feel the womb. I wanted to feel that sweet button of a cervix and I wanted to come there . . . sorry Doctor. But, that image was the only thing in my mind. I wanted to create something for the future. I wanted a sweet warm home. I wanted the soft hands and the big heart of a woman. I wanted a woman to accept me. I thought I could heal. I thought that would heal me. I wanted a relationship. I wanted a girl to stay with me. I was convinced if I had that I would be myself again. I wanted this badly. I was kind of mad about the subject.

"But, at that time I couldn't hold onto a conversation. I couldn't follow a train of thought. Getting a girl to look at me – easy. Getting a girl to talk to me – easy. Getting a girl to sleep with me – easy. Getting a girl to stay – impossible. If by some miracle they were able to get by the arm . . . I'd say prosthesis. They'd understand that but my arm didn't look like or move like any fake arm they had ever seen. Even so, if I could get past that. If they stayed after one night of violet nightmares thinking maybe I just had a bad night. But, every night was a bad night, and that would be the end of that and I'd try again.

"I would've done anything to keep a girl. One girl tied my arm to the bed frame it. I broke out. Another took me into her home and said her father would control me. I knocked him out cold without any memory of doing it. They asked me to leave. Another girl had an uncle who was a doctor, of course, he wanted to know my name, what war I was in and where I had been a prisoner.

"From Canada on I made detailed writings of all I did, thought, felt, dreamed, remembered, every girl I had. I wrote everything about them, their names, where they lived, descriptions, how we met, where we met, everything they said, what we did together, everything."
"How many girls are we talking about?"

"Well, I . . . 50-60 . . . maybe more over the two years." Out of the corner of Bucky's eye he saw Tony's reaction and he glanced at him, shrugged and said. "I was highly motivated."

"Any men during this time?"

That question sobered up Bucky's face in a flash. He squeezed his forehead with his human hand. "Well, I was propositioned many times. I don't know why I was approached like that but I said no. It felt wrong to say no. I felt like I should've done what these men wanted me to do." Out of Bucky's peripheral vision he saw Tony tense up, shake his head no, and make fists with his hands. Buck continued. "I don't know why I felt like that. I . . . I don't have that all figured out yet . . . but the answer is . . . no men."

"And these girls? You had vaginal intercourse with ejaculation, correct?"

"Most definitely."

"Did you use condoms?"

"That would have been contrary to my driving purpose."

"You mean you intended to impregnate these girls?"

"I dreamed of nothing else, night and day. If that happened someone would stay . . . with me. They would have to . . . Was that wrong too?" Bucky held his head in his hands. "It seemed the right thing to do at the time. That was all I had to give."

"Where did you do all this writing?"

"In composition notebooks."

"And where are these composition notebooks?"

"In my backpack."

"And where is your backpack?"

Bucky turned to look at Tony.

"I didn't know of a backpack. This subject is not in your records."

"The backpack was taken from me in Berlin. Steve was probably the last person to see it."

Tony opened the door of the glassed in room and called to a personal robot to find Steve Rogers and bring him into the interview.

"What else was in the backpack?" Tony asked.

"Maybe a dozen notebooks. Assorted sticky grenades, and other weapons. Money - Euros - a forged passport. A clean shirt."

"You wrote your dreams?"

"Yes, I did."
"And your dreams were of . . . ?"

"It was like a compulsion, Tony. I didn't know what was real or what they wanted me to think was real. What I had done or not done. What they had implanted in me or not so I wrote everything."

"You do realize that notebook is a confessional."

"I wanted to confess. I was guilty! Hell, I thought I was guilty of everything. Everything I've heard about. Everything I read. I was flooded with images. They seemed to quiet down once on paper. I wanted to know what was real. What I had done. Who I was. I thought I could figure it out. If it was on paper. Maybe I could see a pattern or something. Maybe it all would become clear. Basically, I just did not care. I didn't think I would live through the next day. I could've been captured any moment. I was running on instinct."

"Did you write in English?"

"I coded them Tony."

"Huh?" Tony was shocked.

"I had a lot of time. I coded them and used five languages. It was nothing they couldn't break but I made it so they would have to decode it by hand. I made it so it would be a pain in the ass to do."

"Ah ha, Steve great, we need to retrieve Bucky's backpack as soon as possible. Where's the backpack?"

"Last I saw it was on his back. The backpack wasn't with our stuff. We have a receipt for our things. It wasn't on that list."

"Your buddy kept the diary." Tony crossed his arms.

"In the backpack?" Steve's eyes got big.

Tony nodded affirmative.

"Did you write about the inner workings of HYDRA or U.S.S.R.?"

"Yes, most definitely – whatever I remembered I wrote – tons of stuff."

"Oh, brother."

"Let's get all brains in on this. Call Natalie. How do we retrieve this backpack?"

Tony shut down the lab temporarily and the team moved into a bigger space.

"We go get it. We know where it is." Steve said.

"You know where it was." Natalie said.

"How do we break into a maximum security detention center?" Banner added.

"They are designed to not break out of."

"We can do a search. We could do a search electronically. Jarvis?"

"Initiated."
"A quiet search."

"Understood."

"You could get yourselves arrested." Trine obviously watched movies in her spare time.

"Then how do we get out?" Buck played along.

"You broke out before, James."

"We're all too recognizable." Cap reasoned.

"We could do like the movies. Disguise ourselves as janitors, or repair men and go in like that." Buck smiled at Trine.

"You have a time machine." Dandalo reminded everyone.

"Yeah, we could go back and get it from Bucky. Before he's arrested." Banner said.

"Oh, I'd think twice about that. I wouldn't want to put anyone in that kind of jeopardy. Bucky's state of mind at that time – that's something I'd not want to deal with - I would not want to try to take that backpack away from him." Steve said.

"You were in his apartment? You know where it was stored?" Trine asked.

"We'll just go when he's out." Banner said.

"I'd rather be caught stealing by the German police than to be caught by Bucky. Keep thinking."

"I threw the bag out the window."

"All we need is someone there to catch it."

"Would that affect your escape?" Tony said.

"We didn't escape we were caught." Cap enlightened.

"I did use a sticky grenade out of the backpack."

Cap thought about that for a moment. "I don't think that affected the outcome."

"That sticky grenade stoped Black Panther from killing me. It gets tricky really fast. Doesn't it?"

"Is the Time Machine that accurate to the minute – Dandalo? Tony?" Hulk said.

"The accuracy decreases proportionate to the length of time. When was this?" Dandalo said.

"Around two years ago," Tony said.

"That's nothing. I can run some figures but off the top of my head I'd say, plus or minus, 3 or 4 minutes."

"That would work. Would something like this be against the 44 Rules of Time Travel?"

"Again, I could run it by professionals but I would say this expedition, considering its significance, would qualify under the 'acute need for the greater good cause'."
"Well, somebody go. Can I have it today?" Doctor Trine Haugen said with some naiveté.

"This isn't UPS," Tony quipped.

"No, they deliver," Buck said.

"Who's going?" Banner said.

"Well, Barnes and Rogers are already there." Dandalo said.

"I would love to go get Bucky's possession for him," Thabre eyed Barnes.

"You're a noncombatant. That's out of the question." Tony barked.

"I would not rule out Thabre's skills," Dandalo said.

"No offense but the Romanian army, the Bucharest SWAT team, and special forces were coming down on that apartment."

"Don't forget Black Panther," Bucky smiled.

"Yeah, and Back Panther. If anyone goes I'm the one most qualified to go get Bucky's backpack. I was there. I saw it. I know where he hid it. I'm going."

"You can't go Steve. They told you that. I'm the one to go get Bucky's backpack. No one is after me. If anything goes wrong I can get out of any mess," Natalie said emphatically.

"You're not taking any risk like that. I'll go, that simple," Hulk said.

Buck placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled loud and shrill. "Stop the press. I appreciate all your generous offers, but if anyone travels back in time to get my backpack it will be me. What risk is there anyway? So I run into myself for a few minutes."

"Allow me a moment to explain. If you did go, Bucky, and you did confront yourself at your apartment, or on the street, or on the rooftop, one of you would cease to exist." Dandalo made direct eye contact with Bucky. "If you - no Bucky would come back to us and no backpack. If the other, you would come back with the backpack and the other timeline would extinguish. All that happened to you from then till now would not have happened. I think something major - something remarkable happened - your miracle pregnancy."

"I can't go." Buck looked at Natalie.

"I could retrieve the bag with my ship in the same manner we collect samples. Then no one goes," Dandalo offered.

"You're on leave," Tony said.

"I have friends."

"I don't know - " Tony's tablet signaled, "here comes the Jarvis inquiry." Tony read, "Oh, the Germans couldn't break your code." Buck looked as astonished as Tony. "So, since Barnes is a U.S. citizen they sent the backpack, minus all the sticky grenades, to the CIA. Well, what do you know – they couldn't break your code either – no, no, they could. They saw it would be hard. Many man hours. So they kicked it down the road to the FBI where it has been for the last six months. What a break."
Tony turned to Trine. "Give me 72 hours. I know some people. If I can't get anywhere we'll plan the heist – much easier here – should be fun. Barnes, we may use your janitor idea, yet."

The team milled around the area. Some members wandered off into the lab and returned to their work.

Buck joined Natalie at the door. He cozied up to her. After all that talk his body ached for her. He touched her back to draw her near.

"50-60! 50-60. Really?" Natalie crossed her arms over her chest and blocked his advance. He did not stop the seduction. He raised his cybernetic arm in the air and rested it on the door frame above her head. He did not try to touch her again but he leaned over her. His eyes twinkled and he grinned like a fox. His cheek brushed her cheek. He allowed his hot breath to fall on her neck and he whispered in her ear.

"Even that . . . even all that . . . did not prepare me for you." He opened his mouth as if to take a nibble of her ear, but he spread his lips and laid them on her temple. She dropped her arms to her side and reached for him.

"Ah hum," Trine spoke. The lovers separated themselves from each other.

"Can you stay James? I'm not done. Steve and Natalie can you stay also? The rest can return to work."

The three sat down and Trine closed the door.

"I have some test results to review with you. James, you have had a significant spike in your IQ score. You were tested on arrival at Solaris, around two years ago, and a few days ago. I want to make this perfectly clear, this spike does not in anyway promise, predict or cause emotional stability. What were you after when you interfaced with the computer?"

"More I wanted more – more strength – more power – more stamina – more knowledge, and yes more intelligence."

"For what purpose? What goal? Did you think it would help your emotional . . . "

"My mental disability? You can say it. I know I have it. You're right, I did think I could get more control over this, this . . . wild ride I've been on." Buck motioned around his head with both hands. "To be more stable in my brain . . . yes. Most definitely."

"What is your brain telling you about yourself?"

"Oh man, really? What's it saying right now?"

"Yes. Say with the brain is telling you."

"Oh, mainly that I'm going to be captured again. That's a constant. That's always there."

"What else?"

"Oh, it's no use. All this is no use. I can't be helped. I'm too far gone. I'm too broken, too damaged. That I have been ruined. All I'm good for now, is to be an object for someone else to use and abuse. I'm wasting everyone's time. You don't deserve kindness. Your arm's a weapon. How do you think
you could ever hold a child." Buck said loudly. "You'll kill again. Everyone knows that." Buck talked faster and louder. "You're wrong. Every cell in your body is wrong. That ILLUMINE makes you a FREAK! You can't be trusted." He yelled. "You should be punished. You should be locked up. You're bad. You're a killer. You're a killer. You're a monster. Your a mons -"

"STOP!"

Bucky did stop and he shut his eyes. He opened his eyes and glanced at Natalie to see her reaction. He was as shocked as anyone to hear what came out of his mouth. He had not intended to be so graphic, but all that mess played in his brain, played, and started over again. He tried to ignore it, but sometimes it was so loud it dominated reality.

"What if I told you, James, you have brain damage. Your brain is a real mess and your brain will always do just what it's doing right now?"

"I'd believe you. I know that's the truth."

"Now, what if I told you that you are not your brain."

"What?"

"You are not your brain that is true. You are much more than any one organ in your body. You are not your brain. Your mind chooses and decide about the messages you receive from the brain. Are the messages you are receiving from the brain true?"

Natalie jumped into the conversation, "none of that is true."

Steve added his two cents. "None of what he said is true. Not one thing."

"Do you think what your brain is telling you is true?"

"I think it's true. Maybe it's not true. Honestly, I don't know."

"There is an easy way to tell. Are these messages in line with your goals and values in your life? You do have goals?"

"Okay, it's really basic. I don't want to kill anyone again. I want Natalie's life to be better because I'm in her life. I want to raise our daughter with her and do a good job. Steve has always needed me his whole life – forget that look on your face, Steve, you know it's true- I want to be a good friend to him. I know I can't make up to Tony the harm I've done to him but I'm determined to spend my life trying. When we first came back he mentioned some trouble – maybe there something I can do to help him."

"Those are clearly defined. Now, are any of the litany of things your brain is saying to you, of productive value in reaching your goals?"

"How do I judge? My judgment seems subpar."

"It takes no judgment. Just logic. Will any of the things your brain said to you logically lead you to your goals?"

"Not one damn thing."

"Well, there you have it. Then these messages are defective and your mind must decide to accept a defective message or reject it. The brain is extremely powerful. Like a machine in many ways. The
brain can easily overpower the mind, and the circuits can run automatically. Like your messages sounded like a recording."

"Yes! That's it. It plays like a recorded message."

"The mind decides your goals and what you value. The mind decides what messages are useful and productive. What messages are defective and must be ignored. Dr. Banner can be a sounding board for this type of therapy."

Buck downloaded all therapies and particularly liked the idea of a therapy called Positive Disintegration. This therapy was created by a survivor of medical experiments and medical torture by the Nazis in World War II. He particularly liked the auto education and auto psychotherapy aspects of this therapy. The exercise Trine spoke of seemed to fit right in.

Bucky and Natalie took a break in their room before everyone met for dinner. The inlet was peaceful this time of day with a swish sound of cool clear water, an occasional bird call, and the warm breeze that blew through the open French doors from the balcony.

Buck kicked off his shoes and took off his shirt, which was his habit upon entering the therapeutic room Tony made for him. Natalie stripped in record time. She changed into her silky shorts and crop top PJs. They laid on the bed, emotionally exhausted. He untied her hair and spread it's beauty out on the pillow. He ran his hand through it's silkiness. He held her small slinky body next to his bare chest and they fell asleep for an hour or so.

They were awakened by a knock at the door. Dr. Trine Haugen stood in the doorway and glanced down the hall each way.

"Can I talk to you a minute. Person to person. Off the record?"

"Come in." Not knowing why, Buck looked down the hall each way, also. "There's no cameras or recording devices in this room."

Buck and Natalie sat against the headboard propped up with pillows. Trine sat at the foot of the bed. Buck held a pillow over his chest, suddenly shy.

"I'm embarrassed to ask you but I'm desperate. I don't even know how to start. I know I come off as a know it all, and I do know it all about some subjects, but other subjects I am, so deficient, so naïve. When you spoke of your experiences with Alicia I think you said his name."

"Aloysha?" Buck corrected her.

"When you spoke of your experiences with Aloysha . . . I . . . You know, and all he taught you . . . I . . . I need you to teach me."

"What? Why?" Bucky and Natalie could not have been more shocked.

"I have very little experience with these matters. I want to pleasure Steve like that. I want to please him."

"Oh, I'm sure you please him just as you are," Bucky said.

"But I feel so inadequate. I am a scientist. I want to know all there is to know about a subject. About this subject."
"You'll learn naturally."

"I want to know now. You said he taught you things you would've never thought of on your own. I want to do things like that to him now. Tonight."

"I'm known around here for my poor judgment, but I can tell you right here and now, there is no way I could teach you. NO WAY."

"Can't you make a video?"

"No. It has to be hands-on."

Trine's mouth turned down. She was dejected. She stared at her hands and pouted. Bucky looked at Natalie and they communicated with eyes only. Natalie nodded affirmative.

"But . . . there may be a way," he said and Trine brightened.

"Natalie is an expert in all of Aloysha's tricks and techniques and much, much, much more. She's like ten Aloyshas. She would be happy to instruct you."

"Really? But there's no penis?" Trine whinned.

"Well, you girls will have to make do. Steve's in love with you Trine. You can't touch my penis. And that doesn't begin to address how unethical —"

"But . . ."

"You cannot touch my penis." Bucky glanced at Natalie for support.

"What if —"

"You CANNOT touch my penis."

"The penis is not essential, Trine, I mean for this . . . if you have an open mind," Natalie suggested.

"I do, I do, I do."

"We'll see."

"Now, how about this. I'll find Steve and Steve and I will take a run or something for a few hours and you can have instruction with Natalie. You can try it all out on Steve this very night."

Trine left Buck and Nat's bedroom. They quickly resumed their position on the pillows.

"Can I touch your penis?" Natalie said in a little gravelly voiced whisper.

Bucky laughed. "Oh, all this talk of the penis."

"Can I touch you here?"

"Oh . . . oh . . ."

"Or here."

"Oh."

"Here."
"Ah, ah, oh, mm aaaa."

Another tentative knock was heard at the door.

"Am I hearing things?"

"Maybe she forgot something."

Buck opened the door and Steve Rogers stood in the doorway. He glanced down the hall each way.

"Oh, I'm so glad you guys are here. Can I talk to you, off the record?"

Bucky and Natalie glance at each other with big eyes.

"Sure Steve. You know these rooms are not monitored. Come in."

Bucky and Natalie resumed their position on the pillows at the head of the bed only now Steve Rogers sat at the foot of their bed.

"I've just received a message from Xhosa. She's on her way here."

"What?"

"Oh my God."

"She said she has something to talk over. But she wants to talk to me in person."

"Damn."

"Holy shit."

"That's right. I've had no girlfriend for 100 years. Now I have two girlfriends. What do I do?"

"What do you want to do?" Natalie took the lead.

"I did love Xhosa. I really did. I really thought I did. But I LOVE Trine. I am head over heels in love with her. I want to spend the rest of my life with her. I would die for her."

"Well, that's really clear. Don't you think, Angel?"

"It sounds like you know what you want."

"But what if Xhosa is pregnant? What if that's what she wants to talk about?"

"Now who's going over the deep end."

"I know. I know. I'm freaked out."

"Your mind is made up and you'll know exactly what to say when the time comes. I have every confidence in you." Natalie's calm and reassuring manner did exactly that. She calmed and reassured Steve.

"That's true Steve. You have tact. When's she coming?"

"She'll be here for dinner."
"What?"

"Tonight?"

"Yeah, I know."

"You'll have to talk to her alone before dinner."

"Yeah, yeah but what do I tell Trine?"

"Why don't you guys go for a nice long run and leave this to me." Nat's soothing voice relaxed almost everyone in the room.

"Really? That would be perfect. I feel like I'm in high school."

"You never had any girlfriend in high school. Anyway, I'll change. A long run is just what I need." Buck pulled at the front of his slacks.

Steve arranged to meet Xhosa in the living room with the fireplace ablaze and a bottle of non-truth serum wine.

"I don't think there's any reason to delay. Steve, I have to tell you right off I've reconciled with my husband. I know. I cared deeply for you. I still care deeply for you. Oh, it's so complex. It's been long standing in our culture that a royal, like my husband can have 2,3,4 wives. I, being a modern woman said no when he took the second wife. It was a long process but he has given her up. He has committed to be a modern man. So I am happy about that."

"I'm happy for you and I have to say that I've moved on also. You'll meet her tonight. It happened very unexpectedly but very dramatically. I am overwhelmed by it all."

"I don't want to lose our closeness. Our friendship. I will be here or wherever Sergeant Barnes is, every six months for the rest of his life. It can't be awkward or unpleasant between us."

Steve held Xhosa in his arms. "I hear lovers come and go. That love comes, so strong like it has for me and then it fades or dies, but that friendships can last a lifetime. Let's last a lifetime."

"A committed friendship? We would be creating something new. But it feels good."

"Yes, a committed friendship."

"I'm glad you said this because there's more. There's one thing more. I'm pregnant. I know what you're going to ask. I don't know. And I may never know, unless it is obvious in a few months. We are forbidden form testing like that. Another holdover from the patriarchy."

"It doesn't matter, Xhosa. I will be here for you and the child regardless of its heritage for the rest of my life."

"Committed friendship."

"Committed friendship. Oh, and I have an official communiqué from the King."

"Can it wait until morning? Can't we just be together tonight? We should join the others. We should join the party. I want you to meet her. She's waiting."
"Yes, if it was emergent he would have called you. I think it can wait a few hours."

The delegation from the planet Torn and Tony's team worked so hard, put in so many long hours studying the ILLUMINE, that Tony set up a seafood, foul, and vegetable barbecue on the beach for the evening's festivities. The personal robots displayed all the hardware needed: lounge chairs, pillows and blankets; tables and chairs; a canopied bar with barstools and the elaborate barbecue itself. The robots made a fire pit for after the sunset. The sun blazed and a cool breeze blew through the area. The scene was set.

Tony desired to show Dandalo and friends something of the beauty of earth. The weather cooperated. Dandalo, Blixa, Thabre, Bucky, Natalie, Bruce, Steve, Trine, Xhosa and Tony lounged around the area, sipped cocktails and flirted with the tide. Where the sea meets the shore has fascinated mankind since the beginning of mankind. Visitors and earthlings alike danced around the foam on the cool sand, played with the rocks and seashell, and poked sticks into the dead fish that dotted the area. A high bacteria count in the water prevented anyone from going further.

The Torns especially delighted to watch the fish and foul cook on the open flame. As the flesh shrunk and crinkled and changed color their eyes shot colorful emotions around their large iris, and they grinned their sharped tooth grin.

They ate, probably too much. They drank, probably too much, and they all probably got too much sun.

There is a time in every day when the sun remains bright but fails to warm the skin. When this happened to Bucky he became watchful and restless; he had been out in the open many hours. Always hyper-vigilant, he grabbed the binoculars, climbed some nearby rocks to the very top and scanned the ocean, the seashore, and land for anything that looked suspicious. He saw nothing that was an immediate threat, but he did see what looked like an oil slick out in the distance with many ships around the perimeter. He called Tony for a looksee. Tony looked and did not like what he saw. He sent for his telescope and liked it even less. He checked in with a tablet. It was not an oil slick. It was a plastics slick headed for his beach. His town. His state. His country.

At least a mile in diameter, this plastics gathering was full of dead fish, dead birds, dead bugs and live bacteria intertwined in the plastic garbage. Live bugs, live birds and fish picked and ate at the remains like it was a huge animal carcass. This was an environmental disaster of the highest magnitude.

The sunset was spectacular. At dusk they lit the bonfire. Humans and Aliens began to experience bug bites. Many slaps of skin and face and neck until the area was covered with a black veil of bugs that heralded the impending arrival of the plastic slick. Everyone ran into Solaris and were happy to shut the door. The party was spoiled, but Tony being a thoughtful host asked the Torns what they did in the evening.

The Androgyns from Torn were industrious. They did not waste time with games or watching anything or socializing for the sake of socializing. They socialized for sexual reason. They did play games of physical skill and strength like arm wrestling. Tony invited everyone into the boxing ring. They opened the bar and everyone sat in the overstuffed leather chairs. Cap and Buck gave a demonstration and the Androgyns tried their hand. The Androgyns laughed and laughed at Jarvis's overly dramatic call of the action. The Androgyns exaggerated their behaviors and laughed and laughed. All this laughter helped to digest their dinners.

They moved into the weight room with the mats and Bucky showed his wrestling skills by pinning
the whole company one by one. The Androgyns loved this. The pinning took no more than five seconds each person. Thabre went three times. Steve gave him the most problem but even then it was over in 10 seconds. Everyone was happy to return to their own quarters. Except Tony who suited up and flew out to the plastic slick.

The next morning a message from Steve circulated around, to meet in Tony's ready room. When Bucky and Nat arrived Banner and Tony sat together on one side of the large table that filled the room. They pulled up chairs opposite from them.

"What's this about?" Buck asked Tony.

"No clue."

Steve arrived a few minutes later with four standard folders and one large folder.

"Great. You're all here. I'll get right to it," he said as he gave a standard folder, that held 20 or 30 pages of paper, to each person.

"I called you here to share with you an astounding – extraordinary correspondence I received from King T'Challa. Your copies are in front of you. You can read but let me summarize. Seems the King and country were very impressed with you." Steve pointed to Bucky. "They were impressed with your restraint and your reparation, they said, they went on to praise you with a few pages of formal, flowery speech." Steve handed the papers out. "Here's another page or two of the same stating how impressed they were with Tony and Tony's 'rehabilitation program' and how you," Steve pointed to Tony. "Rehabilitated the irreparable and the irredeemable. Sorry Buck. That the whole world would have put Barnes to death or discarded him as human garbage and on and on . . .

"Looks like Zemo has recovered in all ways except his desire for revenge. The Wakandans have decided to expunge him – that's a kind of banishment, I guess – but since they have no relationship with any other country they are requesting, hold onto your chair, they are requesting expungement into the custody of James Barnes for the purpose of rehabilitation under the supervision of Tony Stark."

Steve threw his hands up in the air. Some of the papers he held flipped out of his hands and flew around like little paper airplanes that crash landed on the massive marble table. All eyes followed the papers till the last one sailed to a stop.

"This has to be some kind of joke," Buck hoped against hope.

"No, this is what these good people believe. That every life has a purpose. That every life is on the earth to do good and people must be given every opportunity to do so. Did you tell Zemo you wanted to be friends?"

"Well – I . . . I said . . . I said we could have been friends as I was squeezing the life out of him. He was unconscious!" Buck flipped his hands around.

"Well, he heard you and he wants to take you up on your offer. Here's an enclosed letter to you from Zemo."

Steve passed a sealed envelope to Buck. He picked up the letter and turned to Natalie. He held the letter up to her and then did the same to Tony.

"Tony?" Steve asked.
"How long did they say the expungement would take legally?"

Bucky stood by the side of the table. "you can't be seriously thinking – "

Steve interrupted, "about a year in court but it would most likely be approved."

All eyes rested on Tony for more.

"This is not going to be decided right here, right now. Let's hear some questions."

"How do we know he can be rehabilitated?" Bucky babbled.

Tony laughed, "we figured you were hopeless . . . that was not a consideration when I took you on."

"Yeah, of course not or I wouldn't be here." Bucky was the worst offender. He considered himself hopeless many times, even as recently as a few weeks ago. He took his seat.

"Isn't he wanted by other countries?"

"I didn't consider that with you either. Did you operate in other countries besides the United States and Russia?"

"Yes I did."

"And did you commit crimes in these other countries?"

"Well, yes . . . yes I did."

"And at any time, even now, one of these incidents can come back to haunt you? And this would affect me?"

Buck felt like a fly Tony swatted, and he was still stuck to the fly swatter, squirming, and buzzing, with juices flowing; the broken body waiting to be finished off by a toss into the garbage can.

Buck shifted gears. "Doesn't he have brain damage?"

"Again, I figured you probably had some physical damage to your brain and I took you anyway."

Buck cracked. He put his hands to his head. "I'm having a moment here." A painful moment. A painful moment of insight. Buck had come face to face with his own principles. He reeled. Was this it? Was this the flash of future he experienced locked in the bathroom of Tony's Learjet? Was this the future he had seen for himself?

"But, I had a friend to vouch for me."

"Looks like that that's what he wants you to do."

"What if all this is a trick to get here and damage us?"

"The thought entered my mind that you may be programmed to do just that."

Natalie could not take it another minute. "He's not completely done with his own rehab."

"This is a meaningful question but he'll be done by next year, easy." Dr. Bruce Banner shrugged his shoulders.

Jarvis was heard on the overhead. "James Comey on the phone for you, sir. I told him you were in a
meeting. He will not be put off."

"As I said this won't be decided in one meeting. Organize your thoughts and we'll talk again." Tony left to talk to the X-FBI director.

Tony's 72 hours passed with tireless work in the lab by all. The first layer of the mystery of the ILLUMINE was uncovered. Barnes was promoted to lab technician to Thabre, Natalie technician to Blixa and Steve became the low man on the totem pole, the funky lab assistant. Xhosa became intrigued by the research and worked closely with the other big brains: Trine Haugen, Tony, Banner and Dandalo. The lab had been closed with lights out for only four hours over the last three days. Everyone was tired.

Bucky was the only occupant of the cinema room when Tony entered. Buck was behind the bar setting up for customers.

"You know you don't have to do that." Tony took a stool at the bar.

"I love bartending." Bucky laid a napkin in front of Tony.

"You've worked three days nonstop in the lab."

"I love doing that, too. Can I take your order?"

"Alright, how about a vodka gimlet and I'll take the Vikingfjord, but don't tell Trine I put lemon in her vodka."

"A bartender never tells."

Buck sat the drink in front of Tony and Tony drank. He emptied the glass in three swallows. Like any good bartender who assesses their customers emotional state as soon as they entered the bar, Buck had the foresight to make a triple. He filled Tony's glass out of the shaker.

"When we came back . . . what, was it just two weeks ago? The first thing you said to us was you were in some trouble."

Tony choked on his drink. He did not answer.

"Maybe you'll tell your bartender what you won't tell a . . . a . . . fr . . . another person." Buck stammered over the word friend.

"What trouble are you in Tony?"

Tony appeared as closed mouthed as a Aldeberon shellmouth.

Buck continued, "you know that movie you love so much? Where the hero is just about to buy it, and the posse arrives just in the nick of time? Well, Tony the posse has arrived. What's the trouble?"

Tony finished off the second drink. He set the coupe on the bar and looked at his bartender.

"You won't like it."

Bucky filled Tony's glass again without breaking eye contact.

"Yeah I will. I will like it. I'll like it because I know, whatever it is, I can do something about it."
Bucky stared straight into Tony's face.

Tony stared back, "what can you do?"

"The things I do best."

Tony took a drink and shook off Buck's stare.

"What the hell. It's going to be on the news any day now anyway."

Steve walked in with Trine and Xhosa. Tony showed some relief but they went to a sofa.

"Tony?"

"It has to do with some things," Tony gestured all over with his hands, emphasized the word things, "I had to do over the last year."

Buck figured as much. Tony was in trouble for helping him.

Bruce Banner arrived and sat by Tony at the bar.

Tony said aside to Buck, "you're the only one that's asked."

Tony turned to face Banner. Tony spoke with Banner awhile. He finished his third drink and wandered away from the bar. He laid himself out on the sofa, cuddled a pillow, and fell asleep.

"Been a long day," Bruce said. Bucky served Banner his call.

"Trine has asked me to start seeing you professionally again. Is that what you want?" Dr. Bruce Banner asked Bucky.

"Would that even be, uh, ethical, I mean . . ."

"You mean the Tranquility? I'm not using it. I haven't since we talked in the bathroom."

"But how? Why?"

"Oh, hearing how stupid I sounded. A drug created petite Hulk, no I created petite Hulk by my own emotional control. I've acknowledged emotions other than anger in myself, other strong emotions like the desire to save, to rescue, to help. That's why I became a Doctor in the first place. A drug can't do that. Tranquility made me guilt free? No, I resolved some issues. A drug made me work like the devil? No, I did that. I did it all. I'm clean, Buck. Do you want me to drop a urine?"

"No, Bruce, I don't," Buck laughed. "Can you make time for me tomorrow? I'd love to talk to you about some things I downloaded."

"Sure thing."

Dandalo, Thabre and Blixa joined Banner at the bar. Blixa engaged Banner and they moved to a table. Dandalo sat on the sofa, at Tony feet. Thabre looked Buck up and down.

"How can you look rested without resting?" Thabre searched every inch of Buck's face as if witnessing the birth of a planet. Thabre was smitten. Thabre followed Bucky. Thabre's eyes were always on Bucky. It was Thabre who requested Barnes be promoted to lab technician and Thabre gave Bucky work way beyond his pay grade to try to impress him, which it did. Bucky loved the challenge, and the fact someone thought him capable. Thabre taught Bucky everything known about
ILLUMINE, which was considerable and useful. Thabre looked dreamingly at Bucky and blatantly flirted, not caring if Natalie was around or not.

Buck was fascinated by the creature. Thabre was fascinating. Thabre had immediate intense emotional responses that played out in a constant shuffling of the birth and death of color in the eyes. Barnes struggled with his own floods of emotion, and he marveled at the alien's ability to flow seamlessly from one emotional event to another, effortlessly, without judgment, without pain. Buck watched Thabre to gather clues on how this was done. Bucky would love to process his own emotions that fluidly.

Buck was friendly, kind and patient with Thabre. He seemed to enjoy the attention, and to legitimately like the alien. When Steve asked Bucky about what was obviously a serious infatuation on Thabre's part Buck replied:

'Who wouldn't want a friend from another planet'. Steve heard this before. Buck said it in the 1940s. Who wouldn't want a Marxist for a friend or a Freudian for a friend so this was nothing new.

Thabre had not tried to hypnotize Bucky with the eyes or push sexual curiosity as Blixa had done with Banner. Thabre was expert at reading Bucky's responses and adjusted masculine/feminine depending on Buck's tone of voice and body language. Thabre watched and waited for a turn in Bucky that would indicate authentic passion in a relationship Thabre consider true love.

Natalia Romanova shot into the room, grabbed the remote and turn on MSNBC.

"There's something about Tony in the news."

The flash of light and color, loud rapid voices, and canned rock music entered the peaceful inner sanctum of the cinema room. It could only be one thing – the irritating sounds of the News. Tony opened his eyes but did not move. Alarms from Jarvis added to the chaos that fill the room up fast.

Andrea Mitchell spoke. She told the world a source familiar with the proceedings reported that the Justice Department would soon file charges against Tony Stark for:

- Fraternizing with an Alien
- Withholding military secrets
- Violation of eminent domain
- Reckless endangerment
- Compromising national security
- Violation of allegiance

No one moved. All eyes were fixed on the screen. All faces were in a state of shock except Thabre who's eyes remained on Bucky wondering how Bucky's lips could forever be that deep pink color and his blue eyes so crystal clear.

"What does it all mean, Tony?" Steve asked.

"It means the government is trying to appropriate my Alien and my Alien Technology."

Dandalo glanced at the wrist band on its wrist. Apprehension showed on the Alien's face.

Bucky stood by Tony. He was silent. His dilated pupils spoke 1000 words but he only needed seven, 'who do you want me to kill'.

Natalie joins Bucky, "Tony, no one is going to take your machine or your Alien."

Tony instructed Jarvis to call an emergency Avengers meeting for 48 hours.

The buoyancy in the room deflated. The warm feelings of an evening of relaxation were over. Fatigue set in with the dark realization of the news and the fight ahead.

"I'll have to call my lawyers." Tony bounced to the door.


Natalie cornered Bucky behind the bar. She noted his dilated pupils and said, "let's go home."

Bucky laid the bar towel on the bar and focused on the reassuring eyes of Thabre.

"Sure."

His limbs grew heavier with each step he made towards their room. When he reached the bed he could not hold himself up right.

"Will you come to bed as soon as you can?"

"Two minutes," she said.

He watched her in the bath as she undressed.

"Why don't you look pregnant? Are you sure you're pregnant? Or is someone playing with my mind?"

Natalie's heart skipped a beat. She stared at the brush she held in her hand. Darkness descended over her at this paranoid statement from Barnes. She held her breath but made a decision to ignore it.

"Banner said I will show anytime now Angel."

"Why do you call me Angel? You know I'm no angel." His voice rattled.

Natalie laid on the bed beside him in her underwear. He sighed. He held her. He petted her hair. He ran his hand down her body and drew her to him. She stroked him and peered into his dark eyes. His pupils were large and black.

"I've called you Angel for a year and you've said nothing."

"You know I am El Diablo. You know I'm the devil. You know I'll do the devil's work. Tony went to extremes for me. For all this. And now, here comes the consequences. You know I will go to extremes for him. I'm trapped . . . but there's no bars. Tony will order me to kill . . . and I will."

"I'm sure you will not."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because you didn't kill Zemo."

"Only because they asked me not to."
"Oh really? Is that the truth?"

"It felt like I was gonna kill him . . . I'm not sure."

"That's right. You're not sure are you? But I AM sure. I'm sure of you. I call you Angel because I'm sure."

To her tiny hands his head seemed as big as a bear's. She pushed his thick wavy hair back from his face with both hands. Her hands luxuriated and his lion's mane.

"Look at you. I imagine what you must have looked like as a small boy. I do that a lot. I can see you in my mind as clear as I see you right now. Your youth, your laugh, your innocence, your shining eyes. I can see you with your mother; how she must have loved you. She played with you. I hear her call you Angel."

Massive tears sprung from his eyes and bolted down his cheeks.

"She did call me Angel. My sisters were Baby, Toots and Sugar. I was Angel, always Angel. How did you know?" Another stream of tears flowed. Natalie kiss the salty tears off his lips and brushed them from his face.

"Because I know the truth about you and so did she. You're an innocent, Buck, nothing you've done was malicious or premeditated. You did not decide to harm anyone. I call you Angel to remind you of your true self, of how you were born, a perfect being."

"Say it again."

"Angel."

"Again."

"My angel."

Aroused, he kissed her passionately.

"Let me lead you." Natalie kissed the remaining tears from his face.

"You know, they're probably full of ILLUMINE."

"All this is a little much. Isn't it?"

"I'm separated from everyone . . . everyone on earth."

"Not from me."

"I've infected you."

"Whatever that means. Whatever it brings. We'll go through it together. That's what I want."

Another wellspring of huge tears flowed down his face. This time he shook them off. "Aha." He growled and moved on to her.

"You'll get out of this quicker if I lead you."

"I am out." His tears had washed the darkness from his eyes. "Tonight, I lead."
"I'll fight ya for it," she teased.

"Well, Honey. Do what you can – you're trained."

And she did.

"What's a fellow have to do around here to stay on top?"

"Okay, I think you could use some time up there."

He held her. He kissed her. She surrendered to him.

They laid together in an altered state. She was fascinated with his hair. Her hands were in his hair to stay. She scrunched his hair and shut her eyes. If his hair was the same color as it felt, she thought, it would be green. The lush green of cool leaves or tall thick grass – as sensual and alive as a rain forest. She rocked his head gently back-and-forth by her grip. She went in for a deep look: deep into his eyes.

"The way you look at me." He took it in. He'd give his life for that look.

They laid like that until he slid down her chest. He stretched his human arm between her legs and up her back. His face on her abdomen, his ear pressed to her belly, he searched for sounds of the five-month-old fetus within her.

"This baby is a miracle," he said softly.

"That would be a good name," she whispered, her hands still in his hair.

"Miracle Barnes?"

"Miracle Romanova."

"Miracle Barnes."

"Miracle Romanova."

"Miracle Romanova Barnes?"

"Yes, Miracle Romanova Barnes."

First thing the next morning the Torn delegation was slated for departure. All involved were sad to see them go. Banner, Bucky and Tony walked to the Time Machine with the three Androgyns. Thabre was visibly upset. Dandalo was not.

Beyond Thabre's obvious infatuation with Bucky they had become close friends. Thabre's look of distress was the most pathetic ever seen. Being empathetic with Thabre, Bucky was moved emotionally as well. Thabre's eye colors circled dark blue and black – like liquid swirling in anticipation of a cataclysm. Thabre, the tallest of the Torn race looked shrunken, deflated, like a failure. Bucky was unsure how to respond. Thabre gave so much to Bucky, and Bucky gave so little back. Bucky opened his arms to Thabre, something he had never done and Thabre gladly excepted. They held each other a good long time.

Bucky spoke, "I know we'll meet again."
"I know it too," and Thabre believed it.

Bucky stood back and looked into the mysterious eyes of Thabre. The hug, the statement, did not seem enough, and without much thought, Bucky took off his shirt and gave it to Thabre. The Alien acted as if Bucky had given a diamond mine. Thabre held the shirt. Thabre hugged the shirt. Thabre kissed the shirt.

"This is the shirt you wore the first time I saw you," the emotional Thabre said to Bucky. Deeply touched that Thabre would remember such an insignificant thing; Bucky opened his arms again to Thabre.

Thabre stood unable to move. Unable to respond. Unable to process the possibility of hugging Bucky's bare chest.

The onlookers, Tony, Dandalo, Banner and Blixa were moved by the depth and beauty of Thabre's love for Bucky and the display of emotion by the pair.

Thabre could not stand another second of sorrow, signaled to Blixa and Dandalo. They nodded with their eyes to each other and the delegation from Torn stepped through the time portal together. A hum – a click – a swirl of gas and they were gone. Bucky stood with his arms outstretched and watched as the dust from the passing swirled about his feet. The winds of time blew through his mind, and he was stung with regret.

"Why wouldn't Thabre hug me again?" Bucky turned to the others with his empty arms still waiting.

"Brother, can he really be that dense?" Tony said flippantly to Banner.

Tony flipped a glance Bucky. "You need a talking to."

Tony answered a beep from his messenger. "Comey is on the phone . . . gotta go. Bruce, take care of this will ya?"

All 6'5" of James Comey sat in Tony's office. He looked like a grasshopper folded up in Tony's small yellow desk chair.

Tony was perched behind his desk like an owl. They talked for hours reviewing Tony's personal files. Comey closed his laptop.

"Mr. Stark, you should never use Romanova and Barnes as simple combatants. They should be used only as spies."

"And assassins?"

"That too. Your male's price skyrockets after that Zemo incident. They're calling it a soft kill – you can get rid of your opponent and not have to worry about murder? Gruesome." Comey shuttered his shoulders, head and hands.

"He's paying for it. He's not a sociopath, you know." Tony played with a paperclip in his hand, twisted it into shapes.

"I heard that. That's tough. That's tragic, really."

"So, what kind of money are you talking about?" Tony put the paper clip on the desk.
"Per job or ownership?"

"First one then the other."

"Per job would be target based, of course. Say, head of state – 7 to 10 million – out right ownership – 40 to 50 million. Are you thinking of selling?"

"No . . . no . . . just curious. We've had a hard time coming up with a cover for 'em."

"Oh! I have a cover. I have a cover no one could break and a mission of the upmost importance. If I can have them?"

"How much are you willing to pay?"

"What?" Comey said shocked.

"Joke – of course you can have 'em. If they'll go. You know we have a complication."

"Well, yes I do know. They will penetrate Putin's inner circle."

"Oh, they'll go." Tony said emphatically. "When?"

"Six months of training which can be done here at Solaris. One month of actual work if all goes well."

Tony counted around on his fingers. "That might work." He picked up the paper clip again. "But six months training. What cover could take six months?"

"Dancers. They'll be dancing with the Avant-Garde Modern Dance Troupe in Australia. We have an excellent operative already embedded. A native. Aboriginal. Great dancer. Swell fellow. Putin can't resist dancers . . . of either sex, I hear."

"You're right. They're perfect for it."

Bruce and Natalie, Steve and Bucky sat in the interview room around the great marble table. They were joined by Jane Foster who came as proxy for Thor who needed more travel time. She lived and worked in Death Valley and made the short trip. She sat by Natalie. They were in deep conversation. Sam Wilson made the trip from Seattle. Clint Barton hopped a plane and was present. Wanda flew in. All other voting Avengers sent their votes electronically, by Skype or conference call. Tony took the stage.

"My embrace of the Sokovia Accords was predicated on the supposition there would always be a sane POTUS sitting in the oval office. Well, that theory is shot to shit. I have rescinded my signature. If the Accords were presented to me today I wouldn't even consider signing. All in favor of pulling out of the Sokovia Accords signify by saying aye." The vote was unanimous.

"All in favor of reconstituting the Avengers. Signify by say aye." Again, all voted yes.

"I'm kinda done with revenge." Tony mumbled offhand. "Maybe we need a new name. Maybe . . . The Admonishers. Well . . . that's for another time."

"Next order of business. James Barnes has been asked by me to join the Avengers. All in favor say aye." All the Avengers in the room and remotely said yes.
"The aye's have it. James Barnes welcome officially to the Avengers."

"Thank you."

"The last item is not an Avengers issue. This is a personal individually based decision." Tony stood tall and stuck out his chin.

"I have been engaged in high treason on every level possible to overthrow the current administration."

As the last syllable of the word treason lingered in the air, Bucky jumped out of his seat and stood at attention by Tony's side, alert and cautious . . . like sentry. Tony acknowledged his presence with a look of surprised acceptance. Surprised acceptance looked very similar to pride. The crew summarized after this display that Bucky would dispatch anyone Tony named off the planet.

With his eyes still on Barnes, Tony said. "Anyone else want to help me?"

"Hey! Klaatu!" Clint said to Tony. "If you've got Gort here. What do you need me for?"

"Clint. We are trying to overthrow the administration legally. Like by impeachment." Tony said.

Bucky did not believe that for one moment.

"Oh. Right . . . sorry. My alleged criminal mind was working overtime. Well, I'm in."

"Thor abstains from politics but I'd love to help. I'm totally in. There's a lot of things I can help you with." Jane said.

"I think you can. Thank you."

"Yeah. The guy's a bully of the highest order, so yes," Cap said.

"That's a yes for me. I just do whatever Cap does," said Falcon.

"Yes, can't wait." Natalie made her decision.

"Yes, I am in," Wanda said.

All remotes were affirmative.

"Thank you. Thank you all. Now I want to introduce James Comey."

The man a dichotomy of letters, overly tall and overly shy he entered the room like a giraffe in a Winnebago. He walked right to Bucky and plopped Bucky's backpack on the table in front of him.

"I think this is yours?"

"Holy shit."

"Buck?" Said Cap.

"I mean holy smokes. How did you? Oh yeah – thank you." Bucky shook Comey's hand too strongly. "Nice to meet you – sir."

"I have to take it with me when I leave. I have to put it back. You know what I mean. You have two days, son. You can do what you like with the notebooks. Copy them, forge new books, black out,
tear out any incriminating evidence. No one has looked at them seriously yet. It's gibberish to them."

"I'll get right on it. Thank you." Bucky let go of Comey's hand.

"Can we all move to the briefing room and I'll go over the plan."

Natalie and Steve stood by Bucky as the rest of the crew walked by congratulated him and welcomed him to the Avengers team. They shook his hand and slapped him on the back.

Sam Wilson walked by without speaking to Bucky. Out of the corner of his eye Sam saw the frown on Cap's face. He turned back.

"Don't screw up." Sam gave Buck the eye.

"Thank you Sam." Bucky smiled. Sam Wilson took a few steps from Barnes, stopped and turned back again.

"Hey, look dude. That was harsh. I apologize. I know you've worked hard. I know you've gone through a lot of pain to get as good as you are. I admire that. I really do. So, I sincerely congratulate you, man."

Bucky gave Falcon a big hippie man hug, and Bucky did not let go.

Falcon resisted and called out: "Hey! Somebody! Get him off me!"

Everyone in the room laughed out loud including Barnes.

Bucky stepped back from Falcon.

"Really man. Just don't screw up." Sam said.

Bucky lunged at Sam to hug him again. Sam ran from the room.

"Now I know how to get rid of 'em." Buck laughed.

Steve shook his head. "Well done, Buck. Well done."

Natalie laughed. She hugged and congratulated her lover as any colleague would.

Buck whispered in her ear. "I fit in . . . I can feel it." His eyes twinkled and his smile was so bright it filled the room with light.

"You have something here. You really have something." She whispered back.

Slowly people left the room leaving Tony and Bucky last. Buck made a move toward the door. Tony took hold of Bucky's human arm at the elbow and held him. Bucky glanced at Tony's hand on his arm – his human arm – on the flesh of his human arm. His eyes glanced at Tony's face. Buck's lips parted in awe.

"Welcome to the team." Tony said.

"Thank you." Again, Buck headed for the exit.

Tony held tight.

"Wait . . . I think you deserve an explanation. All this. Everything that happened here between us was for good reason. I had to be sure." Tony made eye contact with Buck for a deep look. "I had to
be sure of you. You may be asked to do much more than the others."

There it was. Buck knew this was coming and here it was. It was real. It wasn't paranoia. Buck knew the next words out of Tony's mouth would be the mission, the assassination, who he wanted Buck to kill. Buck glanced at Tony's hand on his human arm. Now that it was here. It was time for a decision. Buck grabbed a good hold of Tony's arm at the elbow with his human hand; the old Roman hand shake.

"Well, if I can't do what you ask. I think we both know someone who can." Bucky glanced at his cyborg arm and watched the two seconds it took the arm to turn metal and become full strength. He made a fist. He flipped his eyelids open to reveal the black eyes of the Winter Soldier. He made sure Tony got a good look; a good look at what he was prepared to give. Buck glanced away for a few second. One. Two. Three. Four. He raised his eyelids again and looked at Tony. His eyes were azure blue. His arm looked human.

Tony did a double take.

"You can control like that? In a split second?"

"I've been working on it."

"Do it again." Tony held Buck's arm. His voice sounded excited.

Buck took a slow breath. A wave moved over him. Tony saw his pupils dilate fully open and his arm turn metal. Buck exhaled and his pupils became normal and the human hologram appeared on his arm.

"Amazing control! Amazing! Now, you've knocked MY socks off." Tony said as he gazed into the baby blue eyes of Bucky Barnes.

"Yeah, I've got control. I've got control of it. All of it . . . The Winter Soldier works for me now. He works when I say. And he's not killing anyone. I'm telling you NO, Tony. I'm not going to kill anyone for you." Buck did not break eye contact with Tony or loosen the grip he had on Tony's arm.

"Eureka! Brother, you just slid into home."

"What?"

"Four years of work. Four long years." Tony glanced at the ceiling. "You just graduated!"

"Huh?"

"Look, I don't want you to kill anyone." Tony said.

"Then what the hell were you talking about – do more than the others?"

"The Putin Caper!"

"Putin?"

"Come on my man. You need filled in." Tony tugged on Bucky's arm.

"Not so fast." Bucky removed himself from Tony's grip.

"Okay, okay." Tony's hands flew off Bucky like he was too hot to handle. "So you're standing on your own. I acknowledge your personal space, Dude."
"My name is Buck."

A huge smile covered Bucky's face, it lit the room.

"And I'm an AVENGER."

Bucky smiled at Tony. Tony smiled at Bucky.

Bucky laughed. Tony laughed.

Their laughter rang out through the empty room.

Tony opened the door and waved his hand into the future. He beckoned Buck to enter.

"Would you care to join me for the briefing?"

Buck stepped through the doorway. Still laughing he stopped and made eye contact with Tony.

"Yes, I don't mind if I do. Thank you."

Tony laughed loud. He touched Buck on the shoulder.

Laughing, Buck touched Tony on the back.

They glanced at each other.

"This looks to be the beginning of a beautiful alliance, Buck."

The door slammed shut.

THE END If anyone would like to contact me privately for

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