A Winter Soldier Comes to Claptrap

by PervoServo

Summary

In the not so distant future, most of humanity has died off. Steve Rogers, once a gangly kid from Brooklyn and now a slightly less gangly twenty something, has never imagined things like super human experiments even exist. He and a merry band of misfits eke out survival in their sliver of post-apocalyptic heaven, the junktown of Claptrap. But when a Winter Soldier - a government bioweapon designed to survive a nuclear winter that never came - crosses their path, it’s a reminder that the outside world (and the past) can’t be kept out by even the highest walls.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
This is your post-apocalypse wake up call.

Chapter Summary

Steve mulls over not so comfortable thoughts from his very comfortable bed.

For the last two years nearly to the day, since being gifted his own residence in Claptrap, Steve has woken the same way. Taking a long silent moment, eyes closed, to experience what is and isn't there.

First the smells - herbs he's harvested and hung to dry mostly, last night's snack, occasionally a hint of whatever Vic's brewed up in the still and brought to share, flowers when they're blooming. There's a faint note of oil and engine grease ever present from his work clothes, and a not quite placeable scent leftover in the steel corrugated shipping container that makes up the bulk of his home. All in all it's a nice mix, homie in the way their tiny low income apartment had been, their smells and the smells of the neighbors all blending together.

*He notices the lack of their* stench more, all those unwashed bodies packed into old cargo vans and truckbeds or huddled on the stoney ground around a charred piece of...sure, he'll call it meat. *That was the worst, how it smelt awful and good all at once. He hasn't eaten an animal, any kind of animal, in years.*

Then there's the loose, open comfort of his nightshirts. Today it's his oldest one, fashioned from a tattered linen tablecloth he had folded in half and sewn roughly down the sides, leaving space for his slender arms to poke through and the bottom open for his spindly legs. He didn't think to measure back then and cut the neckhole too wide, which let it slide a bit off one shoulder. Nat calls it his sexy nightdress and jokingly asks to borrow it at least twice a month.

Next there's the feel of his sheets, still a thing of luxury even if these are a threadbare polyester blend and not Egyptian cotton, hung to dry just a little rough in the arid breeze. He loves waking up to them under the comforting weight of blankets cobbled together from any scavenged scrap of heavy fabric he could find - car seat and furniture upholstery mostly.

*He appreciates the lack of waking in stiff, crusted jeans that he's spent days in, still up and belted if he's lucky. Boots on and already rubbing against the raw places where his socks have worn through. What's left of an oversized peacoat as his blanket, his numb arm as a pillow if his hands are free that night. Them. Pressed near.*

His bed is blissfully empty as he stretches out like a starfish.

Then there's the sounds. The quiet meanderings of the first few residents of Claptrap to leave their shanties, the imperative to get certain tasks done well before the blistering heat takes hold spurring them from their hammocks and bed rolls. Most mornings there are birds too. More and more as the trees grow taller. One sings a sweet, if off key, tune somewhere nearby.

No chorus of snores. No grunting or whimpers he has to pretend he doesn't know the source of. *Even if they come from him. Especially if they come from him.*

He's ready for the last portion of his morning ritual, slowly opening his eyes to take in what he's
worked very hard to turn from junk into a home. First the ceiling, mostly covered in collages of little found objects and old magazine clippings with potted plants hanging from hooks welded to the metal. Then around the room to his possessions, already expanded several hundredfold since his arrival. Piles of books, more plants, hand tools, containers of all shapes and sizes holding this and that, a chrome and seafoam green Formica dining set made before his grandparents were born that had only needed a little work. Then to the window, his pride and joy, large and bordered with stained glass, the soft colors of the sunrise just starting to spill in.

Then he'll see the best part. He's alone.

A loud rapping on his door - hardwood and from the 1920s judging by the handle that had still been attached, but reinforced with riveted strips of steel - pops his bubble of contentment.

"Get your skinny ass up. It's misfiring again!"

Clint. Fucking Clint.

Steve needed breathable air, potable water, nutritious food and adequate shelter like any other human being. However what really kept him going was a bullheaded streak a mile wide, a need for justice bordering on fatalistic in how often it spurred him to involve himself in other people's business and a strong sense of irony.

It seemed he had spent his entire childhood sick, bedridden as much as not, costing his mother the few dimes she had on medical bills. He couldn't so much as step on a playground without catching something. So how had he, the Notorious I.L.L., managed to be one of the glorious 10% immune to the pandemic? It had taken his mother, his neighbors, his city. Even Frank Delino, a painfully handsome mass of a boy that used to kick Steve's ass after school until an "incident" with a trash can lid made him think better of it. Frank was the picture of strapping youth. Steve had found him dead in his own vomit in the stairwell as he left the only home he'd ever known for the last time. He was eighteen years old.

He had been despised in his Brooklyn tenement as a freak. A quiet, bird-bodied nerd with his nose constantly in a book until an outburst of rage would send him flying at one of the bigger boys like a rabid spider monkey. In this new world, all that useless knowledge suddenly had real-life applications. His explosive anger got him out of (okay, and into) a lot of bad situations and earned him as much respect as ire. His ability to occupy himself, to be alone, kept him sane when everything came tumbling down, when there were weeks on the road without passing another living soul.

Somehow - after natural disasters fueled by climate change wiped out millions, after the drought, famine and resource wars that followed killed millions more, and the bug took most everyone who was left - loser Steve found himself with an excess of friends. He even supposed this fuckboi-who-sort-of-grew-up standing at his door was his friend in a way. Friends do shoot arrows into people for you in this world.

Steve would think about the irony of it all and laugh. Sometimes it would be at inappropriate times that at best got him looks once reserved for the babbling homeless and at worst got his lights punched out depending on the parties present. Him, Steven Grant Rogers, 120 pounds soaking wet who spent the first three months of his life hospitalized, was one of the genetically blessed and post-apocalyptically popular.
"So can you fix it or what, bookboy?" Clint is bleary eyed, his short hair a greasy mess. Steve knows he and Nat were up all night fighting again and he wants to rub it in his face for ruining his last few moments of solitude earlier.

Instead he says "It's fucked," flatly and turns to walk off.

"Nononono wait!" Clint moves to grab Steve by the arm, thinks better of it after last time. He likes his pride hurt more than his face. "I apologize...for the bookboy thing."

"And?" Steve retorts, turning slowly with his arms crossed, looking equally like a factory steward and an angsty teen doing community service in his oversized tan jumpsuit and duct-taped work boots.

"Waking you up early." Clint grits his teeth and clasps his hands together, almost as if praying for this part to be over.

"And?"

"Parading around in your sexy nightdress last week, God!" he blurts out a little too fast and way too loud. "I was drunk! And...trying to get in good with the wife. Look, please?" Now Clint has a painfully guileless desperation on his face.

Steve lets out a huff and pokes a finger towards the other man's considerably wider chest. "Fine, I'll go to the yard and try to find a new cog but you have to promise me you'll keep this thing lubricated."


Steve had helped Clint design the machine and somehow became it's de facto mechanic. It extruded melted aluminum scrap into tubing for arrow shafts and Clint had mumbled "heh heh, shafts" at predictable intervals through the whole process. Carbon shafts were more durable but they couldn't work out production. It had been quite an undertaking for the amateur inventor but ultimately he pitied Clint. What is an archer without his arrows?

"I'm serious. This is the third time. You owe me!" The blonde steps forward and scowls up at his personal nuisance. Clint is all of 5'9" but he's still got four inches on Steve and never lets him forget it.

"Anything!" Just like that, the fool is beaming.

"Gas for the bile. Water for the trip, for me and Win. Snacks. Lots of snacks. No fucking jerky this time." Steve starts counting off on his long, spindly fingers, deep voice raspy from the smoke that had been billowing out of the machine a few minutes ago.
"Done, done!" The other man nods vigorously, like a big stupid dog, Steve thinks to himself.

"Your goggles. Not the best ones. But the good ones."

"To borrow?" There's a note in Clint's voice that says he already knows the answer, dreads it, is begging without words for it to not be so.

"To keep, you idgit." Steve knits his brows, unmoved.


"That'll do, pig, that'll do." Steve's sour face breaks into a smirk as he pats the taller man's shoulder, a rare physical interaction that does not go unnoticed.

Clint delivers on his promises, serving up a variety of not-quite-stale single serving bagged chips and gummies, his second best pair of goggles, two gallon milk jugs of water (sediment free) and a pile of saccharine praise that falls on deaf ears. Steve only had a tiny amount of regret for making him squirm so much. The truth was, neither he nor Win had been to the yard in a while and it was one of their favorite activities.

Claptrap was a junktown, a settlement formed partially or in whole because of its proximity to a junkyard, dump or scrap yard. People in the old world wasted so much, right up until the end. Furniture, scrap metal, machine parts, clothing, all manner of useful and unuseful but shiny trinkets, reusable containers, even food unopened in boxes and jars and cans. The massive facility now known only as the yard had served many purposes for the dozens of small communities that had once surrounded it - auto junkyard, trash dump, recycling collection facility.

The sand had started to claim the yard, the same way it would eventually claim the lower parts of Claptrap. A good part of their labor pool had been devoted to fighting it, trying to push it back as it expanded from the dried out wasteland, cleaning it daily off the buildings at the bottom of the small hill that formed the center of the community. It would blow in constantly, coating everything. It had been Steve's idea to use the sand to stop the sand.

They had scavenged a facility that had bags and bags of sodium carbonate. Steve had read in a book it was used for detergent among other things. Most importantly, it could be added to sand with limestone, easily accessible in the dried-out riverbed nearby, to form glass. He and Win and some others had had built equipment to mix the ingredients, melt them down with crushed scrap glass from the yard, and pour the molten goo into molds to make all manner of things, most importantly glass block. It had taken weeks to get the mixture and the process right, months more for manufacturing and assembly, but they had a wall 30 feet high and 6 ft thick with regular buttresses climbing up like steps every hundred feet around the whole town, with extra room left for expansion. That had turned Steve from an annoying know-it-all into the resident boy-genius and earned him his very own "house" set up in just the right way on the hillside where nothing obstructed his view of the sky.

The yard, over an hour from Claptrap on the modified snowmobiles they had learned to ride through the sand, was impractical to haul block to. They had gotten the giant magnetic crane running well enough to pile up flattened vehicles from the junkyard around the area and even to start a corridor running out away from the scrap yard gate in the direction of the settlement. Win welded whatever sheet metal they could find over the outside to form a more solid barrier against the ever blowing sand. The dump itself was in the middle of a ringshaped man-made hill, the only high spot for miles. There had been talk of settling on the hill, letting the sand claim the scrapyard below, but between the ever-present stench of the dump, possible contamination of the soil and how much closer to the wasteland it was, it seemed impractical.
Teams would go in, use large, flat sled-like platforms with low sides (constructed from scrap lumber mostly and called "skiffs" because of their similarity to the style of boat) to drag trash onto the hilltop. It was given a rough sort on the hillside, separating what was truly useless from the rest. The useful would be dragged down the hill and into the now mostly empty scrapyard, to be separated meticulously into various categories. Things like spare parts and household objects that were not immediately claimed were set up under a series of makeshift tents on the grounds - they called it the Super Store and had even scavenged a few shopping carts for its "patrons" to use. Steve knew there were boxes and boxes there of nuts, screws, bolts, gears and the like. Maybe there would even be a looter or two they would have to dance with on the way.

He was so fucking bored of fixing machines and making windows, but it was a far preferable life to the one he had had only a few years before.
Love in the time of Super Flu

Chapter Summary

Steve remembers he has a heart. And a dick. And zero relationship experience.

There had been a period Steve could grudgingly admit to himself, riding the 'bile through the dunes with his arms around a waist just a bit smaller than his own, he had been in love with Win.

Their's had been a pretty typical meet cute. Steve had calmly explained to a pack of arguing Claptrappers that they could just take the hinges off a set of double doors they'd been battering at. When they finally listened, after a chorus of variations on "shut up, new guy," both doors came down in one piece, strips of metal soldered across them from the inside.

Nick - impressed but irritated with Steve as would become their usual - decided to reward (punish) his newfound friend by making him go in first. A slight figure wearing full welding regalia had ran from the darkness to swing a lit cutting torch at him almost immediately.

They pieced together from the discovery of a room filled with bunk beds, and the person's furious, unintelligible yelling, that the factory had probably been using illegal Chinese laborers and housing them on the grounds. The "dorm" locked from the outside and had a toilet, fully visible to the entire room, in one corner. The bottom mattresses each featured two neatly arranged corpses save the last, sporting a single body covered in dried out wildflowers.

"Bug must've got 'em." Clint said flatly, holding a bandana over his face against the lingering smell. "Wonder why the the survivor laid them out like that and put their welding masks on."

"It was the best they could do for a burial." Steve half whispers, remembering stretching sheets over his mother's body. Frank Delino's body. He considers what was required to seal yourself up inside a place like this alone, neat rows of your friends turning to soup in their coveralls never more than a few hundred yards away.

"I've got no good goddamn idea what they're sayin'. I just know it's Cantonese. Learned a few phrases for a business trip. But unless they're gonna point me to the john or make me a martini, it's not much help." Nick looked the stranger over with his good eye.

"We can find a way to make them understand. We can't just leave them here. Especially if we take everything!" Steve protested as someone passed him with an armload of canned goods. There had been quite a stockpile with fifty plus workers normally kept there.

"I'm not standin' here, in this motherfuckin' heat, drawing pictograms or some shit tryin' to explain we wanna be friends." Nick gestures to them, still waving the torch.

Steve, nearly defeated, had left to root around an office and found the previous foreman's English to Cantonese dictionary. It had taken the entire time the others finished picking the place clean, and a begged-for extra twenty minutes, to convince the welder to shut off the torch and remove their face shield.

"If I'd known that was under there, I would have been on your side," one of the men commented.
Their new acquaintance turned out to be a not at all unattractive young woman. Steve flipped him off, but he couldn't deny feeling butterflies the first time she gave him a big, genuine smile a few weeks later. They took every scrap of welding equipment that they could find. There wasn't a single person in Claptrap that knew how to use them, and that had been Steve's ace in the hole in winning Nick over.

She'd been known as Win since she screamed the word, arms up in triumph, after brutally defeating a large group at poker in the town pub. They'd figured out her hand gestures easily enough for the game, after she had made it clear she had wanted to join and Steve talked them into humoring her, but Sam and Carol had been pissed when they lost their respective piles of loot. They certainly wouldn't invite him over that night. Steve could now guess how Win and the other workers had passed their few spare hours, locked inside their shared room. There were more than a few misunderstandings between Win and the residents, and at least one guy ended up with a broken eye socket when he got handsy; Steve could completely relate.

A few months before he had been fooling around with Sam and Carol regularly, at first after a card game when they had a bit too much to drink (it had just been flirting and a little kissing that first night) but sober after. He liked being kissed by them, touching them and - eventually, under his terms - being touched by them. He even liked watching them together (and they really liked being watched), the contrast of Sam's flawless dark skin against Carol's light, golden tan, Sam narrow in all the places she was round, his shoulders incredibly broad.

He had absolutely no prior experience with women, and Carol was mercifully not shy at all about giving directions. He had no positive experience with men. Sam was fun, friendly and patient, never talking to Steve like he was less than him or lacking in personal agency, never trying to be the macho guy that manhandled him. Both of them were so out of Steve's league on the attraction scale that he was constantly baffled they even noticed he existed. They were ex-military, in incredible shape, competitive to a fault. They had piloted the (supposedly top-secret) aircraft that carried Nick and his crew to this part of what had once been the United States and they lived in it at the base of the settlement. It was just another metal box with no way to refuel it.

He thought he had made it clear, without spelling it out, that penetration was off limits. They were all half-naked and making out when one of them (he was unsure who because they were wrapped together, hands everywhere) had seemed like they were trying to put a finger in his ass. He completely fucking lost it and reacted like a supermodel who had her photo taken without permission. It was weeks before he stopped avoiding them and, when things got comfortable again, he politely refused future offers to come over. To be fair what had happened could have been a misunderstanding or accident, but he felt guilty for not being more upfront about his boundaries. The fear it had engendered set him back significantly.

Nat for her part sensed a kindred spirit in Win the same as when she had met Steve. Underestimated for being petite and naturally "feminine" looking, not expected to do anything in this new world except be treated like a prize or a thing to be bought and sold, yet infinitely more useful than many of the mediocre, butch men who had managed to survive on only brute force. She supposed a lot of that had not changed so much from the old world. They bonded, spending hours pointing to things to teach each other words, sharing skills. Others made effort too, but it was Steve that Win gravitated to the most.

People traded things for her welding skills, gifts she often shared with the slender blond, especially junk food, and she spent a good portion of time helping set up infrastructure for the community. They became partners in crime, dreaming up contraptions - if he could draw it, she could weld it - then scavenging parts for their creations. Language barrier not withstanding, they shared everything, even clothes, being a similar build.
It had only seemed natural, despite their inability to exchange complete sentences, when she'd kissed him, post an intense game of Connect Four, about a year after their meeting. The kissing had turned heated and then she was taking off the oversized t-shirt she often wore around in her free time and he wasn't going to hyperventilate. He wasn't.

It was all a blur of hands and lips and tongues until she, in nothing but her work boots, straddled him where he sat on the floor. She freed his cock from his pants and, after a momentary pause clearly intended to give him time to say no, sank down on him. The moment focused to crystal clarity, feeling the soft, tight slickness of her around him, the light brush of her hard nipples against his bare chest, her quivering breath on his forehead.

Looking him dead in the eyes without a hint of shyness, she moved on him slow, putting her hands on shoulders that were narrow but had a surprising amount of wiry muscle. After he got his bearings, he licked his thumb and found her clit with it (thanks, Carol). Then she smashed her mouth to his and they clutched at each other, moving together with intensity, both making high pitched sounds in their throats. She leaned back, perfect half-handful breasts catching the lamplight, a sound pulled out of her that could only mean one thing as he feels her get even more wet. He, Steven Grant Rogers, had just helped a person orgasm with his penis. He finished immediately, practically screaming.

He had about five minutes to revel in the beauty of his experience, the first time he had ever been inside of anyone with that part of himself, and to think about what it might mean for them. Then she unceremoniously handed him his shirt and jacket, kissed him on the cheek and sent him into the night. She acted like nothing had changed the next day, politely rebuffing his attempt to kiss her. It had really hurt him, and his reaction to that was always pigheaded anger.

After he hadn't spoken to her in a week, Nat had to sneak the English to Cantonese dictionary from his place. Win painstakingly combed through the words, alphabetized unhelpfully for her in English, to write him a letter.

The body with the flowers at the factory had been her childhood sweetheart, who she married as a teenager. She cared for Steve. He was her best friend. She had enjoyed everything that had happened, would love for it to happen again and found him very attractive. There was no one else she was interested in. But she could not give him the romantic relationship that she now realized he wanted. Something inside her had nearly died when she had lost her husband and she could not go through that again. Because Steve would always be Steve, taking risks, getting involved. "One day, you will help the wrong person," she had ended the letter.
Wow, what a hole.

Chapter Summary

Win and Steve find more than they bargained for at the yard.

Steve and Win spend a few hours sorting through boxes stored in the junkyard before they come across parts that will work in Clint's machine. They skim the newest assortment of items deemed potentially usable culled from the garbage and find two matching blue cotton tablecloths. Win holds one up to herself and parades around like a catwalk model, clearly mocking his nighties, sending Steve into fits of laughter. He keeps the fabric, planning to make a new nightshirt for each of them.

Then it's on to the real fun - sifting through one of the newest piles pulled from the dump onto the hillside. The people assigned to trash duty are taking their lunch out of the midday sun in the autroyard. Steve and Win are blissfully left alone, a rare occurrence in Claptrap for those with in demand skills. Trashpicking is an art of the imagination, asking not only what an item was intended for but what new purpose it could serve. It was the same way you needed to assess people in this world. A secretary could learn to be a sharpshooter; a grocer could learn to sell people instead of lettuce. Who or what they had been before was less important than who, or what, they could turn into.

Steve finds a small vintage trash can, perfect as a pot for one of his many plants, Win a massive monkey wrench so rusty it leaves her gloves stained orange. She hangs it from a strap on her waistband. Both she and Steve have a hard time finding pants, or belts, small enough and today she has on suspenders - the old-fashioned kind that are not stretchy. The added bonus being how much crap she can fill her cargo pockets with and hang from her belt loops without her pants falling down.

She snags a few tattered comic books - they're good English practice since she can infer context from the pictures. There's a half empty can of spray paint too; fumeheads will trade almost anything for it. She knows Steve frowns on enabling people's vices, but it's always good to have a savings account just in case.

They settle in on the other side of the hilltop, away from any piles, sharing potato chips as they gaze out into the tawny waste. Steve notices something glinting on the ground not far into the dunes.

There was stuff piled next to that side of the hill when the first Claptrappers had found it - possibly an illegal dumping site for those who did not want to pay waste disposal fees back when things like that existed - and what appeared to be a long-abandoned worksite, possibly an intended extension of the facility's offerings that had gone bust. Supports tipped with crossbeams rose up like the ruin of a steel coliseum no more than 200 feet from the base of the hill. Less than thirty yards out the dunes were already encroaching. The wind carries the sand, covering everything for miles in up to several feet of it. Large pieces of metal and other random hunks stuck up out of it here and there but what Steve saw looked different - shinier.

"Sinkhole," Win responds when he points it out, the twinkle coming from the middle of a concave spot in the landscape. The very real danger they posed was one of the first things he impressed
upon her. A lot of the bedrock was limestone in that area; it was not uncommon for sections of it to erode over time and collapse, sucking down whatever was on top of it. When that happened to be several feet of wastedust and garbage it formed something very similar to a quicksand pit and was virtually impossible to escape from.

They finish their snack and wander cautiously down into the low dunes to check it out. Steve is surprised to see a gloved hand splayed out several feet down the slope of the depression. A gloved hand attached to a very shiny metallic arm.

The pair look at each other quizzically, then back down into the pit. The limb extends out from under random trash and a large flap of garbage bag, the heavy industrial kind, sand sliding down on it all in a slow trickle. Win pulls a long piece of rebar from the build site and cautiously reaches in to move the debris. They're greeted by a head - mouth, nose, cheeks and jaw completely covered in a black mask that looks like a type of hard plastic, vented in the front. Large black goggles with dark lenses cover the eyes and part of the high forehead. It has hair that looks brunette despite the layer of yellowish dust.

The human shaped object is buried up to the neck, only the left shoulder - also largely metal - and arm visible.

"Dead?" Win asks, poking the person's forehead lightly with the rebar.

"Maybe." Steve responds, putting his hand on her arm to still her.


Win shrugs, raps the rebar hard on the silver arm, making several loud clangs. It's solid and her efforts don't leave even a hint of a scratch. Nor do they rouse the thing it belongs to.

"Maybe androids exist now?" Steve muses. To Win's questioning expression he responds with the Cantonese word jyutping - a robot or synthetic person. She raises an eyebrow and repeats it back to him in a very interested tone.

"Pull it out?" She says in English, smiling. Steve can't help but hearing Clint, heh heh, pull it out.

They return with a long spool of cable, one end formed into a sort of lasso which they manage to snag around the android/robot/very fancy mannequin's wrist. Whatever it is, it's heavy, especially with the constant pull of the sand and trash slowly being sucked into the empty space beneath it. They can barely budge it and when they're finally forced to let go, it sinks a bit lower into the pit.


Steve looks around, plotting. There was an ancient scaffold up one side of the building frame - he climbs it and is ecstatic when the cable reaches the top, though with only a few feet to spare. The other end is still wrapped around their find. After a short chat, a few hand signals, and a lot of puzzled looks, Win is handing him up every piece of rebar small enough to lift. He lays them in a pile over the cable, eventually wrapping it around and tying it off to form a large bundle weighing a few hundred pounds.

"Get back," he calls down, gesturing her to the side. When she complies, he rolls the bundle off the top of the scaffold onto one of the crossbeams then unceremoniously shoves it off the other side. It falls the 30 or so feet with a massive thud that shakes the ground, yanking the thing on the other end of the cable out of the hole and into the low dunes.

"AHHHHHHH!" Win screams in triumph, arms up, as Steve scrambles back down. He shoots her a
cocky smile as they approach their prize. She lets out a dissatisfaction huff as she sees the other arm is flesh. Just a person after all, probably a dead one judging from their complexion. Steve takes another step forward.

"Wait!" Win grabs his arm. She's basically the only person allowed to do that. "No smell."

She was right. A body dead long enough to start looking grayish should wreak, especially in this heat.

"Hello?" Win tries tentatively. The thing (man?) on the ground doesn't move.

"Sick?" Steve questions. Occasionally some poor soul who had found a good hideout during the spread of the plague would be pushed to leave their nest, not realizing basically everyone left was a carrier. They'd be dead in days usually.

Steve and Win had been in the thick of caring for the dying; their status was clear. They approached cautiously, then rolled the man (?) onto his back. Yes, definitely a man, probably six feet tall and built like a rugby player - Steve had watched things like that as a teen for the hot guys, though he'd never admitted that to anyone. There was no obvious signs of injury and, curiously, he didn't feel hot to the touch. Not cold either, but certainly unusually moderate to have been buried in sand under the midday sun for who knows how long.

The man didn't so much as twitch, until Steve attempted to remove the mask.
What's your favorite hobby? Magnets.

Chapter Summary

Win and Steve bite off more than they can chew.

The man was up like a shot, his metal hand around Steve's throat, hoisting him easily a foot off the ground like he was a bag of feathers. Steve's fingers are scrambling at the almost-literally iron grip, his feet landing hard blows into the man's body that would have knocked the wind out of most. The man didn't flinch.

Win runs at him with a feral scream, the monkey wrench connecting with the man's head, cracking the left goggle lens, splitting the front of his skull open. He relinquishes his hold on Steve. The blonde falls with a thud on his ass in the sand, scrambles backwards immediately in a reverse crabwalk.

Maybe it's not a man after all because it doesn't go down, the blood pouring out of it's forehead so purple it's almost black. Win smashes the wrench into the side of its face again, almost doubling it over and breaking one of the latches that holds the mask on. It swings to the side, revealing a grimacing mouth filled with long, sharp teeth.

Steve grabs her by the arm, half yelling, half choking. "Come on! Come on!"

They run frantically around the side of the hill to the auto yard, chaining the gate shut as soon as they're inside. Two trashers, middle-aged Greta and the almost-elderly Samir, look up quizzically from their card game in time to see the thing spring over the gate and land gracefully on its feet.

It pulls the now decimated goggles off, revealing a set of glowing white-blue eyes. Then it finishes removing the cracked mask, throws it at Steve's feet as if to say you wanted it, you can have it. Its face is perfect. Not a hint of what should have been fatal injuries. The blonde and the thing just stare at each other for a long minute before the crack of a rifle shot cuts the air.

"Get the fuck away from my kids!" Greta screams, pulling back the bolt to eject the empty casing. She had taught Steve how to shoot, how to can things and some very colorful new expressions. She had been two steps away from one of those survivalist nut bags before the collapse but he really couldn't make fun of her for that given their current circumstances. The first shot hit it squarely in what appeared to be a bulletproof vest. The hit should have at least knocked it back, even if the Kevlar stopped the bullet, but it barely moved. The next buries in its flesh shoulder, getting its body to twist ever so slightly to the right with the force of impact. Dark blood sprays out.

The thing digs in the wound with it's metal fingers, pulls out the crushed slug. It holds it up to them dramatically and drops it to the ground as the wound seals itself shut.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph." Greta gasps. She fiddles with the ancient rifle, the bolt jammed. It approaches, fast. Win raises the wrench, prepared to fight to the bitter end, when it flies from her hands straight towards the sky. The thing doesn't even have time to look up, to see the wrench glued to the massive industrial magnet, Samir in the cab of the crane it's attached to, before it's pulled up as well by its metal arm and pinned there, kicking like a dying animal.
They have just enough time to release their collectively held breath, to cheer, before a sharp piece of scrap half buried in the dirt shakes loose and rockets to the magnet. It passes directly through Win's upper arm, slicing muscle, tendons and her brachial artery. She falls to her knees with a guttural wail, blood gushing between her fingers as she clutches at the wound.

Samir shoots up, eyes wide, accidentally hitting the control panel. The thing falls back towards the Earth, pulling a handgun from a thigh holster before it even lands, firing at the old man. Samir dives out, takes cover behind a crushed SUV as the shots shatter the glass of the cab.

It whirls on Steve, already on his knees frantically trying to tie one of the scavenged tablecloths around Win's arm as she goes pale.

"We were only trying to help you, you fucking asshole!" Steve screams at the thing stalking towards him as Win starts to sag. He lays her out on the ground, slaps her face in a futile attempt to keep her awake. "Win! WIN!!"

The thing watches him for a minute, holsters it's weapon. Greta runs at it, swinging the rifle like a club. It catches the butt of the gun, tears it from her grasp, throws it twenty yards effortlessly. It stares her down, eyes like a pair of LED headlights in the shadows of the scrap car piles, freezing her to the spot.

It squats down across from Steve, reaches for the blood soaked cloth.

"Don't fucking touch her!" Steve pulls back to take a swing at the thing, panic blurring out his thoughts. It puts a hand in the center of Steve's chest and shoves. He slides several feet straight back in the dirt, the motion comical under other circumstances. It pulls the makeshift dressing from her arm, puts it's flesh hand partially in it's mouth and bites down hard.

It squeezes it's flesh hand with it's metal one over Win's arm, leaking dark blood into her wound. It's hand heals seconds later, the gash in her bicep immediately after. Steve and Greta stare, mouths open, dumbfounded. It looks over at Steve.

"Do you have medical supplies in your community?" The voice is a bit raspy, not quite as deep as Steve's, but even, eerily soft. Like someone calmly querying about a book in the library.

"It's just us," Greta answers quickly.

The thing's eyes don't leave Steve's. "It is unlikely two people so small and two more so old accomplished this operation." It is not unkind, just matter of fact.

"I'll show you too old, fuckhole!" Greta starts, pulling a hunting knife. Steve grabs her pantleg, urges her to move behind him.

"She will require treatment for the blood loss. Do you have access?" It's voice never waivers and it barely blinks.

"Our...our community isn't close," Steve stammers.

"Shut up, boy!" Greta growls, grabbing his shoulder from behind.

"Thirty miles due Northwest? The junktown on the hill?" It asks blandly.

"Y-yes," Steve replies. Greta goes silent with shock. It's gaze - decidedly less electric, irises faded to a pale turquoise - trains up to her, then back to Steve.
It stands, walks to the fence, jumps it effortlessy.

"What the fuck is that thing?" Greta half whispers, Samir finally coming to join them.

The thing hops back over the gate with a large black duffel, both it and the bag equally covered in sand. It probably went back into the hole for it, Steve half-thinks, used the anchored cable to climb back out. It was gone only minutes - it must be able to move incredibly fast and pursued them leisurely before. It kneels down next to Win, opens the bag, begins laying out medical supplies.

"What is that?" Steve asks when it takes out an IV bag filled with clear fluid.

"Vitamins. Sugars. Electrolytes. Medication. It is used to counteract the effects of blood loss," it says, opening a sterile package to take out a needle.

"What if he's lying?" Greta's nails dig into Steve.

"Why would he heal her just to poison her?" Steve responds, not taking his eyes from the thing as it disinfects Win's arm and places the needle, hooks up the IV bag it's already holding aloft.

"What if it'll make her like him?" The old woman breathes.

Steve swears it chuckles softly at that as it hands her the IV bag.

"I can assist you in returning her to your community," it offers to Steve.

"It tried to shoot me!" Samir counters, back in his hiding spot.

"Warning shots. I do not miss," it responds, cleaning up its supplies.

"Why would it help us?" Greta queries.

"I was in the pit for days," it says, rooting around in the bag for something else, "before he rescued me. The harder I attempted to extricate myself, the farther it pulled me in."

A familiar feeling, Steve thinks.

Steve stands, turns to Greta. "I can't hold her on the 'bile and drive and I'd be moving slow with her on a skiff. We'd be sitting ducks for hostiles. It can help keep her safe."

It takes out a mask and goggles, identical to the others but new. "Please do not call me it," the thing - the man - says, voice still placid, before covering his face.
"Can it stay? It's not a fucking puppy, Steve!!" Nick screams.

Nick and Phil are pointing some serious firepower at Steve's new companion, not letting them through the gate into Claptrap; a few others point rifles and bow and arrows at them from the wall above. The man has Win in his arms.

"He defended us on the way back! Took out at least twelve guys." Steve insists, trying valiantly but uselessly to shield the much larger man and Win with his body.

The marauders had ambushed them, had them pinned down for a while under heavy fire that severely damaged the 'bile. These weren't your typical lowlifes - they were armed to the teeth, one of them with a flamethrower, and there had been so many. Marauders usually only traveled in large bands where there were far more supplies and population. Claptrap got the occasional unwelcome guest in it's surrounding area but they usually showed up in very small numbers and were disorganized. Many of them were marked with white paint, large "X" symbols painted on the chests of their body armor and jackets.

The man was content to lay in cover and pick the others off with his sidearm, but then Steve was shot - the bullet passing all the way through his side. It had been clear earlier in the lines of the man's body when the fire passed dangerously near to them that it was a real threat and he could have easily abandoned them, Win half-conscious and Steve bleeding out in the sand. But he had not, charging into the fight knife in hand when his gun was empty.

The way his body moved put even Nat's physical prowess to shame - his metal fist and feet flying in quick, coordinated movements as his flesh hand slashed and stabbed with the blade. He could jump farther than seemed possible for even a professional athlete, launching himself on one of the men from quite far away. At one point he had grabbed someone by the front of their flak vest, whipped them out into the distance, their yell growing steadily quieter as their body flew before going silent when they landed with a sickening thud. How strong would you need to be to do that?

Steve had managed a few shots from cover - he had his own rifle on the 'bile - wounding two of their assailants and allowing the man to finish them. Once his ally was clear he landed one to the flamethrower's accelerant tank, making it go off like a small bomb, taking out it's owner and severely wounding three others. He couldn't see most of what happened after that from behind the wreckage of the 'bile, his head swimming from the explosion, but he swore when the man leapt onto another assailant he had latched his teeth on to their neck. Above the ringing in his ears he hears the men's frantic screams, some of them cut off in wet, choked noises.

When the yelling stopped, the man returned, covered in blood. He healed Steve, cleaned himself up with a rag, then checked the smaller man over for other injuries, running flesh and metal fingers carefully over the blonde's scalp, his ribs, the blonde too disoriented to do much but lay there. After the man fixed his mask back in place, he gently picked Steve up and put him on the skiff. He did the same to Win, then quickly looted the bodies, adding it to the makeshift sled, and headed
towards the community without a word.

"Do you know what that fuckin' thing is? Go ahead, ask it." Nick demands.

"I, personally, would love to hear what it has to say," Phil responds, inappropriately giddy. He adds a mouthed "sorry" at Steve.

"I don't care what he is. He saved our lives and he can help keep Claptrap safe. We both know more people will always show up. Some of those people don't want to be friends. Now get the hell out of our way so we can get Win to the doctor." Steve's eyes flash with anger.

"Is that what you think this thing is? Your friend? That is a **Winter Soldier**. Durin' the Cold War, our military decided they needed shock troops for what came after the bombs fell, able to be the fist of whatever was left of the government during the nuclear winter. That thing, walking around, is a corpse they brought back to something like life, circa 1983." Nick edges closer.

Steve backs up, arms wide, herding the man behind him farther away. "That's ridiculous. Even if that were possible, he'd be an old man."

"They kept them in cryofreeze off and on. They were genetically modified, capable of surviving in fallout. But, shocker, there were side effects to playing God." Nick has never looked this crazy, not even when he accidentally caught Steve playing with his eye patch that one time.

Steve swallows hard, sets his face to something stony. "So you were involved with the program? A little hypocritical to blame him for what your people did to him." Steve was vaguely aware that Nick had been in some pretty high-level government stuff, but not the specifics. He'd assumed his so-called business trips were probably espionage missions, but what he was talking about was way higher level than that.

"I was sent in to see what they were capable of, if their handlers' mind control was really workin'. Because I saw the early tapes - they were fuckin' savages, rippin' apart anyone who got too close. I didn't buy that Pavlovs dogs were gonna salivate at the bell. I cut my forehead on purpose, just wanted to show the brass how the things would react. One nearly ate the eye right outta my head."

Nick gestures at the patch, the scar surrounding it.

"If that's true, why didn't he go nuts when I was bleeding?" Steve counters, gesturing at his stained jumpsuit.

"The crackpots figured out a foolproof way to control them. Microchips in the brain. Because the bombs never fell, did they? And they needed to justify spending all that money on their little science project somehow. They used these things for missions to take whatever they wanted, to kill whoever they wanted. If it's here now, *it's because someone told it to be,*" Nick practically spits.

"I am no one's puppet," the man - the Soldier - finally speaks, as soft as ever behind his mask. "I am in control of my actions."

Phil leans over to Fury, softly counters that the Soldier would be a great help if it was on their side.

"And why do you give a sh*t what Steve asks?" Fury questions, tone incredulous.

"He pulled me from a sinkhole in the waste. If I had sank there, I do not know how long it would have taken me to starve to death. My neural network is non-operational. *I am in control of my actions.*" The Soldier sounds perfectly calm, almost soothing.

"Fine, fine! But it's your head if he fucks up, Steve. You watch him every minute you're awake."
"You can keep him in your old cage at night," Nick says, not without relish, referencing one of the cells at the drunk tank.

Steve feels the Soldier tense behind him. "He's my guest, not my prisoner. He'll stay with me."

Nick stares at him for a long time, and for a minute Steve thinks he has pushed his luck too far, that Nick is about to give the order for them to blow the Soldier's head off. Maybe his and Win's too and bury them all in the sand. He now firmly believes that is the type of man that Fury was before all this started. The older man just sighs.

"They're still anatomically correct, you know, and it all works. Better watch your ass." Nick snarks.

Steve just scowls as Nick and his entourage leave, cut to the quick. It wasn't intended as homophobic. Nick knows that Steve likes men as well as women and that's not something he would mock him for. Nick has a pretty good idea of the excruciating details of Steve's past. This is his not-so-subtle way of saying that if anything happens to him, he's asking for it.

The Soldier says nothing as they take Win to what acts as an infirmary, as Steve talks to the doctor, then leads him to his home several hours later once he's sure she's safe. The taller man stands silently in a corner as his host explains some things about the community, talking more out of nerves than anything. Steve pulls out an old sleeping bag that served as his bed when he'd been a newbie to the town, a flat old pillow and a few extra blankets (one of them real and not made of scraps). He lays it out on the floor for the man, careful not to put him too close to his own bed but also not completely on the other side of the room like a dog made to sleep in the corner. "It can get cold at night sometimes. Almost no plants or clouds from the drought and no nearby bodies of water, so it gets sweltering hot during the day but the land doesn't hold any of it in at night." Nice small talk, Climatologist Rogers, he chastises himself.

Steve finally sits down on the edge of the bed, lets out a long sigh and looks up warily at his houseguest who is - unsurprising now that the mask and goggles are off - staring right back at him. If this were some sort of a trick, he could not imagine what purpose it would serve. Certainly if someone did control the Soldier, there were far more important things that they could be doing with him than spying on some nobody in a junktown. If he meant what he had said, that he was only here because of Steve, that posed a whole other set of questions. It was true as the man dragged the skiff through the sand that Steve, still high on adrenaline from their fight, had suggested that he take up residence in Claptrap, become their own private defender.

He knew that something had been done to the man and read enough sci-fi to guess it was probably an experiment. It seemed too ridiculous to think he was an alien or a werewolf. Those sharp teeth weren't just for show though, judging from the mutilated corpses he had seen. There had been a time, even after the bug had collapsed civilization and people had started to turn into their more primal selves, that Steve was loathe to think of anyone being killed and would avoid doing so at all costs. That had ended after he had met Brock. He realized that sometimes the most just thing was to kill certain people so that the rest of the world did not have to suffer them.

Steve shook that thought from his head, focusing back on the Soldier, noticing again the odd cast to his skin. Steve was an artist only as a hobby, never professionally trained, but he did know that purple and yellow are complementary colors, cancelling each other out to something close to gray. He assumed that the purplish color of his blood, moving beneath the surface, probably affected the way his skin appeared. It was not an off putting, rotten shade. It reminded him of fresh concrete and ceramics and extremely fancy candles he'd seen in a boutique once labeled "Earl Gray." If he pretended it was all just really well done FX makeup he could see that the man had classic heartthrob features - a pouty mouth, square jaw, sad eyes, high cheekbones and thick, slightly wavy
shoulder length hair that hung over most of his brows.

He hadn't really considered the Soldier's attractiveness or lack thereof until about two seconds ago though. In truth, Steve was just a sucker for fairness, loathe to pass judgement on others as had been done to him his entire life. He should look at this person before him and see a monster (even if it was a kind of hot one), but instead he felt pity, maybe empathy and a sense of obligation after all the man had done for him and his friend. There was something wounded in the bigger man's gaze, rudderless in his actions. He had said he was not a puppet, but perhaps he was a marionette with it's strings cut, no longer under others' control but with no self-direction.

There was also a more practical matter he hadn't considered before. He never slept in his clothes anymore, not wanting to bring the filth of the day - literally or figuratively - into his bed. Putting his nightshirt on was his way of saying to himself that he was sticking around, that he wouldn't need to run in the middle of the night. Steve stood, taking one off a hook. "Do you mind, ummm, waiting outside...while I change?" He was breaking Nick's rules already, letting him out of his sight, but he couldn't feel so exposed right now.

The Soldier furrowed his brow ever so slightly, but complied. After he'd stripped, washed up and changed quickly, Steve alerted his guest he was finished. He offered the bigger man something to change into as well. He was rewarded with silence.

After they stared at each other for a few long moments, the Soldier said very softly, "I believe your friend implied I am a rapist."

Steve doesn't know how to respond, just opens his mouth and closes it again. He's more than a little shocked that the Soldier had caught on. Perhaps it had been the way Steve had cringed, gone silent and inside himself after what Nick had said, intentionally keeping as much distance as he could from the other man. Maybe asking him to leave the building had something to do with it.

"I am not." The Soldier says with simple finality and then takes to his bedroll, laying on top fully clothed, leaving the blankets untouched and folded up next to him. When Steve finally falls asleep hours later, his nightmares are of hands on him much hotter than the Soldier's and much less gentle.
To say Claptrap was a close-knit community would be the understatement of the century. A typical "small town" had at least a thousand citizens minimum. Sometimes even in a big city it could feel like you knew everyone with the same hobbies. The junktown had less than 250 residents, a lot of them practically living on top of each other with only a few feet between dwellings.

Word about the argument at the gate travelled quickly. Clint had been on a hunting expedition when they had arrived the previous evening, had game to clean and a wife to visit when he got home in the wee hours this morning, but he was still knocking on Steve's door not long after sun up. He already smelled like a gin mill.

"So what is this I hear that you brought some kind of mutant flesheater out of the desert?" Clint pushes the door the rest of the way open, and just glides past Steve without an invite. Having been recently choked, shot, hit with a concussion wave from an explosion, and having sparse sleep riddled with past horrors, he decides to himself that suffering Clint would be the worst pain he'd feel this week.

Clint pulls out a chair, slow and loud, scraping the chrome legs across the metal floor. He plops down in it and hoists his feet up on the table, crossing his filthy boots on the formica.

"I heard that it's seven feet tall, has teeth like a piranha and you saw it chew the face from a man's skull!" Clint looks and sounds entirely too excited about the prospect.

"I do not eat flesh," comes a soft voice from the other side of the table. The Soldier, who had still been laying on his bed roll, sat up and fixed Clint with a stare that glowed neon in the dull morning light.

"HOLY SHITBALLS!" Clint blurts out as he tumbles over backwards. Steve can't help but smirk and just stands there sleepily, arms crossed over his chest, not even making an attempt to ask if he is okay.

Clint is up like a shot, backing towards the doorway.

"What the actual fuck, Stevie? You let it sleep in here with you?! With your sexy nightie on and everything?!!?!" His voice had gone high and hysterical.

"For the hundredth time, don't call me Stevie. And don't call him it. He doesn't like that." Steve glares, hands balling up.

The Soldier stands, never taking his eyes from Clint, slowly circling the table to move between him and Steve. The archer's hands tremble for his bow, every hair on his body on end. Everything about it's - no, his - body language says he is on the defensive.

"Woah, big fella. It's cool. Steve, tell him it's cool." Clint holds his hands up in a placating gesture. Steve looks to the man, who must have removed his vest and boots at some point during the night.
He's wearing neither shirt nor socks. Steve can't help but notice his back is...sculpted, to say the least. Fuck, he really is tired.

"It's okay. This is my...My friend's husband, Clint." The blonde steps forward next to his guest, tries to relax his posture, sound friendly. He realizes everything about the way he was standing and speaking said that he did not want Clint here, which was probably giving his houseguest the wrong idea.

"Husband. That is a male spouse?" The Soldier queries. Steve gives him a "yep" back.

"Marauder do that to you?" Clint gestures at the smaller man's throat, which now sports an obvious hand print, bruised nearly black. Steve touches it, winces.

"I strangled him briefly." The Soldier says matter-of-factly, his eyes moving to the marks. Steve thinks there is something like regret reflected in them, but maybe that's wishful thinking.

"He thought we were attacking him. It was a misunderstanding." Steve clarifies quickly.

"You're both a few fries short of a Happy Meal. Steve does love a project though. Whatah... What are you?" Clint sounds genuinely curious.

"I am Winter Soldier number 23" the taller man responds.

"I've heard some of the government goons talk about Winter Soldiers before, but I thought they were just apocalypse fairytales." His eyes move to Steve then back to the Soldier. "Nice to meet you, Fangs."

"Please do not call me that," the Soldier says, as calm and even as ever. He never lets himself think of them as fangs. Snakes have fangs. *Monsters* have fangs. People have teeth.

"So, what do you go by?" Clint queries.

The Soldier looks at Steve.

"What name do you want us to call you?" The smaller man explains, looking back up at him. This is the first time they've stood side-by-side. The Soldier is head and shoulders (and a bit more if Steve's honest) above him, even with both of them barefoot.

"Soldier is acceptable." The glow of his eyes fades (he sees them reflected in Steve's and makes an effort to calm himself, to pull his shoulders slightly more downward). *He cannot quite bring his fists to unclench.*

"Damn, you don't look like a fish, but you definitely got some chompers on you." Clint pulls his lip backs, shows his teeth.

"Chalm-purse?" The Soldier questions.


"Yes. I have teeth. People have teeth," the Soldier replies. This earns him a look from the others. What had he said wrong?

"Oooookay. You use those to drink blood or somethin'?" Clint muses, smirking.

Steve rolls his eyes. "Don't be an asshole."
"Yes," the Soldier states simply, overlapping with the smaller man's statement. He realizes this was the incorrect response when Steve goes silent, head whipping in his direction, his eyes just as wide as the other man's.

*Well that certainly explains all the neck biting,* Steve thinks. And here he'd hoped the *chompers* and the savaging done with them were just from...tiger DNA or something.

"You do not need to be concerned," the Soldier continues to Clint. "You have imbibed a large quantity of alcohol. I would not drink you unless I was desperate."

Clint's jaw drops. He points at the Soldier, swivels his arm to point over at Steve, then back again, his mouth working open and closed like he's gasping. *Who's the fish now,* Steve's inner voice says clearly through the buzz of his whirring thoughts.

The blonde springs forward, forces out a laugh as he takes a strong hold on Clint's elbow and leads him to the door. "He's just fucking with you." Steve makes a face that says *you're so dumb, Clint,* a face he's made thousands of times by now.

"So he doesn't...?" Clint still sounds a bit like a frightened child.

"Of course not. Don't be silly." The smaller man puts on his best *you're so ridiculous* smile. "Tell Nat I said hi! We'll come visit soon." *What's this we shit, Rogers?* He gives a little wave and then quickly shuts the door, spinning around to press his back to it and stare down his visitor.

"I think we need to have a talk," Steve rasps, his throat suddenly very dry. Swallowing hurts, on the outside at least.

The Soldier says nothing, now certain he has crossed some invisible line he was not aware existed. His eyes trail back down to the shape of his fingers on Steve's neck.

"You weren't actually joking, were you?" The blonde's voice goes low, almost a whisper."You can't tell anyone, that you actually drink blood." *What the hell, Steve? Is this really not a deal-breaker for you?*

"I would not hurt you. I am in control of my need." The brunette steps back, farther from Steve's space. It is not a lie, but it is not the whole truth.

"I believe you, but it will still scare the others. Do you... How often do you need to do that?" Steve tries to sound like this is any normal conversation, takes an amicable step forward. His voice only shakes on the last word.

"I drank a large quantity in the altercation yesterday. I should not need more for some time." He remembers how good and full and strong he had felt after - the combined heat of the men pooling in his belly - and how difficult it had been to resist running his tongue over his lips and teeth in front of his new acquaintance.

Steve flashes back to just after the fight, when the Soldier reappeared, blood - red, not purple - coating the lower half of his face, running down the flack vest. He sees it and the boots, now spotless, sitting in a corner on a threadbare towel, no doubt placed there to dry. *Well, he's very fastidious and considerate for a savage bloodsucker.*

"I do not kill those who do not deserve it," the Soldier adds. It surprises him a bit, offering this information without being queried. He is unsure why he feels the need to express this to the smaller man.
Steve, ever the champion of justice, gets his hackles up a bit at that statement, takes another step forward. "And who do you think deserves it?"

"People who would hurt others only for the enjoyment of doing so." The brunette recedes, his back now literally to the wall. Perhaps he made a mistake coming here, becoming entangled with this person. He is so very tired of being interrogated.

"Well, there's no one like that here. What will you do when you need to…?" The blonde goes quiet, noticing how the man has retreated. *Never corner an animal.* It's Brock's voice this time. Steve lightly shudders, immediately hopes the man doesn't notice, doesn't think it's directed at him.

"There will always be someone outside the walls." The Soldier had been loitering in the vicinity of Claptrap for months, and there was no shortage of those with ill intent crawling the area, eager to take advantage of the burgeoning settlement.

"But if there's not?" Steve is blissfully unaware of how many people increasingly dot the sands, of how often the man before him has prevented the horrors of the outside world from showing up at his front door.

"I can feed without killing."

*And didn't that make a thousand new questions pop up in Steve's mind.*

"You can't do that here. They'd chase us out with torches and pitchforks."

"I can subsist on animals. There are still many small things in and around the wastes." *They do not taste very good, but at least they are warm. Alive,* he wants to say but does not.

"I thought Fury was just exaggerating about all this, being dramatic because he doesn't want to have to look you in the face every day after what he was a part of." In all the time Steve had known Nick, he had never heard him apologize to anyone. Dealing with his failings was not his strong suit.

"I will wear the mask and goggles. He will not have to see my face." The soldier responds.

"That's not…" Steve sighs, sitting down at the table. This was going to get very frustrating. "Do you take everything so literally?"

"I only required as much speech as was needed for my missions. Euphemisms and slang are often unfamiliar." The Soldier peels himself from the wall, takes another look at the bruises he had left on his new...companion? There is something that sits strangely about that word. He moves towards his supply bag.

"Do you remember anything, from before you were...dead?" Steve barely breathes the last word, eyeing several large, circular marks on his guest's chest and upper abdomen as the man approaches him, items in hand. They look like healed-over gunshot wounds, except they're in a spot no normal person could survive.

*That's how he died,* a little voice says in the smaller man's head.

"I have short flashes. I am unsure if they are memories or random firing of my synapses due to the damaged neural net." He lays out medical supplies, fingers flitting up to the scars after he notices Steve's gaze.

"That's the thing they used to control you?" Steve averts his eyes (*It's rude to stare,* he hears his
mother say), looking over the cotton pad, disinfectant and small syringe still in sterile packaging on the tabletop. His own hands fidget in his lap. Fuck, there it is again, that weird feeling of pity and empathy mixed together when he thinks about what was probably done to this...person. This person who is opening a needle pack, who now appears about to stab himself.

"It is interconnected microcircuitry providing stimulation to certain parts of the brain, while inhibiting others from functioning normally. I was dormant until a proper verbal sequence was given, then I would activate and comply," the Soldier explains calmly, putting the needle easily into his own vein just below the inside of his elbow. The blood is not as dark today. More noticeably purple. Steve wonders if this is because he had fed so recently. The puncture disappears virtually as soon as the needle is out of his arm.

"What happened to it?" Steve's eyes lock on the syringe and don't leave it as the other man places it on top of its empty plastic wrapper on the table. The Soldier picks up the cotton pad, adds disinfectant.

"The facility where I was housed was damaged by an explosion. When I awakened, metal and glass were embedded in my skull. Please tip your head back."

Steve just stares up at the Soldier, towering over him. "I will heal the contusions," the Soldier reassures him. The smaller man slowly complies, the wet pad cool against his neck as the brunette gently wipes his skin.

"So your... brain healed, but some of the circuits were destroyed?" He swallows hard despite himself.

"Correct." The smaller man's breath is warm on his forehead, the skin under his fingertips the same, the soft flicker of his pulse impossible not to notice.

"You're sure it can't still work?" Steve queries as his guest stands, drops the pad, picks up the syringe.

"Those who broke into the facility attempted to command me. I did not comply." The Soldier's eyes flare for the briefest moment before he leans back down. "There will be a small amount of pain. You should not move."

After so many stints in the hospital, so many trips to the doctor as a boy, Steve is almost immune to the sting of a needle. However he definitely notices the soft, warm grip of the Soldier's flesh hand as it slides around the back of his neck just below his skull, steadying him. His usual urge to bark out "don't touch me" is a lot more muted than usual. This is just too fucking surreal, after all.

"Do you remember things that happened, while it was still working?" You don't want to know about that stuff, Steve. Why are you asking?

"I remember the majority." The younger man's neck is so warm under his palm and the pads of his fingers, the hair at his nape silky as it brushes the side of his hand.

The Soldier is finished with his injections. He stands and watches the bruises fade to purple then yellow, shrinking all the while before they fully disappear, watches the smaller man's Adam's apple bob up and down as he swallows hard. His eyes slowly move up, roving over lips that are a bit fuller and wider than his own, dark pink in color, parted enough to show a hint of straight, white teeth. They continue over a strong nose, cheeks a bit flat in the front below pronounced cheekbones, to meet Steve's. He takes note for the first time of their color, a deep blue, of the shape of Steve's brows above them, a bit dark compared to his sand colored hair, of his unusually long
lashes. They flutter shut slowly, reopen fast, the younger man's breath coming more quickly.

The Soldier questions if the attention of his gaze is inappropriate and turns it away.

"What were you doing by the dump?" The ten-thousand dollar question.

"Watching the people there."

"To hurt them?" Steve questions, trying to keep his tone from being accusatory, fingering his now pain-free throat.

"If you believe I am a danger, why did you bring me here?" This answer surprises the Soldier even as it comes out of him. He did not like the way Steve had looked at him a moment before, something like fear on his features. He had done nothing to threaten the other man or his community.

"You already knew about this place and you could jump the gate, or probably just tear it off the hinges, whenever you wanted. I figure it's better we're friends than enemies... Besides, yesterday, everything was so crazy, and I was just grateful that you saved our lives. I wasn't thinking about much beyond the fact that you're alone and don't seem to have any place else to go." I'm Steve, a big, fucking naive softy. Did the bad government men make you into an unstoppable killing machine? Oh, you drink blood? Come with me, sleep in my house. Touch my neck.

"I had seen the marauders from a distance. I was unsure if they had taken the outpost. I became trapped in the sand while scouting the area." Outside he would just throw the trash anywhere. He is unsure what to do with it here, what would be considered appropriate, and just stands there with it held up awkwardly in his hand.

"That's why you insisted on bringing us back here? You knew that they were possibly nearby?" Steve stands, steps towards him.

"Yes."

The Soldier looks down as Steve's fingers tentatively brush his metal ones, slowly opens his hand to allow retrieval of the used cotton pad and syringe.

Steve tosses the pad in his tiny garbage can (there's very little to throw out in this world), but thinks better of junking the syringe. There's not an endless supply of them, after all. He pauses for a moment before his next question, unpleasant reality dawning on him. "And we made good bait? To lure out your dinner?"

"Yes. Also I did not wish for you and the woman to be used and killed. It is fortunate they did not intercept you previously." There's the faintest hint of something underscoring "used." So he understands that euphemism.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Steve half-jokes, fighting back a shiver. The only thing worse than having that happen to himself would be seeing it happen to one of his friends. He pours a tiny portion of hydrogen peroxide into a very slender, short glass tube with a flat bottom and puts the syringe - disassembled into its three components - inside of it to sterilize. It was probably a vase for a single rosebud - the irony of using something so symbolic of romance to house a sharp object is not lost on Steve.

"You are very clever and brave, but very small," the Soldier says, matter of factly.

"Thanks, I think." Steve cocks an eyebrow at the sort-of compliment.

He doesn't ask the Soldier to step outside when he changes into his day clothes, just has him turn
around and face the wall.
Chapter Summary

The Soldier and Steve both learn the other has unexpected skills.

Steve fully expected the Soldier to be the center of everyone's attention, especially that first morning. He braced himself for the looks, questions, maybe even threats. The Soldier appeared disconnected from a lot of typical human experience, but he seemed to understand when Steve explained that people could be hostile to him.

They agreed if anyone asked about his appearance they would say he had been a soldier, who lost his arm in the war and was given a very fancy prosthetic (the country was fighting five by the end). He still wanted to serve his country and signed up for a medical experiment to test a (sadly failed) vaccine. Under no circumstances was he to discuss being a military weapon, murdering anyone, drinking blood or using his own to heal people.

The Soldier even relinquished his mask, goggles, pistol (now empty anyway) and flak vest after a lot of cajoling. Steve reasoned he would not need them inside the community, and walking around looking like a shock trooper in a relatively peaceful settlement was the fastest way to make people uncomfortable. The Soldier thought his eyes and teeth would do that on their own, regardless of false explanations, but he allowed his host to call the shots. Steve gave him his largest t-shirt - it was quite oversized on him but fit his guest like a second skin.

The Soldier is certain he must look unusual in the attire because the smaller man keeps glancing at him with a strange - but not unkind - expression. It felt foreign to have something so soft against his skin. To not feel the familiar rub of the vest or mask, the weight of the weapon, to be looked at with anything other than calculation, disgust or horror.

They go to check on Win first at the medical center, stares and whispers coming from some of the people they pass, even most of the ones who still greet Steve. It had been no easy task the night before explaining to the doctor why Win needed a transfusion when she had no visible injuries. There was no lie good enough, so Steve asked the Soldier to demonstrate, putting a few drops of his blood into a cut made on the smaller man's hand with a scalpel. The doctor had gone a little pale and sat down as their wounds both closed.

"You're going to put me out of a job," was all he had said.

Steve had begged the doctor, a bumbling curly haired man named Bruce, to keep his knowledge about the Soldier's healing ability to himself. He eyes them furtively the next morning, pushes his glasses up by the bridge with a single finger, asks what it would take in trade to get more of the Soldier's blood. One of the head gardeners has lung cancer, as best as he can tell quite advanced and spread into some of her other organs. He had been a top oncology researcher, working on experimental radiation treatments before the fall, but he had basically nothing to treat her with here.

The Soldier calmly explains that giving an amount large enough to heal such a widespread illness would overload her neurological system, at best making her braindead and at worst killing her. It is not a lie but moreso there is the lingering concern that this man will try to study him, try to reverse-engineer what he is for his own ends, or to find a way to subdue him. The equipment they have is
sparse, but there could be some secret location in the community or even outside of it. He trusts doctors least of all but this one promises to keep his secret, not-so-subtly hinting that he expects their guest to come through if someone has a serious injury in the future.

Win looks a bit under the weather, but otherwise no worse for wear, sat up on her cot putting her boots back on. She is less than pleased to see The Soldier - Steve can't make out most of what she says in her language, but he knows the incredulous tone. *Steve, you're a well-intentioned idiot.* He pulls the dictionary from his back pocket. This will require some obscure vocabulary. Where to begin?

The Soldier says something to her in perfect Cantonese. Win's mouth snaps shut so hard her teeth clack. She stares at him, then Steve, then the bigger man again for a long moment, mouth opening and closing a few times before she responds cautiously. He answers. They talk for several minutes before tears begin to spill down her cheeks.

"Hey, what are you saying to her?" Steve questions protectively.

Win picks up some of his words, notices his voice and face are filled with concern. She takes Steve's hand, smiling, says something to the Soldier.

"She asked me to tell you this is the first actual conversation she has had in three years." The brunette informs him. "She forgives you for being stupid enough to bring me here. She also says in this shirt I am...beef. I do not understand, but she is certain you will."

Win enlists the Soldier as her translator, takes him and Steve to visit everyone she wants or needs to talk to. They have to see Clint first though, confirm that he's kept his fat trap shut. He swears that he has, says that he knows no good can come of repeating what the Soldier had told him. He needs his arrows and he's not pissing off the people who make sure he has them.

"I know the blood thing was a joke anyway. You really got me there, Jumbo." Clint lightly punches The Soldier's arm. The taller man's expression changes in an almost - but not quite to Steve - imperceptible way that the blonde thinks of as his "assessing a possible threat" face. He's used to needing to notice the most minute changes in someone's look, to prepare for the consequences of their mood change.

"That's a friendly gesture," Steve tells him quickly. After a moment, the Soldier does the same in kind to Clint, with his metal fist. The archer winces, making Win and Steve chuckle.

Everywhere they go the Claptrappers eye the visitor - with distrust, fear, curiosity, morbid interest - but are often so taken with Win's discovery that it's a secondary concern. She and Steve are trusted and well-liked by most of the community. The other citizens are not as slow to accept the explanation for his new friend's appearance as he had feared (and Steve was calling him "friend," to put people further at ease). Claptrappers heard all kinds of reports of what happened in and beyond the wasteland; at this point something as simple as a medical experiment seems perfectly believable compared to the far-fetched tales being tossed around. The newest one, carried in by a group that had passed through a week before, was about a mutated monster with a terribly scarred up face who was roaming the land in search of a treasure chest.

Win has a massive list of work set up by mid-afternoon, enough to keep her busy (and in traded goods) for months. She is finally able to suss out technical details of jobs that were difficult to discuss with just hand signals and the dictionary. She and Steve walk their rounds, maintenance machinery, make a few simple repairs. They also stop to fix a few small leaks in the irrigation system. It's during this last task that Steve first learns the Soldier can eat actual food - one of the workers offers them fresh strawberries and he slowly munches a handful while looking around,
intrigued by the scale of the production. Steve was surprised when the Soldier expressed guarded interest and gave him a (he hoped not too boring) agro lesson.

They had tried to grow produce in the open but the thin, dry soil supported very little. They had a bit more luck with container gardens, using bagged potting soil from a small country store that was still half standing about twelve miles away, but it was so limited in quantity. When Wanda and Simon arrived, college professors with pertinent backgrounds, they had formulated fertilizer from human waste to improve the soil. The locals were horrified, but it worked. The sterilization method was not completely safe, so they never used it on things that would be eaten raw or where the edible portion grew directly in the ground.

The community eventually scavenged industrial fertilizer and raw ingredients to amend the soil, such as nitrogen. Very few were settling after the collapse and agricultural implements were often left untouched. There was plenty of rotten food, cotton balls, tea bags, coffee grounds and filters, paper towels and other compostable materials frozen in time in the tightly packed, anaerobic conditions of the dump. It was common to find newspapers decades-old that were still entirely readable. Unless it was obviously contaminated, they mixed in shredded paper and uncoated cardboard from the recycling facility, along with food scraps from Claptrap. Once they had their first fully composted batch, they could branch out into safely growing more foods eaten raw, no poo required.

Eventually the wall stopped the dust - the coating it left on everything had been affecting the plants' respiration and photosynthesis. They had built greenhouse after greenhouse once glass manufacturing took off, opening portions to ventilate the houses by day and closing them up at night to keep the temperatures to ideal levels. They had also created tarps that could easily be put over some of the houses to shade them if the variety of plant inside did not do well in intense heat or too much direct sunlight. Heartier crops could still be grown in the field. Food production boomed. Everyone who lived in Claptrap was provided with a small lunch and dinner, and that would include the Soldier now. Extra goods and non-perishable food could be earned through working for the community or traded for.

The Soldier takes in everything with rapt attention. Win's welding torch, and the sparks it creates, stirs an instinctual panic and he recognizes the distraction is useful. He had liked watching Steve work earlier - his long, clever fingers moving carefully, oiling pulleys, tightening gears, adjusting various small parts. He does not know how to define the feeling that settles in his chest watching the intense look the smaller man had gotten - brows furrowed, the tip of his tongue poking out between his lips - only that he finds himself impressed with Steve's skill. The bigger man knows many ways to make someone suffer without killing them and inversely how to end them swiftly with a single blow. He knows how to move silently in the darkness, how to use virtually any weapon. He knows nothing about machines, save the basics of the one attached to him.

The Soldier's metal arm was a more recent upgrade - his original flesh one had been completely obliterated on a mission, and they found he could not regenerate a limb (though he had pressed his severed hand back to his wrist once and watched - felt - bone, muscle and flesh knit back together). The new tech was why he was in a separate facility from the others when the government had fallen.

The arm was predominantly mechanical parts, designed to mimic the inner workings of a human limb, housed in a series of plates capable of sliding slightly under or over each other to allow flexibility. A breathable but waterproof seal fused each plate to the next, invisible from the external casing, which was molded to mimic his real arm. The experimental alloyed metal was not terribly heavy but it was incredibly strong - he had even deflected bullets with it. Separate from his body it was half hollow and useless, despite the interest it raised from many who attempted to take it from
him.

The doctors at the facility had done a horrifically painful procedure to get nerve, veins, blood vessels and muscle tissue to grow down into the device, wrapping around artificial tendons, joints and bones. It allowed him fairly normal movement, control, even some sensation. It was a slow process and he had little time once it was fully operational before being unceremoniously ordered back into cryosleep. As such, he was not entirely familiar with all of its workings or maintenance. Perhaps it was fortuitous that he had met the little mechanic.
Flowers in the Claptrap

Chapter Summary

Steve finds out familial normalcy is the Soldier's poison.

"This is a...human child? I have never seen one so small." The Soldier looks almost as uncomfortable with the little girl's attentions as he had when the burst from the flamethrower passed near them. She pulls on his pant leg, babbling half-gibberish. He's bolt upright in the wooden kitchen chair he had grudgingly sat in at Steve's insistence (he would not take the first one offered, with his back to the door).

"Yeah. She's a toddler." Steve smiles wide at her as she turns to him briefly, makes a stupid face that gets her to giggle.

"Todd. Lur. It is not a... baby?"

"Like a baby but a little older. Violet, how old are you?" The little girl holds up two fingers in response before moving to fondle his metal arm. She raps her knuckles on it and shrieks happily at the soft clang. Steve bites back a laugh; after everything he's seen this is the moment that finally makes the Soldier's eyes go a little wide.

"What is it doing?" His voice is even a bit different, still soft but with the faintest hint of panic.

"I seem to remember you not liking to be called it." Steve says with a smirk as his new acquaintance eyes the girl like a tiny terrorist. "She's just curious."

"Steeeeeeeve!" She squeals happily, turning to put her arms up. He bends down so she can slide them around his neck, hoists her up with one arm tucked under her bottom.

Violet had saved Steve. Not in a literal way, like she had mind powers or knew karate or gave him an organ, nor had she stopped him from suicide (the thing many of his companions feared he would attempt when he first arrived). Even at his worst, he had only vaguely considered killing himself. He wasn't religious, but his mother had been a strict Catholic and he couldn't shake the nagging feeling it would disappoint her. There was very little left of Sarah Roger's son when he had come to Claptrap but the parts that kept his body going remained.

Steve had refused to stay with Nick, or anyone, when he and the others had first brought the young man to the settlement. He couldn't stomach the thought of them being near when he was asleep, vulnerable. Nick had let him stay in the drunk tank - the remnants of a county sheriff station remained at the base of the hill - but even then he wouldn't use the cot attached to one side of the cage, putting the sleeping bag they gave him in the middle of the floor, far enough from the sides that no one could reach between the bars and touch him. He used a little spool of wire he pocketed and the empty cans from the ancient soda they had added to his meals to rig up something like an alarm system if the door was slid open.

He barely ever left the cage to begin with, despite Natasha - a short, curvy, beautiful redhead with a slightly hollow look in her hazel green eyes - coming to urge him out into the world daily. She had been with Clint and Nick when they'd found him. He knew right away, at that first meeting, she
was a smooth talker. Maybe an ex headshrinker. Or a con artist. She'd tried to use her charm, laced with subtle psychological cues, to convince him to put the gun down. He looked her dead in the eye and said "I'm not buying what you're selling, lady."

She respected that, which is why she tried not to break his arm when she kicked the pistol out of his hand. Eventually he let her think she'd wore him down, because he could tell it hurt her pride a little he wasn't coming around to her extremely well-done manipulation. Or maybe that was what she wanted him to think and it was another layer to her game. Either way, he was just so bored of sitting there. She had taken him to the pub for breakfast, was off in the back trying to convince Vic to sneak them both a cup of coffee, when he saw her, an infant in what appeared to be her father's arms (judging by the shared light blond hair).

Steve stared, open mouthed, even after the much taller man noticed and started to look back at him, frowning in concern. He knew from a very brief stint in front of a mirror that he looked horrifying - most of the right side of his face puffy and black with bruises, his lips split open in several places, a gash in his forehead. His expression is haunted, like the people he had seen on history films as a boy being freed from prisoner of war camps.

There's a soft but heated exchange between the man and the person sitting next to him, a woman in a bright red sweater with cream colored skin and long auburn hair. She takes the baby and stands. Steve finally looks away when she heads straight towards him, expecting her to freak out.

"You're Steve, right? I'm Wanda," she says with a tentative smile, "and this is Violet." She tilts the child enough so Steve can get a good look at her. Even at this distance he can't help but go back to staring, his good eye wide. His other eye had finally opened a little this morning after being swollen shut for days.

He had played nanny to Mrs. Polanski's kids when he was thirteen - a baby named Sid and a slightly older boy named Mark. He grew to love them surprisingly quick, doting and protective. Then she had gotten back together with her estranged husband. When he had come home to Steve at their apartment one night - and the children's mother had explained he had been babysitting once in awhile, would stay tonight if they wanted to go out - he had called Steve a faggot. He accused him of being unsafe to have around his little boys and demanded he leave.

"Wow, faggot. I've never heard that one before," the boy retorted. He was slight and pretty and shy in a way little boys weren't "supposed" to be - it was the go to insult around the building. He heard it less after puberty when he developed a voice almost comically deep coming out of him. He had heard Mr. Polanski hurting his wife a week later and stormed in, smashed a chair across his back, knocking him down and accidentally bouncing his head on the coffee table. There was no avoiding the ambulance. Only the man's lengthy record for domestic violence kept Steve from getting in serious trouble with the police. Court-ordered anger management followed. It was mildly successful, until the trash can lid thing.

"I'm not a creep, I swear. I just... I never thought I'd see one again," he whispers.

"A lot of people say that." Her voice is kind, holds an unspoken understanding.

"Would you like to hold her?" Wanda asks. "It's okay," she reassures, easing the tiny bundle into his trembling arms.

He looks down into the sweet little face, gray eyes peering curiously back up at him. His own mist over, hot tears running down his cheeks seconds later. He can't remember the last time the urge had struck him and he hadn't switched himself off inside - disassociating from whatever was happening - or let the rage bubble up and burn it away.
"Sorry," he says, trying to give the baby back after a droplet falls down onto her chubby cheek from his gaunt one.

"I got this!" Wanda takes a rag from her pocket, folds it over. She wipes the tear from her daughter's face then, moving slowly like he's a deer that will spook, dries Steve's face as well. He winces a little.

"Sorry! Parenting skills include immunity to disgust at the fluids of other people and no personal boundaries." She smiles. "Want me to blow your nose for you too?"

He laughs. *When was the last time he had done that?*

Wanda brings the baby to see him in the cell a few times and eventually invites him to visit the shack she shares with Simon - the tall, lanky man with straw colored hair and light eyes he had seen her with before. His accent is almost too British, like he's in a period film, and a contrast to Wanda's (which Steve has placed as Eastern European). It takes the older man awhile to trust their visitor, with his face moddled purple and yellow for weeks and his demeanor like a stray dog, but he is a gracious host. Simon also can't deny how quickly the baby takes to Wanda's new friend.

They shared their exodus story with Steve fairly fast. That was almost standard "how's the weather?" conversation here. Both had been teaching at the same coastal city university for a few years and fancied the other, but neither had worked up the nerve to do anything about it. It suddenly seemed so silly, with the plague spreading fast and places around the globe falling into chaos. With a few friends and colleagues they left as the city erupted into violence, heading through burning suburbs into rural America and beyond.

Wanda's brother, Piotr, fell sick first; he'd been visiting from overseas, which she thought lucky at the beginning. Soon Wanda and Simon were making an abandoned barn into a triage for their stricken companions. A week and a half later, they left the farm - alone. A row of crosses in a field was the only sign they'd been there at all.

Steve, emboldened by his new friendships, started working at the yard and even going on scavenging runs once Nick gave his weapons back. He brought Violet a cradle, scavenged at the dump and cleaned up, complete with a little mattress made of a truck's seat foam he'd even sewn a cover for. His mom had taught him - she was tired of fixing the rips in his clothes from fighting.

"A baby just shouldn't have to sleep in a box," he'd said, trying to side-step any praise.

They offered to let him move in with them a bit after and help look after Violet. Wanda was extremely busy with the community's agriculture and Simon was finding ways to filter used motor oil and coolant for the few trucks they had running. Steve slept on the floor near Violet's crib, in the makeshift addition they'd added as her room. He made himself a padded facemask to wear at night, to muffle himself when he talked and screamed in his sleep. He'd woken himself up in the drunk tank more than once that way.

When he jolted up, breathing hard, soaked in sweat, he'd go to the cradle and put a shaky hand on Violet's tiny belly, feel the peaceful rise and fall of her breath. A few parts of himself - his wit, his penchant for interesting conversation - came back quickly. His defiance and mouthiness had never entirely left. Others things took longer. Some, he realized, may not return at all. He wouldn't touch anyone but Violet at first, not even a handshake.

The baby symbolized all the cliché things to him that they so often do - new beginnings, innocence, a chance at a future - but also the easy way he was able to be around her reminded him he was still a person. She made him want to put himself back together so that he could build a
better Claptrap for her to grow up in. So that her parents' trust in him as fundamentally a good person was not misplaced.

Violet had taken to Win immediately when Steve introduced her to Wanda and Simon. She helped build a crib when she was too big for the cradle and would talk to her constantly in Cantonese. At least - the welder thought - I'll have one person to talk with normally, eventually. After all the business, and pleasure, of today's visits, Win had saved the best for last.

"She wants to see the flower," the Soldier had relayed to Steve on her behalf an hour before, assuming she meant something in the greenhouse. He had not expected this or that Simon and Wanda would seem not at all afraid of him. On the contrary they were very friendly, too friendly, too curious. Simon in particular asked him many technical questions about his arm and the vaccine trials. He had no practice lying, had literally never needed to do it, and at some point simply stood up and walked out of the building rather than say something Steve would not want him to.

The younger man had smoothed it over, telling Simon his friend's injury was a sore subject, and Wanda chastised her partner for being so pushy. Steve had found the Soldier back at his home, mask and goggles firmly on along with the vest, laid out on top of the bed roll clutching a mid-sized automatic weapon across his body with both hands. He'd apparently had it in his massive bag, which Nick had curiously not confiscated.

He gave up attempting to get the brunette to answer him after twenty minutes. The Soldier even lay motionless while Steve knelt next to him, popped the magazine out and confirmed this weapon was just as empty as the pistol. Save the slow rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, he appeared dead. Steve sighed heavily and threw a blanket over the Soldier's face, regretting it immediately as he sees doing this for his mother's body with her bedcovers. He took it back off his guest as soon as he was changed into his nightshirt. He read a bit then went to bed early. It had been an exhausting day, after all.
Steve surprises the Soldier in more ways than one.

Steve is less than amused when the Soldier is in the exact same position the next morning and still won't answer him. He sits down next to the bigger man and starts to undo the mask's side clip. The Soldier's hand is up like a shot, tight around Steve's wrist. The pressure is not enough to hurt him but definitely to tell him that what he is doing is off limits. The hand immediately returns to the stock of the weapon.

In less than ten minutes Win arrives, eager to see her new translator. She's sorely disappointed when he won't move or respond. She speaks to him in Cantonese off and on for a while, before nudging him several times with her boot and asking Steve sarcastically if he's dead.

No. Pouting." He makes a whiny face to demonstrate, twisting his lips into an exaggerated frown and pretending to rub tears from under his eyes with the insides of his fists. It's the same gesture Frank Delino used to make at him as he'd taunt "baby gonna cry?" Steve couldn't resist saying it back to him after he had smashed the trash can lid into his face several times, still clutching it in front of him like a shield by the handle. The truth was, Frank was already bawling. Steve begrudgingly had to admit the other boy was even more handsome after his nose healed.

"Call the wahmbulance," Win said pointedly down at the Soldier. She'd learned that one from Clint. She blows out a long breath, cheeks puffing up, then shakes her head.

The Soldier is surprised when Steve leaves with her without a word. Believing his host to be out for some time he begins to think about how he should spend it. He chastises himself for not planning during the previous evening. He had ransacked the smaller man's entire home once he was asleep, carefully placed everything back exactly as it was. There was nothing to indicate that Steve had been false with him in any way.

He had paused only briefly to watch Steve in his bed as he whimpered and twisted, had even considered waking him from his distress. It had been illogical though, the smaller man allowing him into his community, into his home, especially when he was so obviously wracked by trauma. There must be something else going on here. He watches Steve for another minute, ensuring that he is not acting.

He needed to see the quarters of the one they called Fury. It would be virtually impossible in daylight, even for someone as fast and stealthy as him, with how close together most of the buildings were. Perhaps he would have an easier time sneaking into the medical facility to evaluate what else may be hiding there. Then there was the home of the people with the small, squelching thing - the todd-lur.

While he is evaluating his potential targets, Steve returns. He can smell the fresh fruit before he even sees the bowl, which is only a moment later as Steve stands over him. The aroma is pleasant but not nearly as good as Steve (he smells similar to spiced peaches right now).

"I brought you breakfast," the blonde says pleasantly, sitting down cross legged next to him on the
crumpled blanket that had covered his face, briefly, the night before.

He is unsure what had motivated him to get in full uniform last night, only that it had been safe, familiar. He had felt something twist inside him watching Steve through the dark lenses of his goggles as the blonde tried to get him to speak, face working through a series of expressions - worried, disappointed, resigned, weary. He did not know the words to express the foreign feeling of fear that had been slowly building in him since he came here.

He is at an impasse of what to do - he is hungry, and putting something into his stomach would help quell the need. That will require interacting, and he has no desire for more discussion, to hear this person pretend to befriend him while they conceal their alternate motivations. He realizes that he feels very foolish, falsely believing that the protection he provided earned him some measure of acceptance, that he could trust the intent of this person. Still he had not left even though he could have taken his things and slipped away well before Steve returned. He has no explanation and had puzzled through it the entire evening, stretched out on his bedroll.

He does not know why he came here. It was just as easy, perhaps easier, to continue his mission outside of the walls. Keeping Claptrap safe meant keeping the asset safe. He had told himself that he could recover intel, being inside, but it feels less like a reason and more like an excuse.

Operating alone was common practice when he had still been a Winter Soldier in the true sense of the words and he had been confined without his "siblings" for many months in the supplemental facility, spent a long time alone on the road. Yet only a few brief hours of companionship and so quickly he had felt an instinctual need to retain it. He could not even blame The Cling, as he had with Luis.

Weak.

Steve places a strawberry directly on top of the vent in the front of his mask. His stomach loudly growls, though from which source he cannot say.

"I was not expecting that," Steve says with a little laugh, picking it back off. "Come on. You're obviously hungry."

The Soldier lies there, indecisive. Steve sighs in a way he has already become familiar with, puts the bowl down, then starts to work at the latch on his mask again. The Soldier's hand comes up, gripping his forearm but much lighter than earlier. He does not stop Steve from removing it - relinquishing his hold on the blonde - or the goggles after. The smaller man raises both eyebrows at him, one side of his mouth quirked up, as if to say was that really so hard?

Something like panic rises slow in his gullet at the feeling that look evokes.

The Soldier knows the food is not poisoned. He would be able to smell it, even if it were the most subtle of notes. He still doesn't move to take any or to sit up, only slides his eyes sideways to stare up at Steve.

"Fine," the blonde says, "if you're going to act like a baby, I'll feed you like one."

He picks up a strawberry and pushes it to the Soldier's lips. They tentatively open to accept it. The smaller man's fingertips are lightly calloused, so warm. He can taste Steve on the fruit.

After several more, the bigger man finally says, "It is shocking you will go so far to get my guard down, to gain my trust."

Steve looks away, shakes his head slightly side to side, and then turns back again.
"I actually thought I had it already, considering you didn't bolt out of here last night when you so clearly wanted to. If you think I'm out to get you, why are you still here?"

Steve pops two blueberries into the other man's mouth, almost angrily. The Soldier chews slowly, eyeing him with something close to naked suspicion compared to his usually guarded expressions. He does not like that the little mechanic's words seem to be mimicking thoughts he had only minutes ago.

"Did they choose you to lure me here because you are small and weak and I would not suspect you as a threat?"

"Wow, rude. So it isn't just me? I'm part of some sort of conspiracy against you?" The blonde almost sounds amused.

"First your leader lets me in without checking me for weapons, even though he knows the threat I pose. Then the doctor asks for my blood and the scientist questions me about my arm. It is clear they are attempting to gain information from me, to study me. You are working on their behalf to put me at ease."

Nick had ultimately been the one who had convinced Steve to return to Claptrap with them, but Bruce talked him into submitting to medical inspection; he had screamed that he wanted to fucking leave after they said he had to take his clothes off. Communicable disease was still a thing, even for the bug immune. People brought everything from ringworm to leprosy into the junktowns with them.

To the doctor's credit he had ushered Fury out of the room, very calmly explained that he needed to check the blonde over. To listen to his vitals, especially his lungs to ensure he didn't have anything like pneumonia or tuberculosis, and to see the extent of his injuries. Especially, those ones.

"I've seen other people sit like that before. I need to see how hurt you are. If you let it go, you could get an infection, have permanent damage. Believe me." Steve could see from the look in his eyes that he was sincere, sympathetic (or he deserved an Oscar for feigning compassion so well, not that there was anyone left to give it to him). The idea that Dr. Bruce Banner, with his rumpled hair and stammer, who had asked him quietly which position would be the least difficult for him to be examined in, was some sort of secret government sadist was laughable.

"It's almost funny, watching you be so salty around a mouthful of berries," Steve says.

The Soldier swallows the half chewed lump, eyes squinting ever-so-slightly at Steve. It was like the smaller man had shut off for a moment, his eyes going dead and then flickering back on.

"There's a glaring hole in your theory. You know that Nick knows exactly what you are and how you work. What would be the point of all the subterfuge?"

"Perhaps he is unfamiliar with the technology attached to me. Perhaps he does not know my weaknesses." I will not fall prey to your produce manipulations.

"Um, fire. Duh."

The Soldier is displeased. He had been trained not to show emotion, never to raise his voice to his masters, and when he was determined not compliant enough they had installed the neural net and taken the ability to show feeling or raise dissent completely away from him. The alterations in his facial expression and tone were extremely minimal even now. How had this person read into his subtle reactions so well after such a short time together?
"The alternate option is that you are foolish and overly trusting. As an example, I could easily bite your fingers off." He mentally congratulates himself on this excellent and very scary response.

"I'm not," the smaller man had said simply, not sounding at all concerned, just reaching out to him with more fruit.

"Afraid?"

"Trusting. Every person I trust in the whole world was in that little house last night, right before you left." Steve looks down at his free hand picking at the blanket, several berries poised in the other.

Was the blonde implying that had included him? That it had included him but only until he had (ran away) taken his leave? Or was his inclusion purely incidental? I trust those other people, you just happened to be there.

"I understand how hard it is, to come to a place like this where people still act like people after a long time of being around ones who don't. I was terrified at first, assumed everyone was out to get me. I had no idea how to make small talk or do anything that wasn't just stay alive. Every time people were nice to me, I thought it was a trick. I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"You thought they would steal your shoes?" The Soldier questions.

"No, it's a phrase. It means you are waiting for something you think will happen, you just don't know when. Usually something bad."

This almost perfectly described the creeping, anxious feeling in the Soldier's gut.

"What about Fury? Do you not trust him?" He cautiously accepts raspberries as Steve again offers. He is not familiar with those, and is unsure if he likes the taste at first.

"Nick has done a lot for me, but I'm not an idiot. He always has a plan and there's nothing that stands in the way of that, least of all me."

"Natasha? Clint?" He does not recall the name of the woman at the junkyard who referred to Steve as her kid. He knows that is a young goat. It must be a slang term.

"Nat puts her own agenda first, Fury's second. I'm on her important people list, but certainly not at the top. And Clint means well, but at the end of the day he's on her side, and she's on Nick's."

"Are these people not... your friends?" The Soldier says, chewing a rather large strawberry.

"Liking people and depending on them to have your back against an enemy isn't the same as naively believing that they're going to put you above their own wants and needs."

The Soldier knew all about Want. And Need. Right now the want was telling him to pull Steve on top of him, that he could be gentle, careful, not drink too much, that it would be so good. The need was telling him how empty his belly was, how weak and disoriented he would feel by tomorrow, how impatient it would become when that happened. He ignored both of them.

"I am dangerous," the Soldier does not understand why he says it, his voice gravelly and low, but he cannot silence himself. "I do not believe you can trust me."

"Everyone's dangerous in their own way," Steve says. He considers the bigger man for a long time after, to the point that the Soldier thinks to look away to break their locked gaze.
The blonde dips two fingers into the berry juice left in the bottom of the bowl, curling his other digits to his palm. He reaches towards the Soldier's face, presses the ends of his fingers to the center of the brunette's lips until they part, slides them inside his mouth.

The Soldier cannot help the little noise that comes out of him at the combined taste, the heat, the tactile sensation. Nor can he resist tightening his lips around Steve's fingers, sucking the juice off as they slowly start to leave his mouth. He presses his tongue to them, up and forward, forming a barrier between Steve's skin and his lower teeth, his lip pressing down from above to keep the fingers separate from the teeth on top. They are all very sharp, not just the pointier ones. The lightest contact and the blonde's blood will be in his mouth, and then he will not be able to stop himself.

The Soldier pictures Steve's revulsion at him - his eyes glowing, his tight grip around Steve's wrist keeping the fingers in his mouth so that he can suck from them, groaning helplessly at the taste.

He does not have words for the act of trust that has just occurred between them, but he knows he cannot ruin it.

"See? Fingers intact." Steve half-smiles. "Take this stuff off," he adds quietly. For the briefest second, the Soldier is confused at his intention. Then the blonde says "you can wear my shirt again. We'll go do something fun."
Cows Moo, Ducks Quack, Babies Scream

Chapter Summary

Steve and the Soldier's situation isn't all domestic bliss.

The next six months passed quickly in retrospect. Steve and the Soldier fell into a somewhat comfortable routine, getting up around sunrise most mornings, changing with their backs to each other on their respective sides of the room. Steve's nightmares had declined back to their previous infrequency, and he was sleeping pretty well. It wasn't like his guest snored.

That second day they had gone to the Super Store to find clothes for the taller man, a few extra dishes (you brought your own to the messhall) and a comb to get the mats out of his long hair. The Soldier had eventually given up on sleeping in his clothes, often filthy from the day. He would not accept one of Steve's large night shirts to wear. He wondered how Steve could stand feeling so exposed. When he had certain ones on, and the fabric was clingy, he could tell there was nothing beneath them. He had found sweats to wear instead and even finally started to sleep inside the bag, blankets pulled over him. It had been laundered, but it all still smelled like Steve.

They would get their breakfast in the pub, something not everyone participated in. Clint explained to the Soldier that you could have a container of oats all to yourself and have to "eat plain, boring ass oatmeal until your insides glued up," or you could trade in your oats (or whatever breakfast items) to the pub. Those who contributed would get served from small cold and hot lines each morning for however long their trade-in credit was good for. Something big, like a family sized can of juice, would buy you a week. Something small like a single serving box of cereal, or helping in the kitchen that morning, would get you a day. This was how Vic - a handsome, early middle-aged, light skinned black man with a large build, close cropped beard and short afro - kept the pub busy. He offered breakfast cocktails in trade for other goods (part of why Clint was regularly drunk before eight o'clock) - and himself fed. He was one of the few who did not participate in any public works and thus was entitled to almost nothing from the public stores.

Steve had traded for potatoes as soon as he got his "property," cut them up into pieces, layered them in barrels with soil and compost behind his house. It was based on a project Ms. Ruiz had done with them in middle school. Each piece would grow a whole new potato - he'd keep some of them and do the same again, trading the others for his pub credits. They had home fries or hash browns or latkas daily.

Lunch and dinner were in the messhall, made from the community's public produce and scavenged items; much of the non-perishable food found on the road would end up in the public coffers. Scavenging was a "public works" job - like agriculture, trashpicking, glass making, guard duty, working medical or messhall, or maintaining the machines used for communal purposes - so the community got most of what was found with the scavengers getting a cut for their risk. People who put their name in rotated so everyone could have a chance. Many did not volunteer; it was not unheard of to encounter hostiles. Nick didn't want any chickenshits in the field who couldn't handle themselves anyway, he'd said.

The Soldier, required to be attached at the hip to Steve, was on rotation with him and went on all the same runs. On the first, they had headed out with Greta and some of the others. They didn't run
into trouble, which disappointed the Soldier a little since he had only been subsisting on solid food and animal blood. He had gotten a few vermin in one of the abandoned houses during the brief minutes he could separate from the others. Greta watched him like a hawk almost the entire time. Unlike the others, who largely bought Steve's explanation for his friend's strange appearance, Greta seemed to know precisely what he was. She had seen what he could do at the yard.

They discovered the Soldier could not eat most processed food - he threw up several times after canned ravioli - but could consume produce and lightly cooked meat. His back teeth were a strange combination of a molar like structure but with sharper points. They could grind or tear. They had fed him some kind of tasteless gruel in the facility; he did not know what it contained. After he had caught and lifted Vic's new still tank up onto its foundation (it had slipped from its hoist and nearly crushed the older man to death as Steve was assisting him with the winch), the pub owner made the Soldier a bloody steak for lunch - perfectly trimmed and barely seared on the outside.

The Soldier ate it with relish while Steve took Vic in the back of the otherwise empty pub, got his word that he would not tell anyone what he had seen. Even what most people assumed was a robotic arm could not explain how he had hoisted the massive tank. It gave the Soldier long enough alone to lick the plate, it's spotlessness not lost on Vic when he returned. He started slipping the Soldier little glasses of blood, claiming it was tomato juice, when he came to breakfast at the pub if there was any available from the raw meat.

They couldn't keep livestock at first, not being able to sacrifice the huge amount of water they required, until they had been able to tap the aquifers near the town. Very few farm animals had survived in the local ecological conditions, often abandoned (or mercy killed) by their owners, but Claptrappers would run across them occasionally and bring them to the settlement. Steve and the Soldier would sneak to the makeshift barn - another public works employer - on their way home at night. If the workers were gone and they could shake their shadow, the Soldier could drink a little from the bigger animals while Steve kept watch.

When a cluster of ducks was butchered and hung to bleed out one day, Steve managed to fill a four quart plastic container, claiming he would use it to make czarnina. One of the butchers had looked at him with suspicion and disgust, but the other commented that his Polish grandmother used to make the duck blood soup. Steve was already preparing an excuse in case the guy asked to have some, but he quickly added that he didn't care for it.

Steve had sent the Soldier ahead (to avoid procuring the blood with his fanged, grayish friend at his side) and hurried home, lid firmly on to ensure it was still hot. The blonde had no idea what it said about him that he sort of enjoyed watching the brunette drink it, spying on him from bed over the top of his book to take in his half closed, glassy eyes, the way his throat moved, the way his tongue would swipe over his lips each time he brought the container away from them. He looked two steps away from drug fueled ecstasy and it wasn't even from a mammal - he'd never looked that way after they'd left the pens. Steve realized they were not rushed here; the brunette could drink it slow, savor it, really enjoy the affects.

When the Soldier had inquired how raw meat was kept fresh in the community, Steve explained they had started generating limited amounts of electricity through various renewable means. They had a small solar array and he and Win had built small-scale wind turbines. People had argued at first over how the power should be used. There wasn't close to enough for a fraction of the buildings, so they used battery operated lamps and candles in their homes. Ultimately everyone agreed that they wanted their medical center lit (the Soldier had noticed functional overheads on his first visit) and their beer cold. Ice for their liquor was nice too.

So power to just part of the pub - a former "house of ill repute" as Vic joked - had been turned on,
allowing them to use the walk in cooler (now shared with the messhall and the butchers) and an ice machine. In return, every resident got one free drink token a week. The settlement was named after The Claptrap, the establishment predating the pub, much to Nick's chagrin. Steve assumed it was supposed to be a funny double entendre when the place was a strip club, though no one but Clint found it as such. It had served a wide swath of tiny communities who didn't want it in their own backyard, just like the dump. Hypocrites. Vic (the former bouncer and sometimes bartender), some of the dancers and a few locals took shelter there after their towns had gone to shit. Other than the sheriff's station it had been the only thing for miles.

Steve and the Soldier made the rounds if there was equipment that needed maintenance or repairs, assisted Win with translation and welding (though the Soldier always kept his distance while she worked). The other Claptrappers slowly stopped paying much attention to him, beyond the occasional odd look, idle gossip or judgmental comment believed to be out of his ear shot; with the Soldier's hearing, very few were.

People would refer to him as Steve's boyfriend regularly, and he simply presumed it meant a friend who was male. The smaller man had seemed strange about it when someone asked him directly if the brunette was, in fact, his boyfriend and had insisted that it was not true. It briefly called what they had built with each other into question for the Soldier. Were they not friends? Steve had certainly referred to him that way many times.

When he asked Win about it, she was not sure how much he would understand about interpersonal relationships, romance or sex. His Cantonese accent and sentence structure were academically perfect, but his vocabulary was just as stunted as in any other language, his reactions to things relaying his lack of real world experience.

"Boyfriends are...men who are more than friends. They have strong emotions about each other."

"More than friends" sounded like a secret level of friendship that you had to work extra hard to unlock. The Soldier liked a challenge. And he had strong emotions, plenty of them, but few tools to process them - if they were too complex he became confused, frightened or angry. He found himself envious of the ease with which other people interacted, often feeling that he was playing at being a person rather than actually being one. He would have to try harder, be better, more normal.

The Soldier had to kill someone in front of Steve literally the next day, crushing the assailant's skull with a hard blow from his metal fist when the man ran at them with an axe. Steve is angry at first, chastising him for killing the person so quickly when he may have just been acting out of fear. The Soldier tells him that he had smelled fresh blood - more than one kind - all over the man, among other things he would not elaborate on. He was a threat. They find four freshly dead bodies in an outlying building on the property, stripped and hung up to bleed out in buckets below. It's a horrible discovery, but the Soldier's quick actions impressed Greta and she eases up on him.

"Flesheater," the Soldier said, looking over the scene, thinking back to his first time meeting Clint. Steve had told the others that he and the Soldier would bury the corpses while they picked the place over. The blonde calmly gave him permission to drain the man and drink whatever he needed to out of the receptacles.

The Soldier just stared at him for a long time until Steve, neck craned to look back up at him, quietly said, "It's not a test. I know you're really hungry, that the animals aren't enough."

How? How did he know that? The Soldier was so careful to hide it. He drank his fill from the man and the pails, after carefully taking down the bodies - a woman, man and two teenagers - and covering them with a tarp. They put them in the ground in silence, burying the butcher separate.
Steve had stayed quiet the entire ride home, picking at the blister on his hand the shovel had caused.

The blonde apologized - looking very small and tired in his pile of blankets later at home - for chastising him, for not appreciating his protection. He assured the Soldier his mood was not about anything the bigger man had done. If they had only gotten there a little bit sooner, the people would still be alive. The brunette had searched hard for words of comfort or absolution, but could not find any. He felt something like guilt that much of the strength in him now had come from the misfortune and cruelty of others. He would not ascend to the next friendship level if things continued to go that way.

There had been a rough patch more recently. He had tried to make one of the faces at Violet that Steve often did, but she had screamed with terror rather than delight. The little girl toddled over to hide behind her mother, tears gushing down her reddened face. The Soldier lay on his bed roll with his mask and goggles on for a whole day. He could tell Steve was disappointed he had regressed to that but he could not stand to think of anyone else looking at him, only seeing the girl's horror reflected there. He finally took them off the next morning but would not leave the shack.

Two days later Wanda brought her daughter over with a drawing she had done; it was mostly colored scribbles but was obviously intended to be three people. From the hair, the smaller two figures were Win and Steve, her with the black buzzcut and his a fluffy shock of yellow. The taller figure has dark brown hair and the left-arm was colored with metallic silver crayon. Wanda was blissfully unaware the large man was hiding from everyone, which meant Steve had lied for him yet again, made excuses for his absence from their almost daily visits. Violet had kept asking where "Soljuh" was. When the Soldier quietly apologized for upsetting the child on his last visit, Wanda laughed and explained that once she had yelled "boo" unexpectedly and Violet had an identical reaction, running to Simon screaming like her hair was on fire. The Soldier shuttered internally at the thought.

The little girl had insisted that the Soldier carry her around after. Steve explained without Simon along for their walk, the Soldier was the tallest and offered the best view. The smaller man was not unhappy with the arrangement - she got heavy for him quickly nowadays. The taller man felt something like pride that the child had judged him worthy. Steve said he had offered to give her parents what he had called "alone time together." The Soldier was very curious what that meant, but did not ask. How could they be alone, together? And what were they doing while they were?

Even in this part of the world, stricken with drought and so close to the wastes, there were still subtle changes in the seasons. It was growing a bit more tolerable during the day but much colder at night. Steve's breath hung visible in the air by the time they returned Violet to her parents. The Soldier had stared at Steve in quiet surprise for a long time after he had offered to let him sleep in bed with him that night. Beyond catching the smaller man a few times when he had slipped at the yard, and a few accidental brushes, they had not touched again after the day with the berries.

"It's freezing in here, plus it's so big I would hardly notice you," Steve had said. The bed was impractically large for the tiny space.

The Soldier declined with no explanation - he had not fed recently and would not be as warm as Steve. He did not want the smaller man to notice this about him if he had not already, just one more thing setting him apart from the humans around him. Besides, it was so much harder to think that close to him when he was hungry. It was already difficult at a distance.

Steve had just calmly told him that the offer was open if he should change his mind in the future.
**Your name is Buck, right? And you're here'ta...**

### Chapter Summary

Steve asks the age-old question, what's in a name?

In Claptrap, virtually everyone had a nickname. They were primarily used over walkie-talkie and CB, but some people - like Win - went by their's all the time. She had learned Americans gave no shits about what her real name was and would probably not make the effort to call her by it if she told them. Steve had tried, more than once, to get it out of her. She would just pretend to not understand and eventually he would change the subject.

Unlike other people, she knew he would make every effort to use it and say it correctly. Not telling him, not hearing her real name spoken fondly from his lips was just one of the many ways she kept the barriers up inside herself against him early in their friendship. The Soldier lacked the social niceties of other people. He had not asked what her real name was, maybe did not even realize Win wasn't it, and Steve had been too distracted to think to have him ask. For now.

It was Clint who had first started calling Steve "Captain America," after a particularly long lecture from the smaller man about what he felt the nation was supposed to have stood for and how they could bring those ideals into their new world, instead of the same pointless bigotry and scramble to be on top. Social Justice Warrior Steve had stuck briefly but it was too on the nose for Clint's liking. Steve in return had sarcastically nicknamed him Hawkeye because, for a former Olympic gold medalist with 20/20 vision who claimed he could shoot the wings off a fly, he seemed to constantly miss everything happening around him until there was danger or titties involved.

They called Nat "Black Widow" because she went through a long string of men before Clint came around. It was rumored that most of them had been killed, some even by her. She claimed she just hadn't been that interested in settling down, her lovers couldn't handle it and, since Claptrap had not had as much to offer then as it did now, had simply went elsewhere. She was dangerous though - Steve had seen that first hand more than once. She didn't talk about what she had done in the old world but she showed up here already knowing Fury and that said a lot.

Nick had been one of the first people to show up at Claptrap, other than thirty or so locals from nearby towns that no longer existed. His comrades, now former military, already called him Fury when they arrived with him after the collapse of civilization. Phil, who was more like an assistant to Fury than a colleague (he desperately wanted a nickname but never had one stick), drunkenly offered one night that Fury was in fact not a nickname at all but Nick's family surname.

"He just thinks it sounds cool, to pretend people chose to call him that," he said, rolling his eyes.

Names have power. They say a lot about who you are, or are not, to those around you. Did they care, or respect (fear) you enough to call you what you chose or at least something that represented just you? Or maybe something shared with someone, but with meaning, like naming your child after your parent. The Soldier had no name of his own.

Clint started calling him "Two-Three" over the walkie and the Soldier found it acceptable. It bothered Steve, wore on his mind like one of those little splits in your cuticle that would heal if you stopped fussing with it. The Soldier was a number, one of many. Like a socket from a set,
interchangable and absent purpose without a wrench to guide it.

"Did they ever call you anything else?" Steve had finally queried one day.

After a short, silent consideration, the Soldier had responded flatly, "Deadman."

Steve couldn't help pondering that it would be a pretty badass nickname, but he didn't think it would exactly endear the Soldier to the locals. Some of them still whispered about him being a zombie or a cannibal, or a cannibal-zombie, which Steve felt was fairly redundant (like saying "assless chaps"). The fact that people heard Fury talk about the eye-eating incident was not helpful.

A few days later, Steve had returned to the yard on a foraging expedition. It was nearly Nat's birthday. He had strongly considered giving her the sexy nightdress, but since he had been sleeping in it (and occasionally jerking off in it) for two and a half years he thought that was a bit...grody. Some part of him liked the difference in the way the Soldier looked at him when he wore it versus his other bedtime creations, one freckle-spattered shoulder hanging out of the thin fabric, but he wouldn't actively admit it to himself.

He and the Soldier were going through a fresh pile of trash that the last team had excavated when they came across a mounted stag head. It had been a beautiful preservation job, and the ten-point rack was mostly intact, but part of its face was missing. The Soldier held it reverently between his hands and stared intently into the remaining eye for so long that it started to make Steve concerned.

"Looks like Fury," Steve half-chuckled, attempting to cut the tension with a joke.

"Buck." The Soldier said simply in return, enunciating the consonants more than was typical for him, like he was feeling out the concept behind the word. The holes in the Soldier's vocabulary still occasionally surprised Steve. As best as he could tell, his new friend was extremely skilled in all of the languages he spoke. The younger man had watched him interact in at least half a dozen different ones by now - sometimes calling people out on not so slyly talking shit about one or both of them but often just to put people at ease. There were words he just didn't appear to know though, or seemed to take a long time to recollect the meaning of.

Steve imagined him learning pictures of animals in a workbook like a small child after the military reanimated him. This is a buck. This is a doe. You don't need to remember them; you'll be hunting humans.

"Have you," Steve paused, "seen one of those before? Alive I mean?"

"Yes," the Soldier stated simply, handing it to him without looking up.

Steve considers the state of the stag head. Nat is actually really into taxidermy, bones and pelts. Maybe that's why she fell for Clint. He is a gifted hunter after all. The blonde envisions a pretty but disturbing art project, and is lost in his thoughts when the Soldier speaks again.

"I remember a woman sometimes from… before." He makes an odd half-gesture towards his face with his metal arm. "She says this word again and again. Buck. I think… it is his name."

"Whose name?" Steve looks at the Soldier gazing at his silver hand and wants to say something sympathetic. Sorry the government felt the need to take your entire history from you in the name of their own selfish ends. Sorry you feel like a freak because they mutilated you, but hey, a metal limb is pretty cool right?

"The one who… was this body, before."
"So, then, it's **your** name?" Steve asks cautiously.

"No... Yes. I am unsure how to answer." The Soldier sounds perplexed, though anyone other than Steve wouldn't notice the minute shift in his tone.

Steve takes one glove off, reaches out slowly, gently squeezes the upper part of the Soldier's organic arm. "It's okay. You don't have to."

They look at each for a long moment, the Soldier unblinking, until Steve turns away. After rooting through the heap in silence for nearly twenty minutes the Soldier offers, voice even more soft than usual:

"You can call me Buck if you want."

"Okay. **Buck.**" Steve swears a little shiver goes down the Soldier's spine when he says the word out loud.

Back at Claptrap too late for the mess meal, Steve makes them dinner while the Soldier - no, **Buck** - brings their bedding in from the line. Buck had thought from night one he would be fine laying with nothing on the cold floor, that this was an unnecessary luxury. He told himself he went through the motions for appearance's sake - to seem more human, to not reveal his abilities any further - not because he liked the physical comfort the bag and blankets provided. Lately he had become acutely aware how much looking "normal" for Steve motivated him. For instance, he ate the food the younger man offered even though it would do very little to keep the empty feeling in his stomach at bay. The **need** was loud this evening.

It was usually easier outside, in the open air. The smell of Steve, clinging to all of his possessions and trapped inside the small metal box that they both now called home, became overwhelming sometimes. Buck would lay there in the night, mouth watering, teeth extended, canines pressing into his bottom lip. Sometimes he would manage to drift off but the same dream would wake him - crossing the room, sliding Steve easily out of the bed, pulling the smaller man's head to the side, driving his teeth into the soft little neck.

At least when Steve was asleep, Buck could use the hatch in the ceiling to go up to the roof. He would lay on the cold corrugated steel until he was able to calm down, until he could no longer see the glow from his eyes reflected on his metal hand when he held it above his face. Until his teeth had retracted. Sometimes the visions crept into the day when the blonde was too near as well. Steve would lecture him ad nauseam about not wearing the mask inside Claptrap, so putting it on to hide what was happening was not an easy option. He could not let Steve see his face, changed with need. With want when the need was quiet. His friend would be disgusted or terrified.

After their closeness in the yard and back at the house today, his hunger felt massive. Buck wandered out particularly far to escape the thoughts that flooded in even stronger once Steve was settled under his covers. He heard gargled screams and followed them to two men next to a small fire, one writhing on top of a limp form while the other watched, laughing. Buck had barely gotten any blood out of the first one, practically ripping him to pieces and wasting most of it in the dirt. Chuckles ran off into the night, giving Buck enough time to realize that the prone body was already dead, one side of their head caved in.

He had easily chased the other man down, made sure that the bite was painful, that he felt everything as the life slowly left him. The Soldier drank every drop he could, forcing his own pulse into the man after his heart had stopped to keep the blood flowing. Buck lay on his back after in the scrub grass for a long time, watching his breath form little clouds with the starry sky as their backdrop. He felt sated and not the slightest bit conflicted about what he had just done. There were
murderers who killed out of self-defense. People who attacked you out of fear. Thieves who stole out of necessity. They could be spared unless absolutely necessary, but rapists and slavers needed killing.

There was nothing of interest in any of their things except a map with this area circled. Perhaps they were looking for the settlement. Good then that he had found them before they had found it. He could not have any Claptrappers running across his kill - he messily buried them and their possessions with his hands. He dug a separate, better grave for their victim, closed their eyes with his metal fingers, crossed their arms like he had seen in one of Steve's books. The Soldier had a long debate with himself - he should just bury them, blood and all, but it could be some time before he got more; there was no bringing them back after all. Ultimately he drained them as well, then put the body carefully in the Earth with a small apology. He could not help but think of Steve's melancholy when they were only hours too late to save the people hung in the shed - Buck had missed protecting this person by minutes. He would do better next time.

Buck snuck back into Steve's home, stripped and cleaned himself up carefully, then changed into one of Steve's nightshirts. The smaller man looked surprised but not upset when he was awakened by Buck sliding in bed with him. He felt confident he could do that now that his belly was full and his body warm; not even the intense cold outside had touched him. The bigger man reached out, slow and careful, placing his flesh hand on Steve's upper arm and giving it a gentle squeeze, mirroring the smaller man's gesture from that morning. He tried to copy the little smile that bloomed on Steve's face with his own, closed mouthed to hide his teeth. It was nice to be so near Steve, to feel his heat, to touch him without the hunger constantly chattering at the back of his mind. Buck had even slept and woke well after sun up, feeling less muddled than usual.

Steve was already gone on his rounds, a note on top of the low bookshelf that made up his headboard under a can of peaches. He could not believe the younger man would be able to leave without the noise waking him. He stretched out in the bed - it really was huge - then rolled over face down, inhaling Steve's scent from the pillows. The feed-want he felt was only a pleasant titillation, not a desperate plea, the need blissfully silent. It was good to be full, to be in charge of his thoughts, his body.

It was his body. He was not a Winter Soldier anymore, not a tool for others to accomplish their ends. Nor would he ever be the the person who came before. He was becoming something like a person though and it seemed right to reclaim part of the name this body was called when it was human. Buck. He liked the way Steve said it, softness in the sound of the first consonant when his full lips pressed together to make it.

He was not sure why he had put Steve's nightshirt on, only that it felt right to wear it in the smaller man's bed. When he had turned onto his belly the covers slid partially off. Buck does not typically wake up this warm, buried in such heavy blankets that trap and amplify his body heat, nor does he usually leave his own bedcovers with so little on; his skin reacts noticeably to the chill and the contrast is stimulating. He is suddenly very aware of himself - goosebumps lightly prickling at his flesh arm, long, bare legs stretched the length of the mattress, a cool eddy between his legs under the open shirt. He mostly ignores those parts of himself even though, as Fury had mentioned, he was anatomically the same to a human in that respect.

He occasionally woke with his member partially erect and today was the same; he could feel it pushing awkwardly into the mattress and returned to laying on his back. Normally it would be pressing uncomfortably against the thick fabric of his uniform trousers - he would ignore it, it would go away. There was no restraint now. On the contrary, the soft, thin fabric felt good against him. He has never touched himself there before except in necessity, does not know why - in this moment, in this place - he reaches down and rubs himself gently through the cloth.
A little breath bursts out of him. The feeling is very pleasant; he grows harder, that want allowed to become a little louder for the first time. He keeps doing it, slowly intensifying the pressure, until a little groan escapes his mouth. There is a moment of doubt - perhaps he is not meant to do this, perhaps sexual pleasure is not something he has the right to - but he feels a small spark of anger at that. This is his body and if it is capable of enjoyment that hurts no one he should be able to feel it.

The Soldier has never been fully unclothed since he left the facility. He had been ordered to do so there, was often left naked in his cell, exposed in the laboratory or operating rooms for all to see, touched and prodded, used. The sudden surge of defiance presses him to disrobe for his own designs, no one else's. He stretches back out, completely nude, looking up at the collage that covers the ceiling. It has often fascinated him as he laid on his bedroll, but he has not studied this portion before.

As he surveys the artwork, his flesh hand drifts lazily back to his penis, still engorged. Touching it now, skin to skin, produces an even stronger sensation than before. He just rubs himself at first, not entirely sure what he is doing. Eventually he wraps his hand loosely around the shaft, slides it slowly to the tip of his length and then down to the base, nested in coarse, curly hair. His nerves buzz pleasantly as he repeats the gesture again and again, slowly tightening his grip. His fingers graze over the head on an upstroke, accidentally gathering the wetness that has formed on the tip, spreading it along one side of his length as he slides his hand back down. The slickness feels even better. He brings his hand to his mouth, licks it several times, covering it in a generous layer of saliva.

When he returns his hand experimentally to himself the slide of it is incredible. He openly moans, a guttural, needy sound. His hips rock up off the bed as his hand strokes, thrusting into the tight, hot wetness. His metal hand runs slowly over his body, fingertips light against his hip, abs, chest. Their cool press is invigorating against his warm skin. He finds the hard nub of his nipple, whimpers at how sensitive it is. He begins rubbing it in slow circles, panting, until suddenly a hot rush of pleasure whites out everything like a nuclear blast.

When he can finally open his eyes, he feels the cold air where he is wet on his chest and belly. He runs a trembling hand through the moisture and lifts it for inspection. The liquid that came out of him is slightly viscous, perfectly clear, with a mildly sugary aroma. It is the faintest bit sweet when he tastes it. He cleans himself with a rag, adds it to their pile of dirty laundry, eats his breakfast and then heads to find Steve, his body swimming with little currents of electricity.

"Does he... look sort of happy to you?" Clint asks Steve when Buck joins them at the aluminium extruder.
Buck tries to reconcile his past with his present.

Steve started a new pre-bedtime routine of reading together with Buck once it became clear the bigger man intended to keep sharing his bed. They would sit a few feet apart with their backs to the wall, legs splayed out on the mattress, each with their own choice in hand. Eventually, if their knees touched on accident they would not move away from each other. The smaller man voraciously consumed books - the monument to his gleaned knowledge was shimmering in the sun as it shielded the entire settlement.

It was slower going for the Soldier. Fiction fully baffled him. Between metaphors, euphemisms, slang, idioms and colloquialisms, he could only understand about half of what he was reading. He was certainly intelligent but context clues proved difficult for deciphering these literary devices. One had to understand what the sentence was conveying to presume the meaning of a word within it. If Buck did ask questions, Steve would patiently try to answer - occasionally the bigger man was even more confused after.

The event, no the act, that had happened that first morning in Steve's bed was in his thoughts a lot. What did it mean? Was the act something others did? Was it okay for him to ask Steve about? Was the location in which it was performed acceptable? When could he do it again? He was virtually never alone.

Steve asked him one night if he wanted to join him for a game of cards at Win's house - he had politely declined. The sweats were pooled around his ankles within minutes of the smaller man's exit, the sound of his spit covered hand making little wet noises as he stroked himself standing next to the bed. He finishes quickly and is surprised to find himself hard not much later. He does it again, tentatively cupping his sack with his metal hand. That part of himself is so sensitive and he quickly learns to be careful not to squeeze too hard; he does not enjoy pain with his pleasure. It takes much longer to get release a second time but it feels even more amazing when he finally does, his desperate noises echoing off the metal walls. Steve begins making a weekly habit of the card games - Win seems to miss having time with just Steve and he thinks it is good for Buck to not feel like he is being babysat (despite what Nick had originally said). The Soldier takes full advantage of this time alone, experimenting.

Buck started to read only manuals (even a random set of stereo instructions) and academic books. Their language was technical but straightforward, saying precisely what was meant. One day digging through a rather large pile of the latter in a musty box he discovered an old hardcover about human sexuality. It had what was described as a "rave review" on the back by someone named Dr. Ruth, lauding how comprehensive it was. He had side-eyed Steve, ensured he was not looking, then switched the dust jacket with one from a book about the rainforest. He had silently shown it to the blonde when asked, nervous he would sense the falsehood, but the smaller man just gave him a little smile and returned to his own book.

He understood what sexual intercourse was in the sense that it entailed the entrance of a penis into another person's anus or vagina, that in the latter situation a child could be produced, but beyond
that… It was not a subject people seemed to speak about so he questioned if it was acceptable to do so and by extension to talk about what he was doing to himself. Certainly it seemed related to sexual intercourse even if it did not involve a partner. Perhaps he could gain information from the text. He reads the entire book in one night. Reads it again the next. Rereads it a third time.

It gives him answers - what he had done was a form of what was called masturbation, it was quite common and starting to do it was a normal part of adolescent development - however it raised so many new questions. Firstly, why was he just starting now? He was not an adolescent. It was clear from his primary and secondary sex characteristics, which he learned about in the book, this body had hit "puberty" long before the Winter Soldier existed. Certainly its previous owner had "jerked off," one of the many slangs listed for the act. He decided that was a terrible phrase since he had actually ripped off someone's penis before.

He could guess that what had been done to him had buried his "libido," as he learned the sexual drive was called. When he had awakened (no, had been reanimated) there was only pain, fear, confusion. Jumbled thoughts, cold skin, holes in his body that slowly closed but did not fully disappear. He could not form words or keep focus on what was being said to him by the people around him.

His human teeth had fallen out one by one once he was placed in isolation. His new set pushed into their place, leaving him spitting and drooling dark blood all over the metal box they kept him in as he screamed. He could feel the musculature in his jaws changing, adapting to retract the teeth partially into his gums. It left a more manageable sized portion of them - still longer than his original ones - exposed in his mouth. He cut himself on them often at first.

Then it had started, the need.

His new teeth descended from the top, ascended from the bottom, filling up the space to the point he could not keep his lips together. The drive to feed made him a mindless beast, tearing apart whatever - or whoever - they put in with him.

Only after the need was fulfilled again and again did something like coherent thought start to come to him, speech slowly following. The want took its place. He was untethered from whoever he was before and much of the knowledge that person possessed, unaware that he had even been anything or anyone else before gaining consciousness in this place. The context clues of what was happening to him were useless when he could not comprehend what normal human life or behavior was. You cannot recognize you are an experiment if you do not know what science even is. The want, at first, only said one thing in its wordless voice - if you feed, you will escape this for a time.

It held onto a piece of him even while his mind was systematically rebuilt by their techniques. Even when they experimented on him, testing his limits. Even when they tortured him to make him comply - when they shock him for raising his voice, burn him for showing anger, fear, hesitation. When they whipped his knuckles or the soles of his feet with a thin metal rod because he failed at some task.

We learn through suffering, the lead trainer had said.

The want contributed to his non-compliance. He attacked guards, doctors, even though he was well-fed (blood and gruel), even though he had started to learn to ignore the need. He wanted to behave, to please, to succeed, but the fleeting moment of bliss when he drank - of everything else melting away - was worth whatever they did to him. The memory of seeing the man with the rod ripped in half, of being soaked in his hot blood, became the bedtime story the Soldier told himself that allowed him to sleep.
Some days all he could see were his teeth falling out onto the floor of his cell again and again. He often resisted returning to it. The cell meant no distractions from whatever this existence was. Eventually he started to dream, seeing things that were not from this place, even though surely he had only ever been here. The dreams filled him with panic, longing, sadness - all things he lacked the words to express or experience to comprehend. Only cryofreeze stops them.

Dr. Zola, the small, bespectacled man with the pinched face who ran the facility, looked different when he saw him next. His hair thinned. Wrinkles around his eyes. All new staff attend his demands. The Soldier does not have a chance to do what the want tells him. Massive metal bands restrain him as they slice his scalp, the protective layer beneath it, clip them to the sides to keep them from healing back together. As they saw through his skull then slice the barrier around his brain. He is fully awake throughout - no anesthesia or pain killer has been found that works on his kind. He hears the screams of others before they are drown out with his own.

The doctor tells him a series of words - there is a static-like sound and feeling in his head, all of his nerves on fire, his ears ring, his vision going white. It is over in less than a second. Suddenly he is blank. Orders follow and he obeys. When he is meant to serve a new person, they tell him the series of words and he becomes their puppet.

He still possesses the skills they trained him in - multiple languages, hand to hand combat, weapons use, explosives, deciphering technical schematics and maps - and could speak when spoken to or required by mission parameters. He could register something like physical pain to alert him his body was becoming excessively damaged.

Looking back now he realizes even with the neural net in a vague, unconscious way he had sensed the need in its own prison somewhere in his depths. Even when he was not fed it was never for a moment free to take control. But there was nothing else - no thought, no feeling, no emotions. There are no dreams when they (rarely) allow him rest, only black void. He is in and out of cryosleep regularly, Zola becoming more gray and hunched each time he sees him.

The want was more elusive. It began to speak silently from many places yet from nowhere, growing more prominent over time in the emptiness of his mind, particularly when he was ordered to endure... certain things. *Something is not right. Something is not right. Something is not right. We do not want this. Make it stop. Drink them.* He cannot heed it. He is the picture of obedience. Later he will take comfort that the damage to his brain (though now healed) blurred out some of those memories.

The book talked about sexual trauma, but he skipped most of that chapter. It upset him in an undefinable way. He did not want to equate sexual violation with the victimhood he forced on others when he bled them. Was he violating them, even when he let them live? Did they wake in the night seeing his eyes, feeling his teeth in them, sweating with fear even though he was possibly hundreds of miles away? Luis had certainly not seemed to feel victimized, but that had been a special set of circumstances and he could not guarantee that someone else would react the same in identical ones.

It also discussed psychological development in tandem with sexuality. He was not thrilled to discover he qualified as "emotionally immature," but talk of the emotional bond that could lead to sex, or forge or deepen from it, was very interesting. He had not considered that people had intercourse for reasons other than their own base pleasure or pro-creation. In addition he is shocked to learn that "sex" does not need to involve a penis at all. It can be done between people of any gender identity (a very new concept to him) with hands, mouths, *objects*. He had looked at his metal hand for a while after reading that part.
It is difficult for him to understand the nuances between what the book calls romantic attraction versus sexual attraction, romantic love versus love based in friendship or family ties. This mirrors his own difficulty separating the want, the need, this new (old?) want, his desire for companionship.

Understanding why his relationship with Steve is not like those with others often vexes him. He would not sleep in bed with Natasha, does not feel a hot stab of neediness if Clint is too busy with other people. The warm feeling he gets when Win puts her hand on his arm or Simon smiles at him as he holds Violet is very different than when Steve does those things, but he cannot explain in what way. Emotions are ephemeral (he really liked that new word) and hard to pin down, hard to separate from the feed-drive.

The training in the facility allowed him to be more than the need, to be a warrior, but their other teachings lingered in every corner of his mind. He had to slowly build on becoming something (someone) else after he had left his cryotube for the last time, to develop his own way of being - absent instruction. His own morality (another newly learned word). Now, he was evolving again mentally, emotionally, perhaps recovering parts from the person he had been when he was actually Buck.

That suddenly felt correct, that he was the actual Buck, or at least pieces of whatever was left of him formed the foundation of who he was turning into. He was not some new consciousness stuffed into an empty vessel, even if he did not have access to their - his - memories. Maybe with a handle on the bloodlust, many advancements made towards undoing the years of brainwashing, there were very human wants and needs surfacing. Sexual. Emotional.

A realization dawns. Steve is human. He may have those wants and needs.
Strange Bedfellows

Chapter Summary

Steve's morning is a shitshow.

Steve is a bit surprised to be summoned to Nick's office by Carol, explicit instructions to come alone (precisely what Buck was going to be busy doing, unbeknownst to the mechanic, during his absence). She eyes the Soldier with interest as he moves to stand not far behind the smaller man, still in his sweatpants and a t-shirt, looking her up and down.

"So, he's kinda hot," she offers after a few moments of walking in silence. "That why you don't come to poker anymore?"

"No, I've been playing at Win's and... just busy." He doesn't look at her.

"Busy gettin' busy? Or busy avoiding me and Sam busy?" She gives him a glowing smile, mouthful of perfect straight white teeth that he catches from the corner of his eye. She looks like the golden volleyball fantasy of every college boy, just that hint of tomboy that makes her even more approachable. Steve doesn't answer her.

"Look, what happened...I really hoped that we could at least be friends. For a long time I thought we would be. We were seeing you around a lot more and things were cool..." She puts her hands in her pockets, fans out her elbows as she walks.

"Maybe you shouldn't have kept inviting me over to have sex with you." Steve stops, looks her dead in the face. He had never admitted it to himself, but it bothered him that they kept insinuating they should pick up where they left off. Like what happened had been a minor inconvenience, easily forgotten, and not a breakdown-worthy event.

"We never said come over and have sex with us, did we? We just invited you to hang out. You read into things. Just like you read into what happened that night. No one was trying to do anything that you didn't want." Carol's voice isn't unkind, but it cuts through him anyway.

"Excuse me? So I, what, asked for it?"

"I didn't mean that like it sounded. I..." She looks sincere. He doesn't stay to hear the rest, walking away from her without a backwards glance, straight to Fury's office.

Steve and Nick have barely spoken since the argument at the gate, the former less than thrilled that the latter is still occasionally having them followed. Steve's inherent distrust of someone so blatantly used to being the biggest swinging dick in the room had only deepened once his suspicions about Nick's background turned out to be nowhere near as bad as the truth.

"How are you sleeping?" Nick asks with an (on-purpose) poorly disguised smirk.

"I presume you already know," Steve responds, staring the taller man down. So much for spying on them occasionally. He pictures Phil outside his window with a comically huge telephoto lense.

"You never cease to amaze me, kid. I once saw you pop Clint Barton in the nose for grabbin' your
arm, but you invited a bloodsucking monster between your sheets." Fury is leaning against the long oak cabinet behind his desk, arms folded.

_Invited. Is he listening to them too?_

Steve wonders for the thousandth time how Fury can stand to wear that trenchcoat in this heat (though it's still a bit cool this early). He does cut an impressive figure in it - tall, dark skinned, head shaved, not exactly handsome but with a certain magnetic intensity radiating from his remaining good eye.

"Correction," Steve looks at him from under his brows, head pivoting a bit from side to side like it often does when he's spoiling to tell someone off, _"he came up behind me and grabbed my arm._ Buck is smart enough to not do that."

"Buck? You named the puppy?" Nick has that look. _I'm very displeased with your flippancy, Rogers._

"No that _is_ his name. Was his name. Before you and your friends experimented on him. Not sure you have room to talk in the monster department, using a dead man for your little program._

He feels like he's tarnished the gift given to him of the name by sharing it with Nick - the Soldier has only ever instructed Steve to call him Buck. The dig at the taller man makes him feel a bit better about it though.

Fury barks out a laugh, shakes his head. _"It was never my little program. I thought I made that clear. Man, they took some serious time writing its back story, making it sympathetic._"

"And who exactly is _they?_" The smaller man lifts his hand and circles it dramatically at the last word. _"Do you have a Nixon complex or do you have someone specific in mind that's supposed to be plotting against us?"

"You can't see what it's doing? Endearing itself to you, using you to get access._ Fury mimics his gesture.

_Get access to what?_

Steve let's out a loud _"ha"_ - it sounds a touch hysterical. _"If only you knew how much like the Soldier you sound. You're out to get him, he's out to get you. I'm a hapless pawn in one of your games, I'm a manipulative spy in the other. Yada yada._ He sounds excessively bored with the whole thing.

"It told you it thought you were trying to manipulate it?" This actually seems to interest Fury.

"I mean, to begin with that's what _he_ assumed. I guess my charming personality won _him_ over._ God, this was one step away from talking to a transphobe. Pronouns. Are. Important, Steve wants to grate out.

"I thought it was fooling you, but now I see you're fooling yourself. You think you have some kind of connection with it? You think it...what? Loves you? Wants you?"

_The insinuation being no one could love him. No one could want him. Damaged goods. Crazy little shit that bites the hand that feeds. Pissing off hot blonde girls when they try to make amends with you._

"He protects this place. Helps with the work. And he asks for nothing in return anyone else here
wouldn't." Steve tries to sound matter-of-fact but there's an edge to his tone.

Honestly, he disliked what Fury had asked just as much as how he had asked it. He had no idea how to define his relationship with the Soldier and actively avoided thinking about it, especially since they'd started sharing the covers. The blonde still had no idea what possessed him to offer that but he knew having Buck near did make him feel safer.

"Three hots and a cot, right?" Fury sneers. "It must have loved that Tupperware bin of blood you special delivered to it, maybe more than snacking on the cows."

"He hasn't hurt anyone." The smaller man is painfully aware of how guilty that sounded. You're caught, Rogers. Hand in the cookie jar. Duck in the Rubbermaid.

"Anyone inside the wall, anyway." Nick has that I know something you don't know tone the blonde often finds so infuriating. He follows it with an intentionally long pause.

Steve's brows furrow. What did Fury mean, no one inside the wall? Almost as if reading his mind, the taller man adds, "I hear it bashed a man's head in on one of the runs."

"He was protecting me." Nope, Steve, you don't sound incredibly defensive at all, buddy.

"And when it stopped to slurp down pails of blood from the slaughtered family, was it protecting you then?"

Yes, Steve wants to say. From himself. He could see the need twisting at Buck sometimes, even though he tried so hard to conceal it.

"There was nothing we could do for them. If that's what it takes to keep him strong so he can help defend us, I can live with it." And he can. Of all the things that bothered him about the situation, dead body bloodharvesting was quite far down the list.

"And when the animals and the corpses aren't enough?" Nick looks dead serious, not a hint of mockery.

"If you think he's such a danger, why did you let him in here?" He can't help but think these are words very close to Buck's own coming from his mouth. There's the briefest flicker of doubt; maybe, just maybe, the Soldier isn't here entirely for his stated reasons. Maybe he is quietly molding Steve's view.

"Keep your friends close, keep genetically enhanced hellspawn closer." Fury moves his head in a little circle as he says it, light reflecting off his scalp. He's sweating in his jacket after all.

It finally dawns on Steve. "There's something you want from him, isn't there?"

"Sure. Eternal life. And some of those tight pants he's always wearing. I just want this place and all inside it, even your punk ass, to be safe." Fury plays it off perfectly. Anyone would buy his sarcasm, his "I'm the mean uncle who still cares" routine.

Nick doesn't know it, and maybe the only other person to catch on is Nat, but he has a tell. Just a minute twitch of his spindly eyebrow. Steve had memorized even the smallest details of Brock's body language - he had to always be a step ahead of him, mentally at least - and all that practice now helped him read other people (like the Soldier, so he'd thought). He watches Fury's face - eyebrow twitch, right on time.

"That's exactly why I brought him here. He's a one man army." Steve pretends to play along,
dropping his former question. Fury would only reveal his agenda directly if he wanted to, not if pressed. Catching him in a slip will be difficult but easier than trying to force the issue.

Fury finally raises his voice, like Steve is being willfully stupid. "Trouble being it's not a man!"

The blonde can't help thinking the Soldier certainly looked like a man. Steve had accidentally caught a peak one morning - when he'd sat up and pushed the covers back the other man's nightshirt was twisted and hitched up. It had happened to Steve in his sleep more than once. The Soldier had covered himself quickly and went back to wearing sweatpants to bed. Fury was right that it was all there so far as he could tell, grayish like the rest of him with a soft lavender hue in some areas rather than pinkish like Steve's.

That's possibly the most inappropriate train of thought in the world for you to be having right now, Steve, while your sort-of-boss grills you.

Besides, seeing him (seeing - ahem - it) had upset him more than anything. He had gotten comfortable thinking of the Soldier as a non-sexual being, someone it was okay to be close with because he would never, ever want anything like that. Admittedly it hadn't stopped the blonde from letting the brunette share the bed - just because the Soldier had a penis didn't mean he used it for anything. Steve's suddenly very sure he's overlooked something, though he isn't entirely sure what or in which way. Maybe he has been (is being) willfully stupid.

After a lot more squabbling, Steve returns home to a faintly sweet smell in the air he can't place.

"What did you have for breakfast?" He queries Buck as he sniffs. The Soldier is curled up with a book in bed. Steve notices, not for the first time, that the bigger man has been reading the same one about the rainforest off and on for over a month.

"Nothing. I was waiting for you." Buck gives him a little smile; it touches his eyes but isn't quite big enough to make the skin around them crinkle. Had he ever done that before, except in response to Steve doing it first? Steve feels something in him warm a little. He's instantly suspicious of the feeling.

Maybe he is manipulating me.

Steve waits for Buck to oh so casually ask what Fury wanted, but he doesn't.

It's not like what Nick had said was entirely off base or Steve hadn't thought about it a lot, especially at the beginning. It was absurd, all of it. The Soldier was designed to be a killing machine, an agent of destruction, a tool of global manipulation. Just because no one was pulling his strings - and Steve still couldn't imagine the amount of instruction that would have to go into making the Soldier behave in such a complex, nuanced way were he still able to be ordered around - didn't mean he was without an agenda.

Do you think it loves you? Wants you?

The Soldier had never seen Steve before the day he'd first saved the smaller man's life. Certainly nothing like affection or lust (if he felt those things) had driven him to do that. Right?

The taller man rises to change, pops his shirt off right before he strolls past Steve to his things. Okay. He had been openly shirtless in front of Steve before during the first time with the syringe but never after. The blonde presumed the Soldier had become aware nudity made him a bit...squidgy. Still, he can't help but note Buck's nipples are lavender, a slightly lighter shade than his…
Do you think it loves you? Wants you? He hears an internal voice pantomiming Fury.

Okay, this is ridiculous, Steve thinks.

He realizes Nick has gotten exactly what he wanted. In forty-five minutes he's shaken the seven plus months of trust Steve had built with the Soldier, made his subconscious start to not so subtly question what exactly the fuck he was doing in this situation.
Waste not, want not.

Chapter Summary

Buck recalls learning about his body and wonders about the bodies of others.

Months before entering the vicinity of Claptrap, the Soldier freed a group of half-naked teenagers chained together under a highway overpass. Normally he gave the undeserving (as he had started to think of those not in need of being killed) a wide berth, ignored the need until they had passed. But it had been so long, he was so hungry. Could he feed and not kill?

A giant of a man ran from the scrub, machete in hand, to reclaim his chattel. One roundhouse kick to the temple knocked him flat. The Soldier restrained him with his own chains in the remnants of a nearby diner as the frightened kids scattered. Despite the man's size, he died not long after the Soldier fed. Stopping proved extremely difficult, the hunger shrieking at him to devour, the want whispering about blotting everything else out.

He had not needed to practice self-control for a long time, the neural net eliminating the necessity. It was his first time in decades (though he had spent much of that frozen) being entirely in charge of his own actions. When he was given someone to drink in the facility, or on a mission, it went without saying that he would kill them. He would need to practice.

Defeating the next group that attacked him, he kept them restrained in a former apartment building. One of them was young, terrified, begging forgiveness as the Soldier - blood covering his face from slaughtering their leader - tied him to a chair in a small basement apartment.

"Please," he begged, "I'm not like them. I just hooked up with them and they're, they're bad fucking people. I just...I played along."

They have a collection of identification cards and trinkets - when queried, the young man confirms they are trophies from those they have killed. His eyes mist up as he says he did not participate but did nothing to stop them when they murdered an elderly man the day before.

The Soldier had learned someone facing death would say anything, but he was not naive. The man was barely more than a boy, smooth faced, big green eyes, lose ringlets in his short dark hair. He had not been nearly as slight as the little mechanic, but not large either. Certain people would do horrible things to someone like that if they seemed weak.

"If you're gonna kill me, just... please make it quick," the young man had pleaded.

The Soldier decided to leave him until he could control himself.

He killed others by accident, but was eventually able to stop before his victims passed out or right after. With practice, he learned to bite quick and deep instead of moving his head side to side or pulling back to tear at them. It caused less pain (a concern were he forced to feed on the undeserving) and no blood escaped the tight seal of his lips against their skin.

He finally understood Zola saying "waste not, want not" when they had brought him, armless, back to the facility and the other doctors had asked if he should be terminated. When he had fed like an
animal so much was lost.

Soon he could drink slowly, savoring it, healing them quick with a small bite to his tongue. They
did not deserve his mercy, but there was no sense in wasting. He had learned purely by accident -
when his blood had fallen into the knife wound of a man pinned below him some weeks before -
that it could heal humans. Some part of him registered the irony even then, though he did not yet
know that word - a weapon designed only to maim and kill who had the power to heal.

The slower, careful feeding had unexpected side effects - he noticed his pulse going into them,
spreading from his teeth, weakening their struggles. He experimented on the young man, willing it
into him much harder than the others. He was surprised at how quickly his victim's body relaxed,
even as he tried to fight back, his pleading going quiet. When questioning him later his captive
admitted the pain had disappeared, that he had felt...tingly. It takes a lot of explanation for the
Soldier to understand what that means. The young man is rewarded with a large meal and time out
of his chair for cooperating.

The next time the younger man made these soft little noises and the Soldier realized the throb was
doing more than taking away muscle control or discomfort. His captive liked it, liked it enough he
could not quiet himself. The Soldier cannot help but groan in response. The feed is better
somehow.

The others never cooperate, cursing and threatening him on a daily basis, their noise irritating. He
uses the pulsing to paralyze them but nothing else.

Every time one of them is released from their bonds, they attack him or attempt to escape. He
decides to kill them one by one, eventually discovering he could use his pulse to force circulation
into their corpses, making them easier to finish draining than a body with no heartbeat. There was
often no one around but the dead. If they were fresh enough, he could use them.

The Soldier kept the younger man well fed, gave him regular time out of the chair, never hurt or
threatened him; when he fed on him again, he had been less frightened, more yielding. The
pleasure had been more intense for both of them, the Soldier's pulse pushing into him much faster
and even harder, the helpless sounds coming out of his victim far louder than before. The Soldier
pulled him off the ground, pressed him to his chest, the younger man's feet dangling as he drank. It
felt so good, being against him, basking in his warmth, his captive's body so pliant.

He had liked pleasing the younger man, feeling bonded to him and lost in their mutual haze.
Enjoyed the way he moaned, the Soldier also unable to quiet himself. It had all felt as natural as
killing but satisfying in a totally different way.

After, the intimacy of it made the Soldier uncomfortable. He had a curiously hard time staying
away, feeling an urge to be near him, constantly returning to check his vitals. He could not bring
himself to return the restraints. Maybe his captive would wander off. Maybe that was for the best.
But when the Soldier returned from scavenging the following afternoon, he was still there.

"I'm Luis," he had shyly offered. The Soldier says nothing in response. He had no name.
Eventually when he is pressed he goes to his old stand by, Winter Soldier 23. Unlike many, who
call him Soldier if they must call him something, Luis had called him Winter. He was unsure why,
but it pleased him.

He let himself feed on the younger man many more times, stayed in the building well after he had
finished the others. It always happened, growing stronger the more comfortable his captive became
with him, the desire to be close after not even allowing the Soldier to leave the room, sitting in the
chair Luis had once been tied to as he watched him sleep. He had started to think of the effect as
The Cling. It, and the fact Luis never attempted to escape, made it difficult for the Soldier to stay objective about the nature of their situation. Especially after his prisoner (but was he anymore?) offered to let him.

Luis had bent his head to the side, taunting him with the soft expanse of his neck, telling him it was okay, that he wanted him to. It had been so incredible that time, overwhelming. The younger man bellowed with enjoyment as the Soldier rocked him back and forth to the rhythm of his pulse, drinking him slow, his blood so hot as it filled him, the Soldier's pleasure rising to an intense crescendo.

He had woken in the small bed the younger man used, tangled together with him, feeling so satisfied and relaxed. He tried to move, but the thought of separating from Luis was like ground glass under his skin. This finally spurred his ultimate decision - he needed to leave this place, this person. What good could come of taking Luis with him? Could he even protect or provide for him if he did?

The asset was still hundreds of miles away, probably in the wasteland. He only briefly considered abandoning his pursuit of it. What then? They were not exactly friends and certainly not what he would later learn to be "more than friends." The Soldier never touched him unless required, barely spoke and Luis mostly returned the favor. He could not live in (somewhat comfortable) silence with Luis forever, the occasional feeding the only thing giving him purpose. That was no life for the young man either, existing just to be his drug. Perhaps he was no better than a slaver for keeping him in the first place. Luis was undeserving.

No, he had to continue. Others could be looking for the asset. Others who could use it to hurt people like Luis. Like the many others he had freed.

He dropped the unconscious man off in the first settlement he came to later that night (as soon as he was able to bring himself to leave their warm little nest; no easy task). Mask and goggles firmly on, he made a deal with an old woman, leaving a bundle of supplies as trade for her taking in his…? He had settled on the word associate.

"Why's he out cold?" She queried, tapping Luis with her foot. The Soldier, his urge to protect still strong, had everything he could do not to break her leg.

"Low blood sugar." It is not a lie, just not exactly the truth.

The Soldier kept his pulse in check with live victims after that, still using it to semi-paralyze them or take away the pain of his bite if he wanted. Even to give them the pleasant, tingly sensation Luis described if they were worthy. He would not let it go into them further, would not risk The Cling.

Steve paid lipservice to his understanding of Buck's need for blood, even helped him obtain it. It could be different if the glowing eyes and sharp teeth were directed at him, if he had any inkling of how much Buck thought about drinking him. The need had demanded or begged or whispered to him, depending on how recently he had fed, from the first moment he was near Steve. Even at the dump, in the heat of the midday sun, or coated in engine filth, the blonde smelled delicious.

But he was in control of the need, enough at least. The want was more seductive.

The dreams and fantasies started quickly after coming to live in Claptrap. Pushing his pulse into Steve hard, pumping pleasure into the small frame, Steve's helpless little sounds filling his ears. The want would whisper to him about how much Steve would love it, how they could be wrapped together after, warm and safe. He could be careful. Gentle.
It made it so much harder to resist. The longer he spent with Steve the more he wanted to please him, to be close to him; it was difficult for him to decipher what he felt and the feed was the only type of intimacy he understood. His friend had strict ideas about bodily autonomy. If he forced his teeth in him, even if he gave him enjoyment, Steve could be angry. Perhaps he would even feel violated by the effects of his pulse, by Buck's actions in the thrall of The Cling.

Now he has the book, and it enlightens him on dozens of ways people are intimate. Did Steve perform the act? He had certainly never heard any sounds in the night and the little mechanic was rarely away from him. Did he avoid doing it because Buck was there? Would he like the Soldier to do it for him?

The book said the majority of people were attracted to someone of the opposite sex. Perhaps Steve would not want to be touched by another male. Buck feels a hot stab the text helps identify as jealousy at the thought Steve's time with Win could be sexual in nature. The Soldier reminds himself that would be Steve's choice. Win is kind, smart, brave. She makes Steve laugh and she can build things. He can only destroy.

Even if the blonde liked to be touched by males, it did not mean he would want the Soldier. He was not normal. Not human. Not any shade of peach or brown or pink. And he had no experience pleasing someone that way even if he memorized the technical specifics.

The book was explicit about body parts and how they could be stimulated, but it did very little to explain the rituals involved with sexuality between humans before the touching began. How did one offer such things?

The Soldier would have to talk to the one person he knew that spoke about sex openly. He would need to get Clint alone.
"So me and your boy had a long chat last night while you were at Win's." Clint is spreading ancient peanut butter onto toasted homemade bread. He's already three Bloody Marys deep. Tater tots weren't the only thing Vic was making with Steve's spuds.

"Wuduyamean?" Steve asks around a mouthful of grits. The Soldier is helping Vic in the back, had said he "owed him in trade."

*Clint, of course, had said "yeah, rough trade, heh heh," immediately after.*

"He showed up at my place with some beers, which explains the *trading,*" Clint makes air quotes with his fingers, "going on in the back right now."

"The Soldier," Steve points towards the back of the pub, "left the house without me, which he never does, to come to the pub on *his own,* to promise Vic, who he has talked to like twice, something or other that convinced him to hand over his beer, so he could bribe you for...?"

"As a master of the penile arts, my expert advice was needed." Clint makes a sweeping gesture with his bread.

"I cannot fucking roll my eyes hard enough. What did he actually want?" Steve snatches the toast from Clint's hand, takes a huge bite, gives it back.

"**Asshole.** Soldierboy was all like *Uncle Clint, tell me about the birds and the bees!*"

Natasha returns to the table, one Bloody Mary for herself and the second for Clint.

"*Enabler,*" Clint half-whispers. He kisses her quick on the lips, then turns back to the blonde. "Yeah so, our weird, gray little boy has grown into a weird, gray big man and he has a whole lot of questions."

Steve - lips pursed and brow furrowed in his usual "please make him stop" way - eyes the redhead.

"Oh no. Don't look at me. I can't even shut him up with a ball gag." She raises her left brow suggestively.

"Oh, baby." Clint moves like he's going to kiss her cheek but ends up making that stupid *nom nom nom* sound like a parent pretending to eat up their baby while he moves his mouth against her neck.

She shoves him off. "Focus, Barton. You can eat me later." Nat's already smoky voice goes extra sultry. She has that down to a science.

Steve had never been jealous of their relationship with each other - he was never interested in either of them "like that" - but he's always been envious of the ease with which they flirt and show each other physical affection. Steve considers that he has precisely zero game and most likely if
someone tried to nom-nom him he'd break their jaw.

God knows he'd slugged the archer more than once for getting touchy. He has a face like a cinderblock though - Steve's knuckles ache with the memory. The first time they met, after Nat booted his pistol, Fury had motioned to Clint. He had held up his hands placatingly as he stepped towards Steve.

"We just need to talk, little fella. Since you so obviously didn't learn anything from the ass whoopin' someone gave you earlier, I'd rather not have to gift you a second."

Steve, half his face dark purple and his blood-crusted lips swollen, just put up both skinny arms, balling up his slightly-too-big-for-his-body fists.

"Man, you think you got some big jangly stones on you," Clint had chuckled, getting into a grappling stance. "Okay junior, let's dance."

Steve jolted forward on his right foot, kicked Clint, hard and quick, right between the legs with his left.

"Maybe you should worry more about your own balls and less about mine," Steve spat at him.

The archer had tackled him as soon he could stand fully upright again. The blonde was flailing, scratching, biting, then Fury knocked him cold with the butt of his rifle.

Steve always remembered when he woke up, the first thing he heard was Clint telling Fury off. "You didn't need to do that! He's just a fucking kid."

"Yeah, so," Clint continues, pulling Steve back mentally to the breakfast table, "he tells me he's been, uh, dancing solo," Clint makes a slightly open fist that he pumps up and down, "and now he wants to know how you go about asking someone else to tango."

"That's..." Steve stops, deep line forming just above the bridge of his nose, mouth quirking up on one side in something that is definitely not a smile. "Wait, he's been doing what?"

"He's flogging the dolphin. Whipping the bologna pony. Spanking the monkey…" Clint makes a lewd gesture with the celery from his already half-empty new drink.

"Choking the weasel," Nat chimes in.

"Stroking the one-eyed pudding flinger," Clint replies.

"I fucking get what he means!" Steve practically yells, people turning to look at them. "But he's not...He does not do that," Steve follows in a too-loud whisper. He sounds irritated, incredulous and just a tiny bit unsure.

"Oh he has and he does. Like a bunch." The archer takes a huge, loud bite of the stalk in his hand. "He came ovah," he says with his mouth full, "tuh teww me, how heez bin comin aww ovah yer howse."

Steve looks at Nat, who just shrugs. "I was not around for this. I have hobbies."

"And when is this hauntingly described debauchery supposedly taking place? Considering he's barely out of my sight ten minutes a day." Steve crosses his arms in challenge.

Please don't say when I'm asleep. Please don't say when I'm asleep. Please don't say-
"Uh duh, he has free time every week when you're at your little card games." Clint tilts back the drink, finishes it in a few hard swigs.

Steve just stares at the bigger man for a long moment, then laughs.

"Okay, dude. Very funny. You almostgot me, you weird, sick old man." He makes double finger guns at Clint.

"Okay, fine, you don't believe me? I'll bet you." Clint takes his best goggles out of his bag, smacks them down loudly on the table. "Also I'm only like ten years older than you, dick."

"More like fifteen," Natasha chimes in.

"Now that you've possibly broken them with your ham hands, I'm not really sure I wanna bother." The blonde pokes the goggles with one long, bony finger.

"Cuz you think there's a chance that I'm right, and you're a little chickenshit." Clint is grinning from ear-to-ear, and Steve desperately wants to hit him yet again.

"And how exactly do you propose I spy on a highly trained super soldier?" He means it sarcastically, but Clint has clearly thought it out.

"The next time you're heading out for the night, and he's staying in, you make sure your curtains are cracked just enough that you can see in. Then you go for a walk, sneak back ten or fifteen later, kneel down in front of the window and see what he's up to."

"He would absolutely see me lurking outside," the blonde retorts.

Oh what big eyes you have.

"In the dark?" Nat queries.

"Yeah." Steve has stopped pulling as many punches with the other scavengers about what Buck can do - they've witnessed during runs some of the unexplainable feats the Soldier is capable of. He hopes eventually Buck won't have to hide much or any of what he is with their community.

"With the light on inside, all he'll see is the reflection of the room," Clint counters.

"He'll hear me."

Oh what big ears you have.

"Take your shoes off a ways out. Fuck, you only weigh like ninety pounds."

Steve gives him the finger.

"And if he catches me, spying on him reading the same book about the Amazon for the hundredth time, and he's super pissed?"

Oh what big teeth you have.

"Then you'll win the bet and I'll take the blame, smooth things over." The archer slides the goggles slowly off the table. They are incredibly high-tech, once a very expensive piece of equipment that Barton used to hunt at night.

"Fine, fine. But only because I know you're wrong."
"And if I'm right..." Clint starts.

"Make it my first born," the blonde interjects, smiling wryly.

"I wanna know the *deets.*" The archer leans in conspiratorially.

"What *deets?*" The smaller man copies Clint's stupid finger quotes.

"Length, girth. Is it gray? Does he growl? Does he just stand in a corner with that blank look on his face? Does he say your name while he does it?"

"You're a very disturbed man." Steve shakes his head.

"He's very open minded for a heterosexual male," the redhead chimes in.

"She's right. I even do butt stuff. But what I really want to know is how does a vampire - "

"For the thousandth time, he's not a vampire." It's not technically a lie, it's just not the whole truth.

"How does a vampire wank and is his dick bigger than mine. That's it! Not so much to ask."

"You married this person." Steve looks at Nat whilst pointing at Clint.

"I don't actually believe in marriage and since there's no government anymore it's not legally binding anyway. But he was all whiny about it. He wouldn't agree to let me peg him until I said yes."

"What does it mean to peg someone?" The Soldier's quiet voice drifts from beside them and they all jump.

Clint opens his mouth.

"NOPE! Nope, we're not having that conversation right now," Steve cuts him off.

The first conversation Steve had (if you can can call it that when one person is just screaming) after coming to was with Clint. Clint carefully cleaned the split in his forehead, holding Steve's chin with one hand to keep his head still while he thrashed against the cuffs they had him hooked to the truck wall with. His legs had restraints as well and he couldn't get enough motion to kick. Clint tried to gentle him down, to explain about the community, that if he hadn't pulled the gun everything would have been fine. Steve was frantic. Had he really gotten himself back into this sort of situation in only one day? The others were outside somewhere, close enough that he could hear them talking but not close enough to make out all of what they were saying.

"DON'T FUCKING TOUCH ME!" he screamed again and again until he was hoarse.

"**Look kid!**" Clint finally yelled back, dropping onto his haunches. Steve momentarily went quiet, ready for threats or a backhand. "I don't know what that fuck did to you but I can guess." The bigger man took an arrow from his quiver, held it up so Steve could see its length. "I'm as straight as one of these, so you got nothing to worry about."

"They all are until they're not," Steve retorted.

"You are gonna go home with us and everything is gonna be fine. Eventually you're gonna forget all about those animals. You're only gonna fuck whoever you wanna fuck and if anyone messes with you, anyone, they'll answer to me."
Steve had laughed in his face at the time, unsure if it was some sort of weird game to butter him up or if the guy was really just that naive. To think Steve setting up shop in their silly little junktown would make it like the last several years of abject horror never happened.

On their second scavenging run after Steve came to Claptrap, he had been caught unaware in a high school science lab by two guys. He'd managed to smash a beaker and stab the first one in the neck, when their less than pure intentions came to light, but the second one was huge. The blonde walloped him upside the head with a super thick textbook; it only seemed to piss him off. He slugged Steve in the gut, hard, winding him.

In a few brief moments he had Steve's arm twisted painfully behind his back and the blonde's chest shoved against a long, high worktable. Steve thrashed and screamed at the top of his lungs, the rage whitening out his vision almost as much as the pain, but it was not much use against the huge bruise. He picked Steve up by his twisted arm and the waistband of his pants and put him over the counter as his legs kicked uselessly against the man's own.

His attacker was slowed trying to get Steve's suspenders off since he had a jacket on over the shoulder straps. He fiddled with the tiny buttons that connected them to the back of the blonde's pants, telling Steve the whole time what he was going to do to him, and how he planned to keep him after for "a few more rounds." The blonde got a good shot to the man's temple with his pointy elbow when he leaned close to talk in Steve's ear. The giant pushed his other arm so high up his back he felt like he was going to pass out.

There was a whisper quiet sound like schick behind him. The grip on him loosened, released, then the huge man was stumbling back, falling with a crash, arms and legs scattering the metal-legged stools around him. Steve slid back to his feet, whipped around to see the guy on the floor, clutching at the arrow in his neck. Clint is suddenly there, yanking it out while his boot is on the man's chest, bow in his other hand.

"You okay?" Clint tried to sound calm, like it was no big deal, but his face said otherwise. Steve, wide eyed, just nodded.

The man on the floor was gurgle-screaming, spraying blood from the puncture (jugular, Steve thought absently). He clutched at it with one huge hand, the other flailing to try to grab the blonde's pantleg. What followed was the one and only time he saw Clint Barton lose his cool.

The archer stomped on the man's outstretched arm, then on his face, again and again and again, screaming down at the dying man. Some of it was unintelligible but there was a lot of "you motherfucker," and "I'll fucking kill you" and "you sick fuck" repeated. He brought his black boot down on the man's skull until it was just pieces, brains falling in small clumps from the sole each time he lifted his foot.

Whenever he's really exasperated with Clint, whenever he really, really wants to tell him off hard or embarrass him in front of everyone or kick him out of the house, he reminds himself of that moment. More so what the archer had done (and not done) after. Clint didn't tell anyone what he had seen almost happen, just gave a chuckle, said "little scrapper got one of them" and acted like there was nothing more to report.
Chapter Summary

The Soldier deviates from his mission.

Waking from cryofreeze the last time was similar to when he had first gained consciousness in the facility, after being made into this thing. The Soldier is confused, in agony, his mind a jumbled mess, his body so cold. A trembling hand raised to his head feels sharp objects embedded there. It comes away coated in blood that is pitch black.

The Soldier smells the intruders - fresh and stale blood, gun powder, boot leather - before he hears them. His ears are still ringing from the blast, from the damage to his skull. Memories splinter and reform into a sickening whirl, leaving him to act on emotion and instinct.

He rips at the things buried in him, thrashes at the debris pinning him inside the busted cryotube. They are near now, footsteps and excited voices around the corner. Muddled memories return of other boots down this hallway, coming to take him from the emptiness of his frozen sleep and push fresh horrors into his mind, into his body.

The metal arm takes him by surprise at first, the pain of the procedure rushing back to him, only increasing his panic. He can see them long before they can see him in the semi-darkness. The need is screaming, all of his reserves used on healing his body. He leaps on one, legs around their waist and arms around their shoulders, burying his face in their neck, ripping and slurping. Their companion starts to read the words, Zola's words.

The want speaks, stirring other memories. *Something is not right. Something is not right. Make it stop.*

The woman is done reading the words by the time he releases the corpse of her partner. She smiles triumphantly, orders him to stand. He does, looks at her for a long moment, as she gives him commands. There is just time to notice the necklace made of human ears and bones around her neck before he flies at her, rips her head from her body. What is left of the one on the floor is also decorated in human parts, sections of his jacket made of tattooed skin.

There are others. He hears their voices and footsteps from somewhere above yet far away, vaguely aware that he is underground, that they have somehow breached this hidden place from the surface.

More approach. He cripples one with a swift blow to the sternum from his metal fist as a second buries a knife in his chest. The Soldier only takes the briefest second to glance down at it, impaled directly in his heart, before he leaps at the person and buries his teeth in them, shaking his head from side to side like a rabid dog, blood flying in every direction. *More, more, more!* the need screams inside him; others are already beating him with clubs and pipes as he feeds. He barely notices, enraptured.

He is suddenly on his feet, grabbing one with both hands, impaling them on the twisted rebar hanging down from the damaged ceiling. Their hot blood raining down on his face is incredible - he stands there, head tilted back, mouth open. There is a shocked silence among the remaining attackers and he is suddenly very aware of them surrounding him.
The Soldier does not have words to explain what happens next, but it is as if some sort of switch flips inside him. He crushes an attacker's windpipe with a high kick, his flesh fist flying out in the opposite direction to break the jaw of another. His metal hand clutches the throat of a man, hoists him up off the floor, breaks his neck, hurdles him into a woman so hard she bounces off the wall, skull fractured. He finally thinks to pull the blade from his chest, then he's stabbing and slashing with a fluid, effortless grace.

He hears singing in the distant recesses of his mind. *Ashes, ashes. They all fall down.*

There are more scents wafting from above, voices. There are so many. The need chimes back in, tells him to run at them, to rip and slash and bathe in them. The want reminds him of his years in captivity, tells him to run. His training agrees - there are too many and *they have fire*. He loots the bodies, the parts of the facility he can still access, then finds an alternate route to escape so that he can bypass the ones coming down from above.

At a safe distance, he climbs a small knoll to look back. There is a smoking crater in the ground. His eyesight is excellent, but at this distance he still needs to use the binocular vision setting of the goggles. Dozens of warriors, mostly men but women as well, many in some combination of body armor, leather and human parts, all heavily armed. Their leader wears a hard composite mask that covers his head and face, white paint streaked on the front. It resembles a skull.

"FIND IT! FIND IT!!!" he rages. There's a white X crudely swiped across the front of his body armor.

This was the first time he became conscious of being called *it*. The Soldier has a stab of dislike for the term immediately. There is a familiar pull in his head - the neural net is not completely non-operational. The asset is signaling him. With no other direction to take, he stands and runs into the night, heeding it's call.

When he is far enough away from those who wish to capture him, he stops to review the documents taken from the facility. The notes, which cover everything done to him since the initial experiment, only list him as "cadaver #23." He destroys them.

The Soldier slaughtered everyone he fed on without thought upon first entering the ravaged remains of human civilization. They had all tried to murder or capture him - eager to take his weapons and his arm, not understanding it was useless if removed from him. He did, however, quickly form certain compunctions about who he attacked.

It became clear that the little he had known of how things operated outside of the facilities no longer applied. This world was broken, in chaos. He crossed people being attacked, being used, being held captive, being *eaten*. He did not yet remember a large portion of what happened to him since Zola had woken him all those years ago, but he could recall what it felt like to be restrained, commanded, helpless.

*Unacceptable,* he had thought simply before murdering his first slaver (squeezing the man's head between his hands until it burst) and freeing those he held. He stared at them, staring at him, as he licked the blood from his fingers before simply walking away.

The Soldier did not have any sense of ethics at this juncture, no code or higher purpose guiding him save his journey to the asset. He would simply see something inflicted on someone else that reminded him of what was done to him and it would fill him with rage, disgust - he would have to act. Sometimes those he freed would ask who he was.

"Winter Soldier 23," he would respond. He was still conditioned to present title to his previous
handlers. He did not yet realize these civilians wanted a name, something that identified him as a person rather than a weapon.

Occasionally he would encounter other free people wandering the shattered world who showed no ill intent towards him; they gave him a wide berth and he ignored the need as it begged him to take them, knowing he would find someone deserving shortly.

By the second month on the road, still heading towards the asset, he had recovered many of his memories from the facilities and missions. There are blank spots, few and far between, and other sections that are vague or disjointed, but overall the majority comes back with painful clarity.

He frees a woman and two children along the road, considers the latter's smallness; he is vaguely aware that they will grow into larger people. Adults. This body would have been a child once, but he does not remember ever not being the size he is now. It suddenly fits together. This body was a cadaver - a dead man as the guard had called him - before being woken in the first facility. Whoever was in this body when it was a child was gone, replaced with whatever he was.

The woman was standing between him and the children now, her posture defensive, yelling at him to stay away. He realizes he has been staring for some time, blood all over him. The Soldier leaves her the supplies and weapons of the man and woman who had been holding them (the cannibals are just blood spatter and parts in the dust now) along with some of his food. He lines it all up silently in the road while the woman continues to keep her children pressed behind her. For the first time he feels the indescribable sinking in his chest from how another person looks at him, suddenly very aware that he is a monster.

The Soldier finds the asset months later, in a large barn not far into the edge of the waste. It appears to have fallen through the roof from above. He has long enough to contemplate how he will move it - he can lift it, but it is awkward and cumbersome - when he hears voices from outside. There is a small alcove at the end of a row of enclosed horse stalls where tools were stored. He retreats there, into darkness, lays in wait.

There is a tall man, dark skinned, bald. He recognizes him, vaguely. From the facility? Not a guard. Not a doctor. It is unclear. Perhaps from a mission. His firearm is large, high-tech. A former special operative of some kind?

The red-headed woman with him has two pistols and an electro-shock disc launcher on each wrist. This weapon had been used on him before - it will not paralyze him as it would a human, but he recalls the intense pain it caused, the burns taking longer to heal than his other injuries. It will slow him.

More enter, with others outside. He hears the ones he cannot see. The ones he can are all armed, some of them clearly ex special ops from their uniforms and automatic weapons. The panic flares in him, the want and need in agreement he will have to fight his way free at any cost before he can let them trap him.

"Holy shit, it's big," he hears a deep voice say.

When the blonde it belongs to comes into view he is not at all what the Soldier expects. Nearly a foot shorter than him and probably a bit younger (though of course the Soldier's age was relative). The man is slender, armed with an ancient rifle. Definitely a civilian from his clothes. He has an innocent face but eyes that are unsettlingly aware and worry lines on his forehead.

"That's what she said!" A man with a quiver of arrows on his back comes to stand beside the small man. A bit taller, far more muscular, bow in hand. The shorter man rolls his eyes, but begrudgingly
smiles. It is different from the interactions he normally sees within groups of the deserving.

There are many other non-military. Even an old woman with a hunting rifle. No one wears human trophies - these are not cannibals. Nor do they carry the scattershot of homemade weapons common to marauders. They look relatively clean, well-fed. Perhaps from a settlement. He had run across places before with ex-Army or Marines holding together a community. He reminds himself not all military are like the men in the facility.

A few keep watch while the rest eat, talking and laughing, in a circle on the ground. The blonde heads in his direction and the Soldier freezes. He smells amazing and the bigger man has a brief war with the need as it demands he pull the smaller man into the dark. The blonde goes behind a wagon, pushes the suspenders from his shoulders (small, but a bit wide for his proportions), unzips, starts to urinate into the straw there.

The Soldier can see his lower back, narrow hips and the top of his buttocks where his too-large pants are slightly down. He is covered in scars. Burns, cuts, what appear to be the gouges of fingernails. It is clear they travel further under his clothes in both directions. He has never seen a human so marked.

Amazing one so small could endure such torment. He remembers his own punishment in the facility and feels a stab of pity. He would like to say he bears no such marks as reminder of his suffering, but the reactions of others to his appearance tells a different story.

The blonde puts himself away, tucks his shirt back in, pulls up the suspenders and turns to go. He stops. Stares into the pitch black of the Soldier's hiding place. He is sure he has not made a sound, his eyes hidden behind the dark goggle lenses, yet the small man seems to know he is being watched. The blonde takes a screw from his pocket, throws it into the right side of the cubby. The Soldier silently dodges it and it hits the back wall with a thunk. He takes out another, does the same but aiming to the left. The Soldier quickly side-steps it. It strikes home again.

Clever.

"Quit fucking off or you're not getting any chocolate," the archer calls to the blonde. He slowly retreats back to the group. The Soldier watches them all split one large bar, each snapping off a small square before passing it. Sharing is not something the deserving do.

He decides to let them take the asset. They have transportation, a place to house it. Easier to let them do the work and follow at a distance. If their custody can be trusted, he can guard the settlement, thus guarding the asset.

A brief flash of recognition is all that keeps him from breaking the smaller man's neck - and killing his attacking companion in the throes of the Soldier's confusion and thirst - months later in the dunes by the yard. He puts together precisely why he recognizes the little blonde after they flee, when he sees the manner in which he was removed from the sandpit.

Clever.

Curiosity had driven him to follow. He had no idea where it would lead.
Ballroom Blitz

Chapter Summary

Everyone's night turns to shit.

Six days after their uncomfortable breakfast conversation, the mechanic asks Clint how he will know if Steve sees anything when he spies on the Soldier. Clint simply replies that the blonde is terrible at lying - except perhaps to himself. The smaller man is less than amused. No amount of self-deception can make him forget what he witnesses when he sneaks back to his shanty fifteen minutes after saying he was going to Win's.

He had left the curtains open a crack, just like Barton had suggested, and the light was on inside, just like Clint guessed it would be. Steve scans the room slowly from the left, not seeing any sign of him. He fully expected Buck to be sitting on the bed reading, or at the table taking apart something. Even though he didn't have any ammunition, he still frequently disassembled and cleaned his guns. Steve had started showing him how to do the same with engine parts, ironically to put his hands to better use.

For a minute, he considers the Soldier has gone to see Vic or Clint again. But then he hears it, the breathy little noises from the back right corner. He moves closer to the glass, angling his head to see that dimly lit part of the interior. Even when he gave vague consideration to the idea that Clint could be telling the truth, he never imagined he'd see this.

Buck isn't in fact pounding off or pulling his pud or whatever childish euphemism one wanted to use for the act of stroking one's penis. The Soldier is completely naked, down on the floor, his body forming a ninety degree angle. The lower half of his legs run behind him, the tops of his feet and shins pressed to the floor, soles and calves pointed to the ceiling. The rest of his body is raised up on his knees, the front of his thighs, belly and chest forming an almost straight line save the shape of his muscles and his full erection. There is a large, ragged towel stretched out in front of him (well that's considerate, Steve thinks absently).

He's not in fact touching his cock - now more deep gray-purple in certain parts - at all. The Soldier has his silver arm bent back behind him. Two ribbed metal fingers, glistening with something slick, slide in and out of him. Buck's breathing slow but hard, a little groan coming out on each exhale. Steve clutches the window frame, frozen and wide-eyed. Buck turns his hand ever so slightly. It must change the angle enough for his fingertips to rub over the sensitive spot inside him even better. His sounds get louder, closer together as his breathing speeds up, more high-pitched as his chin tilts up and he arches back. Unh, unh, unh...

Holy fuck, is Steve's most eloquent thought.

The noises quiet for a brief second.

"S-Steve…" Buck practically whimpers.

Holy fuck!

Holy fuck holyfuck holyfuckholyfuckholyfuck!
Steve stands on legs like gelatin, backs slowly up about twenty feet, then turns and runs, scooping up his boots as he passes them. He finds Clint at the pub, like always, slides silently onto the stool next to him at the bar. When the bigger man turns to look at Steve, the blonde's face is shell-shocked.

Steve raises a finger, signaling Vic. He was always doing odd jobs for the barman, like replacing window panes and figuring out ways to mould more drinking glasses, and had developed quite a credit stash since he almost never drank. Luckily he hoarded them in a cargo pocket on his coat.

"Whatever's strongest and make it a double."

The blonde throws back the requested liquor in a single gulp, returning the glass to the bar a bit too loud. "Another, please."

"Told you," the archer says simply, sipping his beer.

"Fuck you, Clint. Fuck you so hard." He sounds like he just watched an old woman try to dry her dog in the microwave.

"So?" Barton queries.

Vic places a mixed drink in front of Steve. "Have this instead, lightweight. On the house."

Steve clutches it with both hands as he sips, looking like a kid with chocolate milk.

"He was...bigger end of average. Or smaller end of big. I don't know! He was definitely not growling, and he wasn't standing, and he...said my name. He said my fucking name!"

"Wooohhh..." Clint puts his empty glass down, motions Vic for another, pays him with one of Steve's tokens.

The archer swivels towards the mechanic on his stool. Steve turns his head towards the taller man - Clint looks pensive, like he'll say something thoughtful.

"But what color was it?" He raises both eyebrows.

"Ohmygodfuckyou!" Steve snatches his drink back up, takes a large swallow.

"I picture it super black and and all ridgy, like a mutant horse cock."

"You are a terrible bastard and I don't know how I let you talk me into this." He immediately glugs his drink down, pays for another. Vic starts to say something but Steve waves him off.

"This is great news though, right?" Clint smiles.

"What? How? Why?" He immediately starts drinking the new one.

"Who, when, where," Clint answers. "No but really, now you know your little crush isn't unrequited."

"Excuse me, my what?! I... not. I don't... I'm not interested in him like that." After a brief pause, Steve snatches Clint's beer from him, as if to make up for his uncharacteristic lack of a snappy comeback.

"You think you're so slick. I see the way you moon over him and check him out when he's got tight clothes on. Which is, like, always because he's a beast. It's nothing to be ashamed of that you want
“to bang a beefy dude.” Clint hails Vic down again.

“I’ve literally never hidden that I’m attracted to women and men. That’s not remotely the point!” He slams the beer back in front of Clint.

“I meant you still wanting sex with dudes is nothing to be ashamed of.” Clint's voice goes softer, trying to tread lightly around this particular subject. "You doing some dudes doesn't mean you want every dude."

"Another one of these, please.” Steve gestures to his empty drink with one hand, pushes a token forward as Vic comes over. The barman sighs and shrugs, leaves to make it.

"I've had sex since…I got here. I've done stuff with dudes here..."

"Yeah yeah you and Win did it like once and you messed around with Sam and Carol a million years ago." Clint takes a swig of his drink.

"The fuck, Barton? Nosey much?"

Steve glares at him as Vic puts a new mixed drink down, carefully avoiding eye contact with the angry blonde.

"This place is tiny and everyone talks. And hears everyone else...ya know." He makes a loose fist with one hand, jams the pointer finger of his other hand into it repeatedly. "We heard Greta one time!"

"So I'm not a fucking cassanova like you when you were single. Sue me." Steve hoists his new beverage, takes a long drink.

"You're practically a fucking monk. He wants to do it. You want to do it. Bingo bongo. If you're a-...okay, like you say, what's the problem?" The taller man slugs his beer.

"He doesn't understand what doing it even means. He doesn't get that kinda stuff."

"Uhh he clearly does!” Clint makes a pumping gesture near his crotch.

"He wasn't… He wasn't doing that.” Steve doesn't know why he says it, regrets it immediately.

"Was he like… fucking a Vaseline filled sandwich bag between the mattress and bedframe?"

"That's...weirdly specific." Steve turns to eye him.

"Using both his feet to stroke it?"

"That's a thing people do to themselves?"

"Oh my God. Was it butt stuff?” Clint puts his beer down a little too fast and a lot too loud. He takes Steve's silence as an answer. "It was butt stuff! Good for him. I told him butt stuff is pretty awesome."

"Clint, why? Just why?!"

Vic winces at the other end of the bar as Steve's drink also bangs down.

"What? This is like, ideal. He can just bottom and things will be more..." Clint takes a really long pause, "comfortable for you."
A tiny voice in the back of Steve's head congratulates Clint on saying "bottom" instead of something offensive the mechanic would expect the archer to say like "be the girl" or "bite the pillow."

"I'm not saying that I want to do stuff like that with him, but even if I did, I couldn't, because that would be taking advantage." Steve snatches his drink back up, takes a long pull.

"Umm, pretty sure taking advantage of him is exactly what he wants you to do." The archer finishes his beer, slides the empty glass past Steve to Vic.

"He has the emotional IQ of a twelve year old." The blonde stares into his beverage.

"I mean… so do I. And I'm married." Clint catches the refill Vic slides to him.

"It's not the same! He asked me one day if we were more than friends and I went into full panic mode until I realized he had no idea what that actually meant. He thought it was just like, friendship version 2.0 and was all eager to play on advanced mode."

"Yeah, because he wants to be your special friend that you like more than everyone else."

_The goddamn finger quotes again._

"Yeah, like a little kid." Steve finishes his drink.

"Like someone who doesn't have the words to describe having a crush on someone. Who maybe doesn't know what it means when you want to be around someone all the time and have them like you best and have them do stuff to your butt." Clint is doing his best fatherly wisdom voice. He puts a hand on Steve's shoulder but the blonde immediately jerks away from him.

"That right there is exactly what I was talking about earlier." Clint's voice suddenly goes serious.

"What? I just don't like that!" Steve spits back.

"Oh but you're so well adjusted and nothing's wrong. Which is why one of your best friends can't even put his hand on your arm without you trying to rip it off." Clint tilts his beer back.

_"You're not my friend! You're a huge fucking pain in my ass!"

"Watch what you say, kid!" Clint points his finger at the blonde.

"It's called liking personal space! It's perfectly normal!"

_"That. That is why you can't admit that you like him or he likes you or that you want to make sex on each other. Because you can't admit to yourself how much what happened before is still effecting you." Clint turns towards him again on the stool. "You won't talk about it. You dance around it when I do. It's not healthy."

_"Oh thank you, Dr. Barton. Do you accept my insurance or should I use a credit card?"_ Steve swivels towards the archer, one fist clenched in his lap.

_"I'm serious, Stevie."_

_"Don't fucking call me that!"_ Steve yells up at Clint as he finishes his beer.

The bigger man sets the glass down, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand as he stares the smaller man down. Clint leans forward until he's inches from Steve's face.
"Stevie. Stevie. Stevie." He grits out through clenched teeth.

Steve stares back at him for a long moment, enough time for Clint to see something bubble up in the mechanic's face that tells him he has made a grievous mistake. The blonde is on him in an instant, knocking him back off the bar stool onto the wooden floor, toppling over with him. He has a thigh on either side of Clint's stomach, pummeling at the other man with his fists - left, right, left, right - as the archer tries to shield his face with his forearms. The archer thinks, not for the first time, *The little shit can throw a punch.*

Clint bends his legs up, grips either side of Steve's narrow waist with his calves, flips the blonde on his back as he rolls to straddle the smaller man, holding himself up on his knees to not crush him. The bigger man holds his hands up in front of him, palms facing out.

"Peace, Steve! I don't wanna hurt you."

Clint barely has time to squeeze the words out before catching a left-hook to the eye. He grabs the blonde's skinny wrists and yells "Calm! Down!" into his face.

Steve knees him in the balls, scrambles backwards away from him, is up on his unstable feet fairly quick. The room tilts a little, the alcohol suddenly hitting him much harder, but he shakes his head, puts his dukes up.

Clint slowly gets to his feet, holding himself, staggers a bit before finding his footing. Everyone is staring, and it isn't because of his biceps.

"I think the patient needs to act out some previous trauma. You want a replay? You'll get one," the archer says, now fully upright.

Clint runs at Steve, tackles him onto a table. Steve bites him on the shoulder, making the bigger man wail. He stands half up, socks the kid one in the face. *Fuck, is their lead in his cheekbones?* He's in the middle of pulling back to fire off another - Steve already digging his nails into the tender meat at the back of Clint's other arm and grasping a glass with his other hand to smash into the bigger man's face - when a strangely firm hand grabs the archer's wrist. He turns to see the Soldier, eyes glowing brightly, standing beside him.

"Uh, hey big fella this isn't what it looooooooolllooooollllll!"

A simple movement of the metal arm hurdles Clint into the nearest wall. He barely has time to get on his hands and knees before the Soldier is on him, grabbing him by the throat. He hoists the archer several feet off the floor.

"Stop! Stop! Stop!" Steve runs to him, grabs his flesh arm. "Please, please stop!" The Soldier looks at his face, already reddening from the blow, a small cut their sluggishly bleeding, then back at Clint. He's pulling at the Soldier's silver fingers as his face turns beet red, heels thumping uselessly into the wall.

"He hurt you," Buck says, voice low and even. There's something beneath it though, something dark and terrifying. You could hear a pin drop in the bar behind them.

"It's my fault. *I started it.* Now let him go!" Steve says urgently. The Soldier seems to ignore him. Clint's face is turning maroon. "Please, Buck!" the blonde pleads.

The Soldier simply releases Clint and he drops to his feet, legs almost going out beneath him as he doubles over, knees bent, choking and gasping. The Soldier lords over him, points a finger in his face.
"Do not touch him again." His tone is cold, volume ever so slightly elevated. Compared to his usual voice, he may as well be yelling.

"Let's go. Please. Let's go!" Steve herds the Soldier out of the pub, stopping only briefly to meet eyes with Clint as he coughs.
Let's play a game.

Chapter Summary

Fury gets a surprise visitor.

Fury is less than pleased to see Clint and the Winter Soldier waiting outside the small construction site trailer that functions as his office. It's well before anyone, save those on guard duty, are awake. He hasn't even unlocked the door to let himself in yet.

"What shit sandwich have you come to feed me, Barton? This community is entirely too devoid of coffee for you to be bothering me at this hour." His gaze runs slowly over both of his uninvited visitors.

"My buddy here has a request and I think you should hear him out," Clint offers, sounding pretty exhausted himself.

"Psssssh." Fury crosses his arms. "He speak for you now?" Nick juts his chin at the Soldier.

"Negotiations sometimes require a third party familiar with both sides," it quietly responds.

"Cut the bullshit. If you're half as smart as an actual person, you know Clint is less than useful at making compelling arguments about anything." Fury's good eye flares then narrows.

"I believed you would feel less threatened if I did not come alone," the Soldier calmly responds.

"You do that to his face?" The older man gestures at the archer, his black eye nearly swollen shut.

"I did not strike him. I only strangled him briefly. It was a misunderstanding. I have apologized," the Soldier says calmly.

"It's been thirty-six hours since I took this hit. I'm sure you knew all about it in twenty minutes." Barton folds his own arms in a blatantly mocking way.

"That kid is gonna be the death of us all. Why in hell did I let you talk me into bringing him here?" The archer looks at his feet, sighs, shakes his head, before returning eye contact to Fury. "Keep tellin' yourself it was all my idea."

The truth was, Nick had an intense love-hate relationship with Steve that almost bordered on paternalistic. He deeply respected the kid, found him bright and with almost too much gumption. Fury also had to hand it to someone who never backed down from a fight when they were so lacking in physical size or prowess. Natasha was all of 5'3", but she was highly trained, honed by years in the field.

The blonde was just some scrawny nobody.

Nick was also endlessly irritated with him. Arguing and sarcasm were their version of fishing trips and playing catch. Steve could never leave well enough alone, never fall in line, always questioning, always with some new idea that would infuriatingly work after everyone said he was insane. He had such an uncanny knack for seeing through Fury's half-truths. The older man's bread
and butter had been secrecy and manipulation for far too long to appreciate it.

*You want something from him, don't you?* Steve's voice echoes in his head.

When they'd met, the blonde was barely in his twenties and practically feral, with half his face smashed in. Nick couldn't fathom how he'd survived, particularly with Brock. He guessed it was the Brooklyn in the kid - not the privileged, hipster kind but the old school kind. Descendants of immigrants who came here with nothing, people who fought and clawed to stay in their city no matter what tried to push them out.

Steve almost never talked about his mother, but Nick had gleaned that her people came from Ireland during the famine, they'd settled in the city after crossing Ellis Island like so many others and had never left. Generations of cyclical poverty later, his mother was still holding multiple jobs to get by when everything had went to shit. The kid had variously mentioned her working at a laundry, as a seamstress and as a nurse's aide. Which made sense why the blonde could sew or get out a bloodstain just as well as he could bandage a wound.

Nick could make excellent ribs but outside of that his skill-set was largely in people management. Sometimes that meant killing them. But often it meant moving them around like pieces on a chessboard. Fury still had lingering guilt for the last thing he'd said at the gate that night the Soldier arrived, but he needed Steve to get close without getting too close and old habits die hard.

Telling the blonde befriending the Soldier was a stupid idea would make him want to do it even more. Giving just enough back story to make it sound wronged and in need of a champion would get the kid's hackles up. But reminding him he could get abused if he wasn't careful might help him keep at least some of his wits about him. Still, the pained look on Steve's face made him regret his actions for the briefest moment.

The kid and Win had endeared themselves to a number of key players in the junktown; their opinions held weight, especially after the wall went up, the irrigation system, the wind turbines (small though they were without adequate equipment to build or hoist larger ones and this wasn't exactly the windy city). Clint busied himself teaching people archery after the aluminium extruder was completed and they could make a virtually endless supply of arrows - now everyone in Claptrap who was able could shoot a gun or a bow.

When Steve and Win told people "this man saved my life," that was what they chose to see, a man. A strange man that drove a lot of speculation and gossip, but a man. Not a thing. And that was how Nick was able to bring it inside the gate, to keep an even closer eye on it, to work on molding its intentions towards his own ends.

If he'd welcomed the Soldier with open arms everyone would be suspicious, most of all Steve, and distrusting of his judgment. *I didn't want it here. It was all their idea.* It was great cover. As the Soldier lays out its proposal in the office, Nick contemplates the work it took to get the Soldier to his gate.

One of the remaining solar powered mini-drones had shown him the Soldier, or at least the part of it emerging from the pit in the dunes, as it did its daily fly by of the yard's perimeter. It had taken him an hour to figure out what to do about it. The aerial surveillance made Fury aware a while ago that the creature was circling Claptrap, picking off ne'er-do-wells as they approached, freeing their captives if they had any and sending them off in the opposite direction with supplies. The Soldier didn't direct them to the junktown because if it did they would have reported it was out there.

Still, when it discovered a child in the back of a now-dead cannibal's truck with the corpse of her mother, the Soldier left her at Claptrap's gate in the middle of the night. To this day no one but
Nick knew where she came from but Steve had commented on how often the mute little girl would follow him around once the Soldier arrived. If the neural net was functioning properly the thing would be a blank, immobile shell without the commands of a master. That meant it had none; no one with the knowledge to control it would be the type to use their weapon to save children.

The microcircuitry must be damaged. That didn't mean it was harmless or on their side either. Most likely it could sense the asset was near, or had even followed them from the barn where they'd recovered it, but it doesn't know where they put it. Trapping it was out of the question. It wasn't impossible, but it would cost far too many lives and it was obvious that they would not be able to make it comply if they were successful.

He could not help but recall when they had first encountered Win in the factory. She had nearly carved Steve's face off with an acetylene torch yet he had begged Fury not to abandon the stranger to starve alone; he had no idea who was even under the mask and baggy coveralls. The kid didn't speak her language and still managed to convince her to come along. They could just barely hold a full conversation now with months of the Soldier's tutelage.

Steve was a powder keg under the right circumstances, and there was certainly some dark shit swirling behind the non-threatening, boyish face. But he was usually thoughtful, patient, funny, jovial. He wasn't judgmental or afraid of much. Fury remembers Steve staring into the dark of the barn's tool storage cubicle; always too curious for his own good.

If it had been in the dark alcove as the blonde peered in, it definitely saw him. The thing could have yanked him in there, clamped a hand over his mouth, drained him before any of them noticed he was missing. But it hadn't. Maybe something about Steve had convinced it to let them be when they'd taken the asset. If it recognized him in the dunes, that could work to his advantage.

If the Soldier was playing at being a person, maybe it wanted a friend.

It had only taken a little late night tampering with Clint's machine - flushing out some of the lubricant, creating a hairline fracture in a cog with a hammer and chisel that would split under pressure when it overheated - to get it to breakdown the following morning. To send Steve right where he needed him. He knew the mechanic and the welder always had their snack facing out into the wastes, away from the trashpicking. The marauders had been a convenient turn; Nick had known they were near and timed Steve's "surprise" trip perfectly so they would be on his path when he returned. The Soldier could handle them but Nick had his (now meager) tactical team on stand by in case things went south.

He had gone to a lot of trouble to bring the Soldier into the fold. Yet here it was telling him it wanted to leave the junktown (and without its babysitter).

"I am not a dog. I do not wish to follow someone around anymore." The Soldier stares up at him across the desk, sitting in the chair Steve had been in recently. Unlike the blonde - face an open book, nervous energy spilling out into a constantly jiggling leg as his long, spindly fingers picked at something on his pant leg - it sits unblinking, back straight, hands in loose curls facing palms-down in its lap. Its eyes are a color reserved for gel ice packs or glowsticks. God, it is unsettling.

"And if I give you what you want, what guarantees do I have I won't regret it?" Fury queries.

"If my intentions towards you and this community were violent in nature, you would already be dead and it would be rubble."

Cocky. Steve had rubbed off on him. Fury immediately imagines Clint's lewd response to that statement.
The archer, thankfully, hadn't stayed after saying his piece. It amounted to *give the thing whatever it wants*, though the shorter man had addressed it as Bucky. Clint had a fetish for calling people diminutive versions of their name. He had called Fury "Nicky" just once and the withering look the older man had given him deterred him from doing it again. He had referred to the mechanic as Stevie for years despite the blonde's repeated protests.

He was already well aware Steve had rubbed off on Clint. The archer had taken to the mechanic right away like he was a stray dog (subtly needy once you got past the biting). That was why he had not asked Clint to sabotage the machine. He noticed the kid often made a show of keeping Clint at arm's length, but to Fury it only confirmed how much Steve valued the other man's company.

"Let's say I granted your little request. What else would you need?"

"I would require ammunition. And the assistance of your metalsmith in the creation of several items. In addition, permission to make modifications to one of your vehicles. Win would assist me." Its face is almost without expression save something stirring deep in its eyes.

"What reassurance do I have that you'll keep your word?"

"I was not trained to lie."

*You weren't trained to have domestic squabbles either.* The scene in the bar, and the loud argument that followed, caused some significant chatter throughout the community about their long-term guest. Perhaps it was for the best to remove the Soldier from the equation. Fury had initially assumed the situation with Steve would blow over, but the blonde would not come out of his shanty. Regardless of his long-term goals, in the short-term he needed his machines to run, his power to stay on and the equipment watering the crops to work properly.

"What about Steve?" Fury cocks an eyebrow.

"What about him?" The Soldier's tone stays bland but there's a flicker of something on his face.

"I need an hour to make the necessary arrangements. *Will that do, sir?*" he asks in a sarcastic, put-upon tone he hopes is not lost on the thing.

"Acceptable." The Soldier rises abruptly to leave.
We'll float around and hang out on clouds, then we'll come down and have a hangover.

Chapter Summary

Steve struggles with the repercussions of his actions.

Steve wakes in his bed, not entirely sure how he got there. It feels like a full sized marching band is performing Mardi Gras music inside his skull. His body is slick and gritty under his filthy jeans and too-warm sweater. At least his boots are off; Buck must have done that. It makes him warm a bit but then he twists the soft feeling into anger.

He sits up slowly on shaky arms, his hands incredibly sore. When everything stops going gray and he can move without fear of falling on to the floor, he lifts his hands to check them. His knuckles are bruised dark and swollen; one of them even split open.

Yeah. That happened.

His face is worse, a steady burning throb from his left cheek spreading into his jaw and molars. Clint had pulled no punches, literally. Turning his head feels like an immense endeavor that takes hours - he's moderately dizzy, stomach lurching, the room still moving after he has stopped. He's hit with a memory of throwing up all over the floor, on his hands and knees. Buck must have cleaned it up.

He vaguely remembers the bigger man wiping his face with a rag as he slapped at him, scooping him up while Steve battered him with his fists, putting him in bed as the smaller man raged and called him every name in the book.

That was nice of him. Steve's rational voice sounds so much like his mom.

Fuck him. He shouldn't have touched me. The stubborn one is all Steve though. Or maybe that's his dad coming out. He wouldn't know. He'd never met the man.

You would've preferred waking up in your cold puke on the freezing ground?

Steve's eyes scan around again - the small trash can is on the floor next to the bed, lined with a plastic shopping bag. There were several bottles of water, a package of crackers and a container of aspirin on the top of the headboard.

That's like gold around here. Bruce would have given him a couple, if he begged, but not a bottle.

It must have come from the Soldier's duffel, or the "bag of tricks" as Steve had labelled it since Buck would pull the most random things out of it. The duffel. It was usually in the corner almost straight across the shack from the bed, along with Buck's unused, rolled up sleeping bag and a small trunk they'd found for him to store his few clothes in. The corner was completely empty. Steve feels like a pit has opened in his stomach.

It's just the hangover.
You shouldn't have said the things you did.

I just told him the truth.

Only stupid people mistake cruelty for honesty.

He had been cruel.

So what? The Soldier deserved it. It was hard to put words to exactly why, harder still to remember all of what he'd said. He'd felt betrayed or cheated or tricked. And so very, very pissed off.

And you certainly never use anger to mask your other feelings...

He'd yelled at Buck for going after him to the pub, for making a scene in front of everyone. They had definitely noticed his glowing eyes, not to mention the extreme level of violence that he was capable of, even against someone who befriended him. Steve said he was sick of the Soldier following him around like a big, stupid dog.

"You ruined everything!" Steve had screamed up at him as soon as they were inside the shanty. Fuck, he's drunk. When did that happen?

"I will apologize. The others will understand."

"Fuck Clint. Fuck the others. You ruined everything for me! I trusted you. I trusted you to stay in the house when I asked and not to be fucking yourself while I was away!" He's starting to slur his words, to get that weird feeling like his head is a balloon coming untethered from his body.

The Soldier's face stays painfully blank.

"I did not ask you to spy on me." His voice is low and even, but there's that hint of anger beneath.

Fuck, so he knew.

"It's my house!" Good comeback, Rogers. Very sound argument.

"It is my body. You do not decide what I do with it." For the first time ever, the Soldier actually raises his voice. Not just to a typical volume like earlier, which had seemed so loud to Steve, but a level actually above that. It only pushes the button in the blonde's brain that tells him to be even more confrontational.

"I let you sleep with me!" The blonde throws his hands up, feels dizzy and off-kilter immediately.

"I have not done it in the bed. When you were here."

"YOU DID IT IN MY BED?" Steve practically screams. I bet the neighbors loved that.

"Only the first time. I did not realize what would happen." His voice is low again, perhaps even a bit embarrassed, not at the act itself but at his lack of knowledge.

"I really thought I wouldn't have to deal with this bullshit from you. That I could trust you of all people to not want that. I mean, what the hell? You shouldn't even think about things like that," Steve rants. He suddenly has to grab the back of a kitchen chair, the room starting to spin slowly on a tilted axis.

"I have not done anything wrong. It is a normal part of human behavior." The Soldier looks genuinely affronted. Something about that really bothers Steve. A childish voice in the back of his
mind says that Buck is just copying facial expressions from those around him, trying to mimic real emotions rather than feeling them.

"Well you're not fucking human, are you?" Steve retorts, raising his eyes to look the bigger man in the face. Real hurt blossoms there. The Soldier's brows knit together, his lips press into a little frown.

Steve didn't have time to contemplate that reaction before he was violently wretching. Now he's stuck in bed with all the time in the world to think.

Nobody ever wants me in the way I want to be wanted. Win didn't love me back. Sam and Carol just used me to entertain themselves. Everyone else who's ever made advances towards me thought I'd be weak and easy to control. They just wanted to lord their power over someone. The last thing that I need is some random monster getting off thinking about doing god-knows-what to me. Because it's never enough for people to just fantasize about hurting someone, eventually they always do it.

The other voice tells him that he isn't being fair, that he's not a psychic and he has no idea what's in Buck's head. Steve pushes it away.

He feels like he literally wants to die. The nausea and headache are terrible, his body throbbing with pain, and he knows the twisting inside him is from far more than overdoing it at the pub. He desperately needs to hate everyone - the Soldier, Clint, all the stupid people at the bar who had laughed at them while they beat each other, Fury for letting this happen. He needs to hate them so that he doesn't have to hate himself.

He sleeps most of the day away, barely eating anything and refusing to let himself take any of the aspirin. Physically he feels passable the next morning, but he just can't bring himself to get out of bed. His sleep was riddled with nightmares and unlike before, when he would wake up and see Buck there (and occasionally even put his hand on the sleeping Soldier's belly to feel its calming rise and fall as he had once done to Violet) he is completely alone.

He can hear and feel and smell Brock like he's in the room. He wraps his arms around his head, buries his face in the crooks of his elbows, but it does nothing to block it out. It does however muffle his screaming, equal parts disgust, rage and frustration.

He drifts in and out the whole day, seeing Brock, his mom, Jack. He can't bring himself to eat anything, only gets up once to piss in the trash can out of desperation. Several people come knocking on his door that day, Nat and Wanda among them, but he tells them all to leave him alone. He's afraid if he doesn't respond at all they'll tell Fury he's offed himself and the strike team will break the door down.

By the third day he smells awful. He's still in the same night shirt that he had begrudgingly changed into after waking up, which would normally be fine but he had not washed up at all before or since putting it on. There was even more urine in the can, and it certainly didn't smell like roses either. He makes himself eat, but goes right back to bed.

Steve had never thought of himself as a prissy or germiphobic person, but he was definitely fastidious. His mother had kept an extremely clean apartment and he'd been expected to pull his proverbial weight since he was a small boy; Sarah Rogers hated the idea that people thought of the poor as dirty and unkempt. Every time he started to convince himself to get up, he looked over at the empty corner. He reaches up and touches the swollen spot on his face, the little cut there crusted over.
What had he done?

He doesn't want to face the people in the town. He doesn't want to have to answer for his behavior or Buck's behavior. He doesn't want to listen to Nick's smug observations.

When he wakes up the fourth day he just can't fucking lay there anymore, drowning in his own stink.

Cleaned up and changed, trash can emptied and relined, he makes his way to Win's. She's not really a breakfast person and always has tea or coffee in the morning while she reads her comic books. The welder had never failed to cheer him up, and he thought they could go on their rounds together, returning some sense of normalcy to his life.

"You look like shit," Win says without a hint of humor, sitting at her small table as she sips what appears to be Earl Grey from the smell.

He had avoided looking in the mirror at home, but she directs him to the one hanging behind him near the entrance. His face sports a black and blue lump with a scab in the middle, green and yellow moddled bruising spreading out from it. He's more pale than usual (even with all the scavenged sunblock in the world his fair skin still burns and then very lightly tans), eyes rimmed red and hair looking greasy. Well if she didn't want to date you before, Rogers…

Everything in her place is metal with very few exceptions, soldered from scrap, trinkets and random parts that they had scavenged and spray-painted in various bright colors. She's buzzed her hair again somewhat recently and it's extra short. Watching her sit at her teal scavenged garden table - braless in a men's white muscle shirt, woven leather suspenders holding up her paint splattered cargo pants, their legs rolled up at the bottom just above her unlaced boots - Steve wonders how he ever thought he was cool enough for this person. Win took the apocalypse in stride along with every hardship it had to offer and somehow came out incredibly confident and driven.

He realizes quickly her inability to suffer bullshit is in full effect. He watches her eye him with displeasure as he sits down across from her. She must be mad about the thing with Clint. Or him sticking her with the work the last few days. Or her translator skipping town on what she probably guessed was his account.

"You were asshole to him." She says bluntly.

"Can you be more specific?" is all he can think to say.

She gestures to Buck's things, piled in a corner.

"He's...he's here still? He's staying with you?" There's a tone to the last sentence even he can't quite decipher.

"We are friends."

Steve knows her well enough to hear the implied "duh." He supposed it was true. Win and the Soldier were certainly huddled together in conversation a lot when he was busy fixing something. Come to think about it, they were a bit handsy with each other. Were they…?

"He's in love with you." She says it flat and direct, like she's saying that shit stinks. "He does not really understand. But he is."

Yeah. Yeah that kind of makes sense.
"And… how do you feel about that?"

"Sorry for him." She sips her tea. Just like Kermit, he thinks, full of not so subtle judgment.

"Where is he?" Steve is a bit embarrassed at how much like pleading that sounded.

"Run." She picks her comic back up, lays it across the knee she has balanced against the side of the tabletop.

"We're not assigned to go out for a few weeks."

"He is assigned every run now." She opens her book, flips slowly through a few pages like he's very boring. After a long silence, she finally looks up at Steve's pathetically forlorned face, sighs, tosses the book on the table. "Few days trip. Clint though, at the pub. Go!"

"I don't know what to say to him." Steve stares at his hands.

"Maybe words not your strength. Try something else." Her English was still far from perfect, but Steve couldn't judge since his Cantonese was far worse. She's certainly smarter than him, regardless of the language she uses.

Clint sees Steve way before he gets to the table, the smile fading from his equally bruised face. He gets up and makes a bee line to the bathroom. The toilets don't work so the stalls are boarded shut, but there's a urinal trough that drains just fine.

Nat calls to the small man as he passes in pursuit. "That's not a good idea, blondy. He's not in a place to hear what you have to say right now."

When Steve bursts in, the archer actually is taking a piss. He intentionally draws it out, whistling a tune and wheedling from side to side as Steve waits in silence; by the end he's just forcing out random drops. After he's zipped up he covers his hands in entirely too much sanitizer, stares Steve down as he aggressively rubs it around for far too long. Steve just gazes back, an uncharacteristically nervous look on his face.

"This had better be fucking good," Clint finally growls, "I mean an epic apology. Grovelling. Begging. Promises of servitude."

Steve takes a step towards him, slowly reaches out and takes Clint's (slimy, alcohol scented) hand. The blonde moves it to his own bony shoulder. Clint's face twist as Steve looks earnestly up at him, eyes shiny. Steve leans forward and pushes his face to the bigger man's chest.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry I hit you. I'm sorry I said you weren't my friend." The smaller man's deep voice, half muffled, crackles as tears start to spill down his cheeks, soaking hot through Clint's shirt.

"That'll do pig. That'll do." Clint lightly squeezes his shoulder. Steve sobs, his own hands dangling at his sides as his body starts to shake.

"Can I…? Can I hug you?" The archer asks tentatively. He feels Steve nod against him and slides his thick arms loosely around Steve's upper back. "It's okay, kid. It's okay."

Another patron enters, eyes the two men. "I need to piss. Get a room."

"Fuck you, prick! We're bonding here!" Clint yells.
Once the man has backed out of the door, Steve starts giggling. He slowly stands upright, wiping his face as he breaks into fits of laughter. The archer does the same. Soon their maniacal cackling is echoing in the tiny space and spilling out into the pub.
They don't shave their heads for the heat.

Chapter Summary

Buck puts his first scavenging plan into effect and possibly makes a new friend.

Buck had not developed any sort of plan as to what his requested position - permanent scavenging run point leader - could gain him. He recognized going to Fury and asking to completely change the nature of their arrangement was poorly thought out, a purely emotional reaction. In some small way that gratifies him; it is very human. It was clear he could no longer spend all his time with the little mechanic. Perhaps he would not be spending any of his time with him.

He tried to push away the feelings that thought made claw at the inside of his chest and stomach. Regardless, they both required space that could not be had if the blonde were required to continue watching him or if Buck had to remain constantly on the grounds of the junktown. He could not hide inside Win's (very interesting to look at) home forever.

He had not acknowledged previously how wasted his skill set was within Claptrap. It was good to feel the weight of the full magazine and the weapon that housed it hanging on the strap across his body, of the loaded pistol in its holster against his thigh. Perhaps he should not enjoy wearing the uniform - goggles, mask, boots, heavy slacks - forced upon him when he was one of many identical soldiers. Maybe it speaks to him as a creature of violence to be pleased with the makeshift harness he had added to the front of his vest for the two dozen throwing knives the metalsmith had forged for him. Yet he feels comfortable and alert in a way he had not in some time.

On his request, and with Fury's permission, Win had welded two circular steel mounts on the top of the heaviest run truck's cab, several more sets along the roof of the cargo box attached to it. The vest had retractable strapping along both sides - designed to rig himself into an aircraft were it to become damaged and lose pressure - just above his waist. Each could be extended about five feet and featured a steel caribener on the end that pressed flat to his ribs when the straps were fully in. With the rings he could clip himself to the truck, wherever was necessary. No matter what he was hit with, he would not be removed from the vehicle.

The welder had also constructed and attached metal plates over the front windshield and side windows. They featured a series of holes large enough to see out but small enough to be virtually impossible for even very low caliber rounds to pass through. She also added a structure made of large pipes across the front of the grill, similar to the so-called cow catcher on a train. He had seen that in one of Steve's books.

Fury had suggested two options for his first major mission - hit a group of reavers that was gathering to the east in the remains of a farming town or invade a formerly friendly stronghold in the west that had been violently colonized by Burners.

The reavers had limited transportation, but were savage cannibals. They would move into a town or facility, carve up the locals, settle in and then start branching out with raiding parties, killing and eating everyone within fifty miles before moving on to the next area. They barely even bothered to scavenge. Claptrappers on runs had come across reaver kills who still had hoards of canned food and other useful supplies with them. There wasn't much around but the junktown and it was only a matter of time before they found their way to the front door.
The Burners had some transportation but largely stuck to their compound and the general vicinity. They had agriculture, solar power, hand dug wells, hydroponics. The settlement, a former green living experimental facility that hosted retreats for wealthy vegetarians and guilt-ridden soccer moms, had been a mini zen paradise before the collapse but it was too small to support more than fifty people so Fury could not move his community there.

Claptrap did not have direct communication with the Green Place, as it was simply called. It was out of walkie and cb range so even after they had sent a party to say hello and do a bit of trading there was still no easy way to know what was going on there. They had worked out a fairly regular pattern of meeting halfway to exchange information and goods. After their representatives did not appear one day, Fury retasked a drone to check out what was happening. They were met with a series of giant crosses - burning - with people strapped to them just outside the Green Place's perimeter wall.

Claptrappers had crossed paths with Burners before on the road - if they were not "of the color they preferred" (as Fury put it) they had tortured and killed them, setting them on fire in the wastes at the edge of the dunes, maiming their white companions as "race traders."

Nick explained Burners, short for Crossburners, were remnants of several social and political groups that believed in the supremacy of so-called white or Caucasian people over all others. It had taken Fury a lot of time to make the concept even semi-clear to the Soldier. Buck gave little thought to people's flesh pigmentation, beyond noticing its wide variety and that his own was like no else's. The Soldier certainly did not group the deserving or undeserving based on it or any other factor of bodily appearance. He decides, not for the first time, that there are many things about humans not worth emulating.

Even with Fury's tutelage, the Soldier cannot begin to understand the complexities of bigotry, extending well beyond complexion. The need to make someone else an other so that you can be the normal. Telling yourself that someone else is lesser so that you can feel above and use that as an excuse to take from them. An inability to respect that people may believe different things or hold different cultural norms and that did not make them bad or wrong or weird. Buck certainly does not understand that even people in Claptrap, ones that he would think of as good, may hold some lesser version of these beliefs.

For the first time in a long time, he knew precisely what his goal was and how to achieve it. There was no ambiguity to slaughtering a known enemy. The idea that these people would hurt Win or Vic or any number of others in the junktown simply because they disliked something about their body completely determined by genetics made him all the more certain he would sleep well after killing them.

Fury described in detail some of their allies who may be left at the Burners' compound if they had taken prisoners. He did not know how many of their former trading partners had been murdered or enslaved. This portion of the conversation had further cemented Buck's resolve to eliminate the Burners first. Now he knew there was someone specific at the facility he wanted to meet.

He had quickly formulated the idea to use one of the bigger delivery trucks as a battering ram after Nick had explained the layout of the facility, particularly its wall and massive gate. Stationing himself atop it, he could easily use the high sides of the truck as cover from close ground fire. Those inside would be safe behind the shielding and within the box of the truck, small rectangular holes cut in the sides to allow firing out. Other trucks could move in for scavenging once he and the main crew had dispatched their foes.

He would need someone reliable and fearless to drive the main vehicle - they could take heavy fire
from armor piercing rounds, even something rare like a rocket launcher was not out of the question. It would be a very dangerous position to be in and they would need to think fast. He had asked for Greta.

She seemed flattered by the request, despite her reservations about what he was. She did not like the idea he may be giving her orders, or "running the show" as she had put it, but he had calmly relayed his plan to her and asked her advice. She thought it was solid, "ballsly," and said she was eager to "kill some fascist scum." The Soldier was unsure what that meant, but saw it as an encouraging sign that she was excited for the task at hand.

The Green Place's defenses were one of the main reasons Fury had not attempted to send anyone in after he had discovered the takeover. The walls were high, now topped with heavily armed sharpshooters, and they would have lost a lot of people trying only to possibly save no one. Most of the compound, even the agricultural areas, was not open to the sky so he had no idea how many survived (if any) from the previous residents.

Buck took heavy fire well before the truck approached the gate including high velocity rounds, the impact of which may have removed him from the speeding truck without the straps. Only one penetrated the kevlar. He was an excellent shot and was able to remove all fifteen of their wall guards before he had taken more than a few hits, several going through the meat of his arms and legs. Each hit is a blinding hot flare, like always, but he is used to pain and pushes it from his mind. Most of the holes heal quickly from within, forcing out the bullets that did not pass through.

The Soldier unhooks from the cab, reattaches halfway down the box and lays on his back. The truck smashes through the gate at full speed, debris flying over top of him. Well done, Greta. Then he's on his feet, firing and re-positioning methodically as the Burners seem to attack from every direction. Many do not have guns, attacking with clubs, machetes and a variety of other implements. He unhooks one strap, repels down the side of the truck on the other, runs along it slashing throats and throwing knife after knife, easily flipping back up on the roof to fire again when there are too many in one area.

The compound's main building is low, the roof unsuitable for mounting a defense from - they have no line of fire on him from above. Walls that protected them from the outside also kept them boxed closely in, the courtyard completely surrounded with buildings and possessing very little ground cover. The people in the back of the truck open fire. Even the least skilled marksman manages to hit someone with such close proximity to their targets. It had been made clear up front that this was not a negotiation and they would not be taking prisoners; Greta had said anyone who was squeamish should stay home.

"Like shooting fish in a barrel," Greta had commented after. "Nazi fucks."

She had also suggested several clever ways for him to feed without the others seeing. At first the Soldier pretends to not understand what she is indicating, but she finally tells him that she is not a fool and he does not need to pretend with her.

"Whatever you are, I'm just happy you're on our side. So why don't you take one of these degenerate fucks that's still alive into that building over there and interroagte him alone. Then volunteer for body duty. We usually at least pile them up inside a building if we have to take out a few. No reason to leave a mess for the next guy."

The Soldier is grateful. He is so very hungry and it has been weeks since he has had anything human. He busies himself getting his fill while the others start cleaning the place out.

Later, he finds a man locked inside a makeshift medical facility. He had thick black hair streaked
with gray swooped over his forehead and a full moustache and beard. His height, skin tone and iris coloring were as described by Fury as one of the people who frequently came to the trade meetings. While the Soldier surveyed him, the man pushed up his glasses by the bridge with a finger. They make his eyes look even bigger.

"Dr. Gurminder Arneja?" The Soldier questions.

The shorter man responded after a brief pause. "Uh...Yes...?"

The Soldier makes a pleased grunt in return.

They pick the facility clean with the help of the survivors, filling all three trucks and several more the Burners had on site, even strapping some items to the rooves. Fury had been concerned the remaining Greenies would protest leaving, and if there were a significant amount he'd been given orders to help secure the compound and leave them. Nick said he "wasn't playing colonizer" by stealing the resources or autonomy of another group. But of the forty-one original residents, only six remained. None disagreed with the plan to strip the facility and head to Claptrap.

Once it is too dark to work, the solar array already disassembled and packed, they settle in around a fire to eat. Buck spends the evening speaking with the doctor at length about himself, his past and his current... situation. He is as honest as he is able to be. It feels good not to second-guess his words or how others will respond to them.

To his credit, the man's fear dissipates quickly. If anything, the Soldier seems to pique his interest. As a rule, he distrusted and feared doctors, but Gurminder was a different kind than he was familiar with. He also seemed to know just what questions to ask to get Buck thinking about something in a different way than he had before.

Several days later, after giving mission report (no casualties, only three minor injuries clearing out a building of stragglers) he assists in offloading supplies. It is evening and grows dark earlier this time of year. With his responsibilities completed, it is not long before he is standing at Steve's door. It feels right to knock; he no longer lives there and is unsure if he ever will again.
Use your words...

Chapter Summary

Buck and Steve talk about what they want and need.

Chapter Notes

***extra trigger warning*** some blunt discussion of sexual violence towards the end

The blonde's face is hard to read when he opens the door - surprise, anxiety...relief? He looks tired and drawn, his aroma says he has not been eating well (though Buck is shocked at how much it still affects him). Win had informed him that, after much cajoling, Steve had returned the Soldier's things to his shanty. He can see them over the smaller man's shoulder in a neat row on the table.

"I'm not presuming you'll stay, I just...I was afraid you wouldn't talk to me otherwise."

It's something akin to physical pain to see the large contusion, slowly fading, on the little mechanic's face. To see the fear and hurt there. To realize that the fear is not of him, but of him not being receptive to the smaller man's attempt to reconcile. Buck is unsure that he can; things cannot be what they were before.

Steve stares down at his feet. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I was…"

"A large asshole." Win's words out of his mouth.

"Yeah." Steve says simply, looking up at him with his head still bowed, "Can we talk inside?"

"Remember what we discussed about personal boundaries," a voice chimes in from the Soldier's right. Steve leans far enough out of the doorframe to see Gurminder.

The doctor gives him a little wave and pleasant smile. "Hello! You must be Steve."

"Ummm…hi." The blonde sounds confused and less than pleased at the intrusion.

The man in his fancy quilted vest, fleece jacket, slacks and loafers would look like a wealthy suburban dad going for a fall stroll save for how filthy and tattered everything he has on is.

"Buck, uh, who is that?" the smaller man asks.

"After you fell asleep from the alcohol, I went to apologize to Clint. He revealed my understanding of several terms was inaccurate and during that discussion he said," the Soldier looks up, making effort to recite from memory, "maybe I was wrong trying to hook you two up. Steve does not need a boyfriend. He needs a good psychiatrist."

Buck looks at Steve after in silence for a long moment, the ghost of a proud smile on his face, as if his accomplishment is obvious.
"So you're telling me you…kidnapped a psychiatrist?" Steve is talking to Buck but not looking at him, eyes fixated on the doctor.

"Rescued, actually," the stranger chimes in. "From Burners."

"Don't take this the wrong way, but you don't look like someone the Burners would keep around."

"I thought for sure I was dead, but then they asked if I was a doctor. I guess they figured every well-dressed brown guy with the right accent is. Not many healthcare professionals kicking around these days so they couldn't be choosy. I just never told them what kind of doctor." Gurminder laughs, little lines forming at the corners of his eyes.

"How'd you pull that off?" the blonde asks, sounding mildly impressed.

"I had enough medical training to fake it for the simple stuff. The first appendicitis or bullet wound and I would have been screwed. But my friend here," he gives the Soldier a pat on the arm that makes Steve's brow furrow a bit at it's level of familiarity, "liberated me from their bondage." Bondage. Another topic Clint and the Soldier had discussed. Buck decided it would be, as Clint had said, not his thing. He had been restrained enough for a life time.

"Can we talk?" Steve sounds a bit exasperated, weary.

"We are all talking." Buck responds matter-of-factly.

"Alone." Steve turns to the doctor, voice dripping with sarcasm. "Ten minutes long enough for me not to erode his boundaries?" He holds up his arm and taps his wrist, indicating the watch on Gurminder's own. "You can time me. You're used to that in your profession."

The doctor nods when the Soldier looks to him. Buck follows Steve inside. The smaller man sits on the edge of the bed, runs a hand through his (finally clean) hair, not sure where to start.

"Sit?" Steve motions to a kitchen chair.

The Soldier remembers the dog comment, recalls seeing people give the simple command to their canines, and bristles slightly.

"Please?" There's something vaguely desperate in Steve's tone. He slowly complies, but chooses a different chair, even though it does not face the closed door like the one previously gestured to. Perhaps he had absorbed some of the little mechanic's stubborn nature.

"Okay, where to start. Firstly, I know I was a huge asshole and I said a lot of things to you that I shouldn't have, and I slapped you, like a bunch of times, and also you had to clean up my puke and that's really awful. So I'm really, really sorry and I get it if you're pissed off at me." Steve fiddles with a thread on one of the blankets.

"And?" Buck says flatly, employing a technique he has witnessed Steve and Clint use on one another.

"I get it, if you want to go stay with Win or someone else. But I really, really would like you to move back here."

"And?"

*Taste of your own medicine, Rogers.* Steve finally looks at him, but quickly looks away.
"I'm sorry that I spied on you. That I got mad you were... I didn't want to think of you as wanting things like that but it was selfish to expect you to not have... needs... just because I get... weird about that stuff. Part of why I got so upset was because... Well, you were... You were clearly thinking about me when you were doing it."

"I do not think about anything while I do it, except that it feels good." The Soldier's voice is as placid as ever.

"But you... moaned my name." Steve's cheeks redden at that, even the bruised one.

"I called to you because I realized you were outside the window," Buck says calmly.

_Oh, Steve. You goddamn idiot._ He feels foolish, then - strangely - a bit disappointed when he believes Buck did not want him that way, perhaps any way, after all.

Then the Soldier follows up with, "and I hoped you would join me." There's a faint hint of something smoky in his voice by the end.

"Wait, what?" Steve blurs out.

"I choose not to think about you when I touch myself because it feels inappropriate to put you in a situation you may not want, even in my imagination. But I do have sexual feelings for you. I would have been pleased if you had come in, had touched me or let me touch you."

_Well, goddamn._ Steve is uncharacteristically speechless.

"I would never touch you in that way without your permission or force you to do anything, save to protect you or prevent you from harming yourself, as I did when you were intoxicated. I would never hurt you. You have nothing to fear from me or my genitals."

Steve knows Buck's not trying to be funny with that last part, which is what in fact makes it hilarious. He can't help letting out a short chortle.

"Um, okay. Thank you for... clarifying."

"I have also, with help, realized I am... romantically attracted to you. If you do not reciprocate those feelings, I would still like to be friends. However, our relationship cannot be what it has been. It is too confusing and difficult for me, emotionally."

_Wow. That shrink must have made a fortune before the collapse. Or Clint really did have good advice occasionally._

"So let's say I... was open to the idea of maybe having those types of thoughts and feelings about you. Would you move back in?" Steve tip toes carefully around stating anything outright.

"Only if you will agree to speak to the psychiatrist as much as he deems necessary." Buck's face is a mask, giving away nothing.

The blonde sighs, long and hard, stares up at the ceiling.

"Fiiiine," he groans like he's accepting a terrible punishment.

"You must also realize I will make my own decisions about what I do with my time and body."

Buck's voice gets the slightest bit louder, more forceful.

"I won't boss you around or try to control you, _but_ I have conditions too." Steve side-eyes the
"Name your terms and I will advise if they are agreeable." His voice is soft again, a glint of curiosity in his eye.

"When you… touch yourself, you'll hang something on the outside of the doorknob. A bandana, a shirt, something, so I know to give you your privacy." Steve's face grows a bit pink.

"Acceptable. However, consider my invitation to join me still open regardless of the presence of a cloth." He stares at Steve, unblinking, not a hint of shame. The blonde's face reddens even more.

"And about… that stuff. I…" The smaller man looks down at his hands. *Fuck, is he really going to do this? *"What do you know about the people I was with, before here?"

"That they were deserving. That they hurt you. That you have many scars from them." The Soldier's eyes, now more ice blue than their standard pale turquoise, start to glow slightly.

"You've seen those?" Steve's voice goes quiet, but there's something vaguely accusatory in it.

"When your shirt has pulled up in the back." It is not a lie, it is just not the whole truth. He had not seen the marks since the day in the barn. He was careful not to look when Steve changed.

"What else do you know?" Steve continues, voice still low, cautious.

"That your time with them still affects you. That you have nightmares. That you avoid most physical contact. That it is difficult for you to trust others, especially males."

Steve lets out a long wavering breath, steels himself for what he's about to say.

"Their leader was a man named Brock. He was ex special ops, like Fury, ran a crew of others who were too. I thought, at first, I'd got lucky meeting them. I'd been alone for a year, had a few run ins with dangerous people. Brock's crew had supplies, vehicles, weapons and they were military. People who protect you." He swallows hard, looks up at the ceiling. "And Brock was…He was really attractive, well-built, and…convincing. I was nineteen and I had never even kissed anyone and even though he was a lot older I was flattered when he paid attention to me."

Steve finally glances at Buck. The Soldier watches with rapt attention, eyes just a bit wide, lips pressed together.

"The first night he offered to let me stay in the lead truck. He gave me a bedroll, told me I'd sleep better there, away from the others' snoring. He…sat with me. Asked me all sorts of questions about myself. He seemed so friendly and nice. Then he…he pulled me up onto his lap. He said…I was so pretty and…put his hand between my legs. He had his other arm around me tight and he was really strong and I…just froze." Steve stops, picks a bottle of water off the headboard, takes a long drink.

The Soldier's eyebrows are drawn towards each other when he looks back at him, corners of his mouth turned down.

"He…he put his hand in my pants and… stroked me. I was freaked out that he would just *do* something like that without asking and…I thought maybe I'd done something, to lead him on." His voice goes lower, twists with shame. "No one had ever touched me like that and I… Even though I was scared I got hard. He took his hand out and I thought, thank god, he's realized I'm not comfortable, but then it was back, just…wet. I was disgusted, but my body just…reacted and I… finished in my pants, really fast."
Steve looks down at his lap, rubs both hands over his face, the pain from his cheek bringing him back to himself.

"He just sort of...pushed me off him and got up. I asked if he had anything I could clean up with and he said...He said *sit in your mess, slut* and I knew, I knew immediately I had made a huge mistake. I tried to run for the door but he caught me, started beating me. I fought back, really hard, but it wasn't enough and he...*Brock raped me.*" He barely whispers those words. He's never said them to anyone. "He kept telling me how it was obvious I wanted it. That I couldn't deny that he'd got me off. Like it was all my fault because I came when he touched me. He never tried to jerk me off again, but he forced himself on me over and over. I resisted every single time so he'd...He would torture me, sometimes during, sometimes after."

The Soldier's brows have drawn harshly down in the middle, his lower lip trembling, eyes blazing blue-white with anger.

"So, I...I may want to touch you. I may want you to touch me. But I'm not sure...how I'll react. Sometimes, even when I touch myself, I feel...panic. Disgust. I need to go slow. Really slow. I need you to be patient and understand it's not about you."

"You will have all the time you require. I will not touch you at all unless you ask. I will sleep on the floor." Buck's face has softened, but his eyes are still fierce. In his head he can only chant *I will kill this person, I will kill this person, I will kill this person...*

"No...I...I missed you in the bed, when I was upset." He tries his best to give a little smile, is unsure if it comes across that way. "And... if you want to touch me, in a non-sexual way, as long as it's not from behind and I see you coming, that's...that's okay too. It's...nice when you do."

Buck gets up, crosses slowly to Steve, gets on his knees in front of him, carefully takes his hand and pulls it to the side of his face. He rubs his cheek back and forth against it as he looks up at the blonde, then turns his head slightly, presses his lips lightly to the smaller man's palm. Now the blonde is sure he's smiling.

Right on time, Gurminder knocks on the door.
Buck and Steve start to explore their boundaries.

The next few weeks pass slow for Steve and Buck. There is a lot of nervous energy between them, especially when they are alone together, but they resume reading in bed (as well as sharing it to sleep) immediately. There isn't even another conversation about it - after Buck helped the doctor and the Greenies get settled in temporary housing, he goes back to Steve's and ten minutes later they are changing with their backs to each other in their usual spots.

Buck barely sleeps, mind buzzing after their mutual admissions. And that was what Steve had done in his own way, admitted he shared the other man's feelings. The Soldier understood being open about such things - vulnerable - was not the little mechanic's way but how calmed the smaller man seemed by his presence said a lot. Despite the slight awkwardness and tension between them when the lights were still on, the blonde fell asleep fast and did not move or make noise save his deep breathing, utterly exhausted after not having the brunette there to make him feel safe in the night.

Steve started his appointments with Gurminder after only a few days. He expected the doctor to immediately prod him to talk about some of the things he had discussed with Buck, assuming the Soldier had repeated them to his new confidant. But the subject doesn't come up. Gurminder only seems genuinely interested in getting to know Steve right now. The blonde knows this is step one with any therapist worth their salt, gaining your trust and getting you to be more comfortable with them. He tells himself it won't work on him, but mentally commends the doctor on his technique anyway.

Nick had liked the idea of having a head-shrinker around, not only to keep track of the stability of the residents - and deal with their ever-mutating interpersonal problems - but also to obtain information on them. He sets the doctor up with an office and treats his position as a public works job, allowing him access to food and supplies from the community coffers. In return the doctor provides free services to anyone who needs them. Gurminder even starts doing mental health workshops teaching people about things like meditation.

There is a lot of snickering and rolled eyes about the silliness of things like this with the current state of the world, but with all the improvements to their living situation the people finally have a little free time and are bored of the same activities. They start to show up to his group classes and eventually his office. Many of them don't even realize how traumatized they are by everything that has happened until they start to talk to him about something trivial and, as is his way, he slowly encourages them to self-direct into something more serious. He tries that technique with Steve a lot, but the blonde has been down this road before and catches on quickly.

Fury is sorely disappointed when he realizes the man will not cooperate in repeating any of what he hears from the Claptrappers - especially from Buck - nor even in giving him a general impression of their psychological health. He tells Nick that since he seems like "the police around these parts," he will follow the same protocol of only letting him know what is happening if he feels like someone will hurt themselves or someone else. When Gurminder finds a listening device in his office, he moves it to one of the outhouses. Steve is less than thrilled about having to go to the
appointments, but after he hears whisperings of the doctor's rebellion against Fury, he gains a lot more respect for the man.

The blonde does have to wonder if his time with Gurminder is somehow affecting him subconsciously. Things quickly become different than before between him and Buck. They touch each other a lot - a casual hand on an arm, thighs brushing at the dinner table. Steve even gives in to the urge to play with the Soldier's hair, running his fingers through it lightly when it is out of place or pushing it out of his eyes. Their conversations are different as well, deeper somehow. He holds back when the Soldier asks him questions, tries hard to remember how confusing and difficult this must be for Buck.

Gurminder had advised against Buck moving back in and definitely against sharing the bed. He felt it may engender a false sense of intimacy, making Buck think he was getting what he needed when in actuality it was a way for Steve to have the Soldier close without doing the work to open himself up emotionally. It was falling back into the habit of staying in a gray zone with one another, engaging in behavior that was not quite friendship but was also not openly romantic in nature. It is the one area in which Buck ignores the doctor.

Something warms in him seeing Steve relaxed in the bed next to him. The smaller man lays closer than he would have before, arm folded beneath his head, on his side to face the Soldier. The bigger man mirrors his position while they talk about all manner of things - ideas for runs, words or concepts that the Soldier needs clarification on, the meaning of certain interactions he witnesses between people. Watching Steve's eyelids grow heavy, his long lashes finally coming to rest against his cheeks as he drifts off, is not something Buck is willing to surrender even if it gets him more emotionally invested in their (possibly going nowhere) relationship.

The Soldier never feels more useful than when Steve wakes from a nightmare and calls out to - or reaches for - him. He may not know many words of comfort but at least he is present, able to be touched or provide touch if that is what Steve asks. Usually that is the warm press through his thin shirt of the smaller man's hand on his stomach, nothing new though Buck no longer pretends to be asleep when the blonde does it. But then one night Steve, trembling lightly and soaked in cold sweat, pushes close and requests simply hold me. Buck does his best, cognizant of his metal arm's weight and hardness where it rests against the little mechanic's delicate ribs. When the Soldier's dreams - minute flashes of the old Buck's life and his time as a Winter Soldier flickering through his mind like images on a broken computer screen - drive him from sleep he is careful not to wake his companion.

Eventually Buck had even revealed what, in fact, he had been reading all those weeks. Steve skimmed the book, face a bit pink (even though he does not think of himself as a prude, it was quite explicit and the state of certain pages made him realize they'd been read more than the rest). He blanches when he reaches the chapter about trauma. Buck notices his reaction and quietly informs him he had not been able to read the chapter at first, that the subject matter had upset him too much. But he had forced himself to after what Steve told him about his experiences.

He thinks he can use kernels of wisdom from some dimestore therapist to fix me.

*He's just trying to understand. It's the thought that counts.*

"I apologize if I upset you." The concern on Buck's face is so visible, not the usual subtle changes Steve really needs to look for to notice, that it surprises the smaller man.

"It's okay. I asked about it." Steve gives a little smile, hands it back to Buck.

"I apologize for misleading you before. I thought the subjects in this book may be inappropriate to
discuss. Not just with you, but with anyone. People seem to bring up sexual things in jest but otherwise it is virtually never mentioned." The Soldier looks at it for a long time, takes the dust jacket off, sets it and the book carefully on the bookshelf headboard on what has become his side of the bed.

"There's a lot of shame and taboos around sex in many cultures. Even where I grew up, which is fairly open-minded, you wouldn't hear someone having a frank conversation about masturbation." Steve is sitting atop the covers, knees folded up to his chest.

"Is it okay we are having this discussion? It does not make you uncomfortable?" Buck has his back to the wall, legs also bent though stretched out a bit more to let their feet touch.

"I don't need you to walk on eggshells." Steve pulls his legs in even higher as he slides the covers from beneath him, then settles between the sheets, pulling the blankets up to his waist.

"Walk on eggshells. This is a metaphor?" Buck follows suit, putting a pillow against the headboard as Steve had and leaning his back against it, stretching his long legs out under the bedcovers.

"Yeah. It means…to choose your words and actions really carefully so they don't upset someone. You don't have to do that with me. I just… I want you to be honest with me and I'll try my hardest to be honest with you. If something you say bothers me, I'll tell you, but I won't be mad." Steve turns a bit on his side to look at Buck, who considers the response silently for a long time.

"Have you ever…masturbated?" The Soldier looks down into his lap.

*Wow, okay right to the hard stuff, Rogers. No pun intended.*

"Yep. Lots of times." Steve says it as matter-of-factly as he can.

"Have you done it since I came to live with you?" Buck turns to his right to face Steve.

"Not very much. You were around all the time and I thought that would be weird for both of us if you accidentally heard me." Steve tries hard not to blush or sound like it's a thing that he asked. This isn't something he wants to make Buck think is embarrassing, especially after how shitty he'd been about it before.

"Now you have more time alone, while I am out on runs."

"Yeah…" *But I'm too stressed out and tired to even think about it most of the time.* Steve slides farther down, pulls the pillow with him. Buck follows suit, both cradling their head with their bottom arm.

"It would not be weird for me, to be near when you do that." There is a soft hint of lust under his calm tone.

"One step at a time." Steve reaches out and gently pats the larger man's chest.

"I understand that phrase but not what it conveys in this context," he responds, looking down at Steve's hand on him. It comes to rest near his heart and does not withdraw.

"When you… want to be sexual with someone you also have attraction for… romantically… you do...other physical things before you go right to… masturbating in front of each other." *Fuck, did I really just say that out loud?* "You touch a little - not sexually - at first, to get comfortable, to show the other person you… have feelings for them. And then eventually you...increase that."
Steve feels a bit selfish. Perhaps he is being misleading explaining things to Buck like they are working towards going steady in 1957, acting as if there is some rule book to follow. But he had already made it clear to the larger man he needed to move very slowly when it came to this issue, so he supposes it is best to infuse what he wants and needs into his advisement on the subject to not send mixed messages.

"Nnh," Buck half-grunts in the affirmative, "you are referencing displays of physical affection. I read about that. I was unsure if you would be comfortable with those behaviors."

"I did say you can touch me." Steve's voice is almost shy as he says it but he doesn't look away.

"Yes, and I have done that more but...I have concern that I will do it in the wrong way. That I will misunderstand what is affectionate rather than erotic."

The sound of you saying erotic is pretty erotic, Steve can't help but think. He pushes the bedcovers down to his knees.

"Basically touching someone anywhere between here and here" - Steve puts one hand sideways and level with his hipbones and the other one across the middle of his thighs - "would be considered sexual." He pulls the blankets back up.

"What about...nipples?" Buck recalls touching his own and how stimulating it was.

"Uh, yeah and those too." Fuck, is that something he likes?

"It is hard to know where the line is with certain behaviors between sexual and non-sexual. Kissing in particular is very confusing. The book mentioned the act as both physical affection that could be romantic or platonic and as a type of sexual foreplay. What determines that?" The Soldier looks incredibly fascinated, like Steve has promised to explain the meaning of life.

Shit. That's a tough one. Maybe Gurminder could explain it better. Okay, but also he could talk to Clint again and you saw how that went last time.

"Okay...umm. Does the book say what an...erogenous zone is?" Steve does blush a little at that despite his best efforts.

"Yes."

"Kissing someone there, or the area I showed you a minute ago, would be sexual. Kissing other places wouldn't be."

"What about the mouth?" Buck had wondered about humans pushing their lips together since the first time he had seen it done. Sometimes it was soft and silent, sometimes quick with a loud smacking sound. Other times the mouths opened and moved together.

"Ummm... That has to do with how you kiss someone."

"I do not understand." There's that expression again, like Steve has all the answers.

The blonde gets an odd look, a bit worried, then presses his mouth tight, draws his eyebrows down and sets his jaw - a face the Soldier has seen him make many times when he is setting his mind to a task. Steve leans forward and presses his puckered lips lightly to Buck's mouth.

"That's an affectionate kiss."
"Oh." The Soldier is silent for a long time, eyes scanning back and forth across Steve's face. Finally he asks, "may I try?"

Steve slowly nods. Buck leans in very cautiously, mimicking the way Steve had moved his lips. It's almost a bit comical how exaggerated he looks, like he's eaten a lemon. He pecks Steve's mouth very lightly, the smaller man pushing his lips out a bit to meet Buck's.

"That was very nice," Buck practically whispers, an awestruck look on his face.

"Good." Steve gives him a little smile, slides the hand on his chest over his collarbone, lightly up the side of his neck and cheek, brushes the hair back from his face.

"May we do it again?"
Practice makes perfect.

Chapter Summary

Clint can never leave well enough alone.

Buck had gone out on one other run since eliminating the Burners, heading back to the Green Place to protect a crew tasked to disassemble more of the agricultural equipment and bring it back to Claptrap. The trip is uneventful, but he was gone several days and Steve begrudgingly admits to himself that he misses him terribly. Apparently the sentiment is returned.

The mechanic is in the pub having breakfast with Clint and Nat when Buck strides in from the road, heads straight towards him, sits down without so much as a hello and kisses him on the mouth. He does it again and again, with all the technique of a twelve year old, for what feels like ten minutes to Steve with everyone watching. The blonde blushes hard at the sloppy display of affection. Only Nat's nails digging into Clint's leg under the table keep him from saying anything.

"Um, hi," the archer manages when the Soldier finally let's Steve up for air.

"Hello." He's painfully oblivious to the reactions from everyone else, smiling like he's just won a contest or got to hold a puppy.

As soon as Buck is standing at the hotline on the other side of the building getting his breakfast, Clint breaks into only somewhat muffled hysterical laughter.

"Oh man! That was painful to watch!"

Steve leans over the table, wacks Clint's knuckles with the handle of his butter knife. "He'll get better. We just started doing that." His voice is testy but ultra-low.

"Well, god, give the poor guy some pointers. That looked like my Aunt Mable with her pomeranian."

"Fuck you, and also I don't want to hurt his feelings. This is super new to him and I don't want him to think he's screwing up right away." Steve is still talking super soft.

"Why are we whispering?" Clint too-loud whispers back.

"Because he has really good hearing."

"There's no way he could hear from over there." Clint turns to watch Buck, in conversation with Vic, across the room. It's loud in the pub as well, fifty people talking and chewing and scraping their plates with silverware.

"Buck, if you can hear me, give me a thumbs up," Nat says in an only slightly above normal voice. Without missing a beat the Soldier's arm is up, giving the gesture.

Steve points both hands, palms up, in Buck's direction as if to say see.

"How do you talk shit about him under your breath when he pisses you off?" Clint asks.
"Right? That's like... twenty-five percent of our relationship," Nat replies. Clint kisses her on the cheek as she rolls her eyes.

"Unlike you two, we don't argue. We talk about things like grown-ups." The blonde cockily moves his head from side to side.

"Too bad you aren't smooching like grow-ups." The archer grins, loudly bites his over-dry toast.


Clint invites Buck over to play cards that afternoon. The Soldier, having helped unload the equipment and debriefed Fury, has little to do that day while Steve works. They've been playing for all of twenty minutes when the archer finally can't help himself.

"So...what was with the suckface at breakfast?" Clint draws a card, eyes it like it's very interesting. He never beats Buck - he's good at faking people out but the Soldier's poker face is flawless and he's clearly been trained to think strategically.

"I do not understand." His face is perfectly blank. Win had taught him to play and to give nothing away.

"You and the kid, locking lips."

"Oh. You mean kissing." Still not a hint of a change in his expression as he reviews his cards.

"I mean...if you can call what you were doing to his face kissing," the archer says low as he rearranges his hand. This finally earns Clint the faintest hint of consternation on the taller man's features.

"Steve enjoys what I do to his face." He schools his own back to blank, save something vaguely uncertain in his eyes.

"If you say so."

The Soldier's brows knit together ever so slightly. They focus on the game, Clint sure he's rattled his opponent. After he triumphantly slaps down a straight flush the Soldier calmly lays his cards down on the table. Royal flush.

"Jesusfuck! Every goddamn time!" Clint grabs the deck and throws the cards up in the air; they drift down slowly around both of them.

"What am I doing wrong? To Steve's face?" Now he's wearing a full on frown. It continues to surprise Clint how expressive he's become.

"Well, you've got the enthusiasm but your technique is all off." Clint slides his chair closer to the bigger man.

"How do I learn this…technique?" Buck looks at him earnestly.

"Oh, me and you are totally gonna practice." Clint smirks.

He's barely gotten the words out before Buck leans in and jams his mouth to the archer's.

"Woah! Woah! I was kidding. It was sarcasm." Clint's hands press the other man gently away.
"I do not understand sarcasm. It is stupid!" Buck pouts, throwing himself heavily back in his chair with his arms crossed.

"Look, I can explain what to do," Clint tries to console him.

"Nnn," he grunts. "You do not learn to fight by being told how. You are shown and you practice. Steve does not provide direction and I have limited time with him in which kissing is appropriate."

Clint leans his head back, sighs heavily. "Fuck it. Fuck it, fine. Come'ere."

Buck just scowls at him, hands sliding further along his sides as his hold around himself tightens. Clint grabs the seat of his chair and hops it over next to the bigger man.

"You can't tell anyone I did this. I don't care if people think I kiss dudes, I just don't want Steve to sucker punch me again." Clint leans in closer. "Okay, first of all your body language is shit. You need to be relaxed when you kiss someone, make them feel welcome in your space."

The archer takes ahold of Buck's arms and, after a moment of immobile resistance, the bigger man allows him to unfold them and to turn him in his seat towards the archer.

"Okay, so usually you want to touch the person before you do it. Not grab, just light." He puts Buck's hands on his waist. "Then you give the look."

"Look?" Buck questions, before pressing his mouth back into a severe line.

"The I want to kiss you look. Like this." Clint's eyes go warm, scan over Buck's face, settle on his mouth. "Then you see how they look at you. Are they giving off the vibe?"

"Vibe?" The Soldier sounds fascinated now.

"It's, like, the energy they give off. Do they look like they want to kiss you back? If they're just sort of...meh," Clint makes a bland face, "then it's probably not the time for a good liplock."

"Vibe. Okay." Buck responds like a college kid taking notes.

"You want to start slow, especially if things are new. Don't just pounce. You're libel to chop his lip off with those chompers." Clint leans in, slides his hand to cup the side of Buck's face, lightly brushes their mouths together. The bigger man tries to pucker up and the archer pulls back. "Nope, nope. That's just for like...an affectionate peck like..." he plants a quick kiss on Buck's cheek with a little popping sound. "That's something you'd do to a lady friend or a relative. Or maybe your significant other if you were in a hurry. And you don't usually do it more than once."

"Oh," Buck says, embarrassed that it is the only kissing technique he knows and yet he is apparently employing it incorrectly.

"Relax your mouth," Clint instructs.

Buck's jaw drops open.

"Not that much. Just a bit. Like you're about to say something. Like this." He parts his lips slightly and when Buck follows suit he leans in and presses their mouths lightly together. The Soldier emulates him, pressing softly back.

"Better! Much better. Okay, so that's nice if you just want a quick kiss, but if you want it to be more romantic, you need to fit your mouths together more and sort of...move them against each
other. Like you're...lip dancing."

"I have seen people do this!" Buck sounds like he's about to say eureka. It's the closest thing to excitement Clint has witnessed him express.

"You want to tilt your head a bit more to the side so your mouth is at like...a forty-five degree angle from theirs." He figures the Soldier will understand technical instruction. "But if they're already tilting their head you want to do it in the opposite direction. So if I tilt mine to my right, you tilt yours to your right." Clint bends his neck a bit and the Soldier copies him. "Okay, so we go soft at first and then, when things feel comfortable you open your mouth wider. And you close your eyes while you do it."

Clint tilts up into the kiss, lips just slightly parted. When the Soldier seems to have that down, the archer pushes against him a little harder, opens his mouth a little wider, moves his lips subtly up and down, forward and back, working his mouth against the other man's. Buck is fine at first copying his movements, but he gets a little overzealous, opening his mouth too wide.

Clint leans back, wipes the spit off with the back of his hand. "You're kissing his mouth, not trying to swallow it. Your lips should be against his, not around them."

"Okay. May I try again?"

Clint nods. Buck leans in this time, emulating Clint's gesture, putting his hand to the side of the shorter man's face. He brushes their mouths together first, then slowly tilts his head, leans in harder, intensifying the kiss. He moves his mouth against the archer's with much more finesse than last time, his pulse picking up as he imagines Steve's much fuller lips against his own.

"Ahem." A sound comes from the entranceway.

Their heads both whip towards the door to see it a bit open and Natasha standing there. She raises her eyebrows. The Soldier is shocked he did not hear her, even with the distraction.

"This isn't what it looks like!" Clint blurts out.

"It looks like you're making out with your friend's boyfriend."

"Okay, it is what it looks like. But it's not for sexy times. I'm teaching him." The archer gives her a goofy smile he hopes is convincing. She closes the door, sits down at the other end of the table, eyeing him seriously.

"You know some part of me always wondered if I'd at least get a little horned up kissing a guy, but nothing. I mean, gray skin aside you're a dish, Bucky. But not even a ghost of a chubby." Clint looks at his lap.

"Don't ruin it for me, Clint." Nat snaps quickly. "You know, Buck, if I watched I could probably give you some good pointers." She smiles sweetly.

"Critique of form is useful when learning a new skill," the Soldier agrees.

"Riiiight. Did you teach him how to do it with tongue?" Nat grins wickedly at Clint.

"Have you seen his teeth?"

"Well if you're too scared..." she counters, smirking.
"Fuck you, I'm not scared." He turns back to the Soldier. "Okay, so, we're gonna kiss like we just
were, but I'm gonna put my tongue in your mouth juuuust a little. Like...just barely inside your lips.
And you move the tip of your tongue against mine."

"This is... romantic?" Buck questions.

"Well it's...sexy kissing," the shorter man explains.

"Sexy?"

"Yeah like, to get the other person turned on," Clint says. Nat nods a little too vigorously.

"Turned on?"

"Horny. Ready to go. Hot and bothered..." the archer lists off.

"He means sexually aroused," the redhead chimes in.

"Oh." Buck contemplates if this is something he should learn. Steve is not ready to be sexual with
him and he does not want to overstep. Still, it can only be a positive to know if the eventuality
arises. "Okay. You may put your tongue in my mouth."

"Great! Now we're all having fun," Nat perks up.

"Don't. Fucking. Bite me." Clint points a finger in the bigger man's face before leaning back in to
kiss him.

"Yes. Yes, good form. Okay, now slide your arm around Clint's waist. Nice. Yep. Kiss a little
harder. Uh huh, that's good. Open your mouth a bit more. Perfect. Now...let me see that tongue
boys." Nat's hands slide off the table.

Later, Steve can only wonder silently if Buck has been making out with his hand or a pillow. The
Soldier kisses him (without tongue) so well before he shuts the light off that the blonde's toes curl.
He can't deny the heat that spreads through him and he lays awake, distracted, for a long time.
Steve grapples with his fear.

Steve's rotation for a run is coming up soon and his usual excitement is compounded knowing it means Buck won't be out on the road without him. The Soldier seems practically invincible but he still worries. For starters, from what he’s been told there are twenty-three other Winter Soldiers (eleven other males and twelve females). Who knows where they are or who is in charge of them. Would their old/new master(s) use them to claim Buck or at least try to destroy him?

If they did capture him, was there still someone capable of repairing his neural net? The thought of the Soldier - a blank-faced, empty-headed killing machine - unleashed on Claptrap is terrifying. Steve would have to defend his friends, their community. He can't even think about what that means. Fire scares Buck but he has no idea if it will stop him or if he could bring himself to try.

The group of marauders from the first day they met is on his mind off and on as well. They were organized, well-equipped, the white X on each of their chests like some kind of matching warpaint. There had been rumors of massive gangs rising up, a thousand or more strong. They ran whole cities, destroying or enslaving anyone in their path deemed unworthy to join. Could they be from some larger group?

Others developed well-oiled personal armies that treated the sections of the former nation they took over like a fiefdom and those within them as serfs. It wasn't enough for people who craved power over others to loot, pillage and kill at random anymore. Systematically oppressing those who had established something with their own sweat was now the easiest route to prosperity and dominance.

Buck could take on thirty men, fifty. But what about a hundred? Five hundred? He was superhuman but he had his limits. And Claptrap now had a lot to steal or grift off of via threat of force. That meant more people lingering in the outskirts, more danger on the road.

Certainly Brock had found no shortage of people to follow him; he'd had over eighty at Steve's last count. The core of them were other ex special ops and ex military Brock had worked with before and during the collapse. Like Jack. He'd started pulling in all sorts eventually, even flesheaters. If they were strong and brutal enough, or could provide an invaluable skill, they were brought into the fold.

Steve was the only "pet" and the others weren't allowed one; their conquests were left behind or killed as they tore their way through small settlements and what was left of towns, their terrified, starving residents cowering in the remains of their homes. When one of the others put their hands on him in the night, Brock didn't beat them later to avenge the smaller man, but to establish his ownership. He often made Steve sleep among the lower-level foot soldiers, daring those beneath him to touch what belonged to him (filling the blonde with constant terror of what the others might do to him was a bonus for the leader). After Steve broke enough underlings' noses and fingers, Brock went back to leaving him on the truck.

It was part of Brock's prestige in his position to be the only one with human property. They never
settled, which meant no permanent infrastructure, dwellings or agriculture. Without any of that to tend to, the enslaved only served one purpose (okay, two if you accounted for the occasional cannibalism the group partook in), and "having some ass around," as Brock so eloquently put it, wasn't worth keeping them fed or transporting them.

Trusting Fury's motivations towards Buck also proved difficult. Even though the older man rarely ventured into the field anymore - choosing to sit in his office pulling strings and watching his drone feeds (something only a privileged few knew about) - there were people from his ex special ops crew on every scavenging rotation. Who knew if they would be tasked with betraying Buck once his guard was down? Enough bullets, a few well-placed grenades and...

Steve thinks it speaks to just how paranoid and untrusting he's become since Brock that he has a virtually indestructible...boyfriend?...that's basically a living weapon and yet he still manages to concoct worst-case scenarios. Maybe, he ponders, it's because things have been far more intense between them lately and it's made him go all soft and gooey.

They've worked their way up to nearly a half hour spent kissing before they go to sleep and it's gotten more and more passionate each time. He'd stopped pretending a while ago that it was just affectionate, then even that it was only romantic - they had clearly crossed the bridge into sexy town. It's impossible to deny how incredibly turned on he gets as of late and more and more he forgets why it had worried him so much before. He's even pulled Buck's big hands from their gentle rest on his waist lower, to his hips, or urged the larger man's arms around him, pressing close. These invitations to touch more heatedly have occurred enough times that the Soldier feels confident now to do it without prompting.

One night the blonde balls his hands up in Buck's shirt, yanks the other man closer, puts his leg over the Soldier as their mouths move together. The bigger man's flesh arm tightens around his back, pulling Steve farther into his space, and just like that - with their height difference - Steve's hard on is rubbing through his flimsy night shirt against Buck's belly. He groans into the other man's mouth at the feel of it, Buck taking this as his cue to finally ease his tongue carefully between the blonde's lips.

Steve's tongue brushes his lightly - the little mechanic is so hot there, soft and wet. Buck groans, his hips shifting minutely, involuntarily. The bulge in the brunette's pants comes to rest lightly against Steve's inner thigh. And there it is, the old familiar panic rising up in the blonde.

The mechanic pulls his head back, puts his hands flat against the Soldier's chest, pressure light but firm to ease them apart.

"Umm, I'm...really tired. I think we should go to sleep," he says, withdrawing his leg.

Buck looks at him searchingly for a moment, eases his arms from around him. "Everything is alright?"

"Yeah. Yeah of course."

"Did I… do something wrong? Was the kissing too...sexy?"

Steve can't help but chuckle at that. "No! No it was perfect." Steve leans back in, kisses the Soldier long and slow. "Goodnight."

Fuck. The blonde lays there for an hour - still mildly horny and very pissed off at himself - before he finally manages to go to sleep.
He'd seen the bandana on the outside doorknob a few times since Buck moved back in and the more things progress between them, the more often it's there. Steve makes a beeline for anywhere else - helps pour glass and stack block, gets a beer at the pub, heads to one of his friends' shanties, even goes to pull weeds at the ag field - anything to distract from thinking about what Buck may be doing to himself.

The day after the "accidental boner rubbing" as he'd dubbed it, the rolled square of fabric is there (mocking him) when he goes home to get a part for one of the water pumps. He stands outside the door, biting his lower lip for a long time, thoughts swirling around in his head. He could just walk in there and get the part, right? No big deal.

*It's just your sort-of-boyfriend possibly fingering himself. Nothing to see here.*

Then he hears the very distinctive sound that had been coming from his shanty the night he and Clint beat the crap out of each other at the pub.

*Unh, unh, unh…*

"Fuck."

It's almost like another person possesses his body. He sees and feels his hand on the doorknob, but doesn't seem to be actively willing it to move. The same with his feet as they take him inside, his elbow as it pushes the door shut behind him. Buck - panting hard in the exact same position he had seen him in the other time on the floor - turns his head to look over at Steve. With the curtains closed and no lamp on, his irises glow softly in the dim light. He doesn't remove his fingers from himself, just stills his motion.

For the first time the blonde really let's himself look the brunette over, takes him in slowly from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. His body is so enticing - his legs long, thighs strong, the curve of his ass perfect, the slight pronouncement of his hip bones inviting hands to rest there, beneath magazine ad worthy abs and rounded pecs. His nipples and his cock, the latter deeper purple than the former, are hard even though he isn't touching either.

Steve has never liked admitting to himself that he finds athletes from certain sports - rugby, soccer, MMA - really attractive. Not that he has only a certain look for men (or women for that matter) that he likes, but he can't help but notice Buck is definitely that type - lean, extremely fit without being comically overgrown, effortlessly masculine. It feels so in line with sexist stereotypes about what "real" men should be - and what people attracted to men are supposed to want - to lust after someone like that. Someone whose form stands in such sharp contrast with everything about Steve's own body.

But he realizes in that moment he doesn't see Buck as just some specimen of physical idealism or fulfillment of his teen fantasies. He's certainly sexy, tall, muscular, handsome. But beyond that he's struck by how *beautiful* all the things that make the Soldier different are. How the flush high on his cheeks is lavender instead of pink, the soft electric blue of his eyes, the sharp points of his perfect white canines and the almost identical but slightly smaller teeth next to them just visible. His pale gray skin is flawless, save the circular scars in the center of his torso.

It also occurs to the blonde that this may be why Buck is attracted to him - because he does not look like anyone else, this unusual mix of features labeled feminine and masculine. Steve wouldn't say he has no self-esteem, no characteristics he likes about his body, but he certainly isn't vain either. Next to the cozy house where his self-worth lives grows a garden of insecurity seeded and watered by a society whose ideals he couldn't conform to right from childhood. It was heavily fertilized by a mountain of shit heaped on it by an abusive psychopath.
Nobody gets to tell me what I deserve anymore.

Buck doesn't in fact look twice at him; the Soldier stares at him with awe like he's the center of the universe. In that moment Steve feels wanted and seen in a way he never has. He thinks he'll spontaneously combust if he doesn't do something to release the churning energy it builds inside him. His legs carry him over to stand in front of the Soldier, completely unsure of what's about to happen.

His eyes never leave Steve's, even as the arm behind him starts to move again, wet little sounds filling the air briefly before his mouth drops open and those incredible noises drown the others out. Steve stares down at him for several long moments - only five or so inches taller with Buck lifted up on his knees - watching the Soldier's face contort in pleasure.

The mechanic's own cock tents his too-big pants. He easily slips his hand inside the large waistband, suspenders doing nothing to impede his motion, no underwear beneath today either. Steve starts to stroke himself roughly, Buck's eyes widening ever so slightly as he finally breaks their gaze, eyes trailing down to the blonde's hand moving under the fabric. Both of them breathe hard between and through their groans.

Buck suddenly grips Steve's wrist with his flesh fingers, eases his hand out of his pants, runs his tongue over it several times in slow, wet stripes from palm to fingertips, watching Steve throughout. He returns it to it's former position. The blonde whimpers at how much better it feels, hunches forward as he pumps himself. Buck catches the little mechanic's lips with his, still careful of his teeth even as he deepens the kiss, as their tongues lightly swirl and press and retreat randomly as they moan into each other's mouths.

Buck's right hand goes to the side of Steve's face, the blonde's free arm wrapped around the Soldier's upper back while they both work themselves, quick and needy. The blonde practically hyperventilates as he gets close, Buck easing him back so that he can watch. Steve's dark rose lips hang open, little broken sounds - starting almost guttural and ending high - escaping him, lids half closed, top lashes ghosting lightly over the bottom ones, face flushed with color.

The Soldier wishes he could see exactly what the blonde is doing, precisely the way he likes to be touched to make him come apart like this. He moves his fingers slightly inside himself to just the right position, urging himself closer, forcing his own sounds to get loud and desperate. When the smaller man cries out seconds later, eyes slamming shut as his fingers dig into Buck's shoulder, the bigger man quickly moves his free hand to his cock. It's not to stroke it but to pin it to his belly - fingers cupped over the head to contain his release - as he finishes hard with a wail.
Chapter Summary

The gang talks details of the upcoming raid.

The Soldier and Nick meet several days before the scheduled raid on the reaver compound. They go over the list of everyone who was due to be up on the next three rotations and pull them in to the office in small groups. They discuss the operation and ascertain if anyone wants to back out. To say this will get messy is an understatement. Reavers are brutal cannibals, mutilating their victims, often cutting pieces off of them while they are still alive. Sometimes they keep captives for long periods, cauterizing a stump or wound where they have removed something, coming back later for more. There is no question what will happen to them if they lose.

Steve, Win, Greta, Clint and Nat meet with the two run planners in the late morning. They are all, with total certainty, in. After how invaluable she was with the Burners, Buck has convinced Nick to let Greta have option to join any run that she wants, asking the older woman to act as his second-in-command. She is a crack shot, unafraid of anything, quick on her feet even compared to someone much younger and always has useful ideas. It did not hurt that she had helped him procure his meal in the Green Place without a hint of judgment.

None of them, save maybe Nat and Greta, really relishes having to kill anyone. But neither are they in a moral quandary over picking off some violent, semi-rabid flesheaters. Especially ones who are no doubt planning an offensive to come for them in the night or may snatch a group of trashers from the yard. There were so few other options for human meat in that region. Steve knows from past experience that were they to invade Claptrap, one of the first people they would eat would be Violet. Kids are apparently tender.

Unlike in the Green Place, the small town that the reavers have taken has a lot of low ground cover. Burnt out cars, tool sheds, and all manner of other random junk and small structures dot the community. The entire village is less than a quarter mile square, with maybe two hundred houses. It had hosted a half-dozen businesses and a tiny school to service the neighboring farms. The area has been thoroughly trashed by marauders more than once and about a third of it is partially or totally burnt down. It's not unmanageable with a big group, but there are a lot of places to hide.

It is decided that Win, Steve and Clint will stay atop the trucks with several others, shooting their rifles and arrows from above. It's important to have an elevated view, and to be able to call out to the others who are on the ground. Fortunately, there are very few structures that are over one-and-a-half stories, so they are not too concerned with snipers. That isn't the reavers style anyway. They tend to prefer hand to hand combat, slashing, stabbing and chopping.

The Claptrappers will bring in four trucks, each half full of personnel, and park them in the center of town in an X formation with their cabs (all with the windows shielded, courtesy of the welder) facing each other. The back doors will roll up, and everyone will file out at once with those atop each truck laying down cover fire if needed. The ground crew will spread out from there in a circle and Clint will make his way up to the roof of the lone three story structure, an old Bank next to their planned spot. He'll be able to walkie multiple people to report from his bird's-eye vantage, using his fanciest goggles to detect body heat and magnify what he's seeing. The extremely
expensive compound bow that he carries on his runs has quite a range. He named it Cecilia and no one else is allowed to touch it, not even Nat.

Aerial views from the drone of the community show very little organization to any of the vehicles or trash that lines the streets. Nick feels it can go one of two ways. The reavers could mount a full-on defensive attack once they know they are being invaded, trying to take the Claptrappers out as soon as they exit their vehicles (they are so far from anything else, everywhere silent as the grave in the post-apocalypse with no traffic and no power, and the enemy will hear and see them coming). Or it could be a brutal guerilla fight, having to go building by building to flush them out of their hiding places. Reavers don't retreat - they will fight to the last woman and man - but they have no problem laying in wait until long after they are assumed defeated, only to spring out and slit throats.

Steve has fought reavers before on the road and seen Brock's crew tangle with them. He offers that they will most likely not swarm the trucks the way that the Burners foolishly did. They may seem to behave like animals but they are still people. Their relative lack of high-tech weaponry has encouraged them to use their wits in a way that the blonde would were he in their position. They work together in packs, use trickery, booby traps, human lures and often carry multiple hidden weapons. The reavers have had several weeks to dig in at the town and prepare whatever horrors may await anyone who dares step onto their turf.

Buck is impressed with how knowledgeable Steve is on the subject, how many extremely useful observations he makes. He wants to ask more, to find out specifically what happened in his previous encounters, but he knows this is not the place or time to press the subject. The longer the little mechanic talks, the more a creeping sense of dread spreads through him. He has gone on runs with Steve before, and they have encountered dangerous people, but it was not like this. He is willingly taking him into a war zone, one where he will be brutally tortured and killed if they are not victorious.

"They won't want you two anyway," Clint jokes to Win and Steve. "Not enough meat on your bones." Win flips him off. He's still not used to her knowing what he's saying most of the time.

"Sorry we don't have meat arms like you." She mockingly flexes her biceps. "Have better things to do than push-ups all day. Need to keep place running while you stay pretty."

Nat laughs, a guttural woodpecker-fast repetitive sound from her chest that's jarringly dorky coming from such a beautiful woman. Steve and Greta join in. Even Buck chuckles softly from his spot sitting on the edge of Fury's desk.

"Can you assholes focus for five more minutes?" Nick queries, less than amused.

"Ooooooooo, you're in trouble," Clint says, soft and high-pitched.

"Shut it, Barton," Nick retorts.

"Yes, sir," the archer responds.

"If you fuck this up, if you trip and fall, if you get cornered, they will tear you apart. And if they have the time, they'll eat you. You may even be awake when they do it," Fury lectures.

"And if we lose, once they regroup they will come here. Claptrap will be left with far less warriors to defend it. They may be overrun." Buck's statement is sobering, even to himself. He thinks about Wanda and Simon trying to protect their little girl. He thinks about Vic, valiantly defending those who would take shelter in the pub to his last breath. They cannot fail in their mission. He cannot
Steve is a distraction. Even in this kind of setting he cannot keep his eyes off of him for long. What had been staunch determination to succeed has melted into the terror of losing him. Was there any victory in destroying this enemy if he could not protect the person he most needed? The little mechanic is clever and brave, determined, vicious when cornered. But he is not a soldier. Not a warrior. He is small, weak even for a human (though he would no longer ever make such a statement to the blonde's face). Still, if Steve feels he is up to the challenge, who is Buck to tell him otherwise?

Fury had actually suggested in the earlier meetings that they exclude the mechanic and the welder from this mission. Their skills were invaluable and losing either of them would be a huge blow to the community, especially when until recently there had not been adequate free time for them to start training anyone else on their daily tasks. Win's recent improvement in English had allowed her to start teaching a small group of teenagers. She would still be the most technically skilled and in demand for private jobs, but they could at least do simpler tasks for community works.

Other than the Soldier and Win, Steve had not showed much of anything to anyone. He was a fairly patient person, but he had no background in training others, unlike Win who had acted as a shift supervisor of sorts, showing new people the ropes at the factory. In addition, some of the machines in Claptrap he had designed were more of an art than a science. The welder could do basic maintenance, and replace some of the more simple parts as the person who had helped build them. But the overall blueprints of the machines existed entirely in Steve's mind and without him they would quickly break down.

Nick had acted very put-upon when Clint had urged him to bring the kid back to Claptrap (even though the archer was sure it was all an act, and that Fury felt just as much sympathy for the small blonde as he did). After he had grilled Steve at length about what happened with Brock and his crew, he had given him an interview of sorts, silently ascertaining if he had any useful skills.

"The truck you came here in. Who got it started?" Nick asked, gesturing over to the vehicle. It had been taken from Brock's fleet.

"Umm, I did. Duh," Steve answered snottily, wrists still shackled to the wall of the Claptrappers' truck.

"It's hot-wired."

"And?" the blonde snapped back at him.

"You don't look like much of a criminal." The older man smirked.

Steve bent down, pulled a bobby pin off of his jacket pocket with his mouth where it had been stuck over the top. He eased it up to his fingers, using his teeth to help adjust it into a certain shape, then picked the lock on the cuffs with it.

"You were saying?" Steve chucked them and they landed with a rattling thud on the floor boards. He went to work on the lock holding the restraints around his ankles. Fury just watched, amused.

"It's a manual transmission," he continued. "Not many people under eighty that know how to drive stick these days."

"I used to drive an old repair truck." The blonde was getting frustrated with the lock. The cuffs were an older model, easy to pick, but the ankle restraints were something more fancy and modern.
"You do the repairing, or just drive around someone who did?" The bald man watched in amusement as the kid continued fiddling with the lock, knowing full well it couldn't be forced by that method.

"My mom had this boyfriend for a while, Taj. I guess she really didn't have time to date, but they stayed friends and he was pretty cool. When I got my working papers, I apprenticed with him. He sent me to classes and stuff too. Once I finished school I worked with him full-time for a couple of years."

"He still around?" Fury asked pointedly.

"Died in the first wave. Caught it from some old lady when we went to fix her washing machine. Nobody knew yet, how bad it was." Steve stilled for a minute, thinking not for the first time that he probably carried the bug straight home to his mother and to every other customer that they saw thereafter. Fury read it on his young face like a book.

"How old are you kid? You look like a teenager." Nick finally let a vague hint of sympathy show in his voice.

"Does it matter? Not sure there's anyone left to worry about whether I drink or smoke or vote. Or who has sex with me." He went back to fiddling with the lock. Nick is not a stupid person and he picked up on that last comment right away.

"Is that why you did what you did? Revenge?" Fury queried, referencing their earlier conversation.

"I did what I did so no one else would have to live with it." He looked up at Nick finally, good eye to good eye, his other already swollen shut.

Nick remembers that look of determination - and how impressed he had been throughout their entire conversation - quite often. He especially dwells on it when he desperately wants to throttle the blonde. Steve may be small, but he is no wimp (mentally or physically) and far from helpless. That was why he didn't demand that Steve be removed from the run. Instead he casually dropped the suggestion and left it up to the Soldier, hoping that the heated discussion about the reavers would make him - and he had started thinking of it as a him despite himself - see the light in terms of just how in danger the mechanic would be.
In for a penny, in for a pound.

Chapter Summary

Steve continues to surprise the Soldier.

Maybe it's the thrill of this new direction their relationship has taken that gets Steve to do it. The two of them are huddled together - in the bed or occasionally at the table when they just can't wait or even on the floor - virtually every night since Steve's little walk in. They vigorously touch themselves while they kiss and moan and clutch at each other, Steve's hand working in his own pants or under his nightshirt.

Or maybe it's the little high Steve always gets the night before a run. He scavenged alone for fourteen months before meeting Brock and he'd developed such a taste for the searching. The need to think fast and improvise, the triumph of a good find, the adrenaline rush of uncertainty. He was grateful for the safety and comfort that this place provided, but he couldn't deny feeling couped up sometimes, getting the itch to be back on the road living by his wits.

Maybe he's just feeling particularly touchable, watchable, after his first real bath in a long time. The Green Place had developed a system of solar powered electric coils used to heat water in vintage metal claw foot tubs. All six of the units, with curtains strung around, were put in part of the open-sided pavilion-esque structure they used for large meetings. He'd been a winner of the first lottery - after that there would be a monthly schedule - and asked Buck to join him. Water conservation is important, right? At least a few other winners had shown up with friends or spouses.

The bigger man had stripped without a hint of hesitation, slid into the hot water with a soft sound of contentment, arms coming to rest on the high sides of the old tub (his left settling with a soft clank), head leaning back against the edge. He'd lifted his hands, unprompted, to cover his eyes while Steve undressed and got in. They washed themselves in comfortable silence, but he saw the Soldier sneaking glances. The blonde has never been without clothes in front of him, not even shirtless (nor with anyone else since coming to Claptrap).

Maybe it's the spontaneous thing Steve did before, once they were back at their shanty. Steve has his back to the headboard wearing only a clean nightshirt. Buck sits on the edge, long legs bent with his feet on the floor, in just his sweatpants. The bigger man is reading him something out of a book - he's trying very hard to concentrate but every tiny shift of the Soldier's frame, every move to turn a page, minutely flexes the already distracting musculature of his shoulders and upper back.

Steve doesn't know what motivates him - courage, lust, their increasing openness - to ease forward, slide his legs to either side of Buck's. His inner thighs are against the bigger man's hips, arms wrapping around his midsection from behind. The brunette keeps reading, using his free hand to lightly rub Steve's arm.

Buck is warm and he smells good - his usual mildly sweet aroma mixed with the soap and shampoo they'd used. The blonde had brought an empty cup with him, had used it to rinse the suds from the Soldier's hair after he had given it a good scrubbing. The bigger man had bent forward, making a soft hum of enjoyment as Steve lightly worked his nails all over his scalp. After a few minutes of listening to Buck read, Steve can't resist pressing his lips several places along the
brunette's spine. A shiver goes through the Soldier, a little *mmm* slipping out of him.

"Aren't you supposed to be reading?" Steve questions mischievously. He slowly rubs his cheek next to the bigger man's shoulder blade. He's always surprised at how luxuriously soft Buck's skin is, but he finds an even more delicate spot when he bends a bit to the side and forward, lightly kissing over his ribs not far below his armpit.

The Soldier resumes speaking as Steve puts the side of his face against the bigger man's back, listens to his heartbeat - normally so slow - pick up speed a bit, to his lungs as they expand and contract a little more quickly. Steve's hands start to trail down the bigger man's belly, brush lightly at his waistband. Buck's voice stutters as the blonde pulls the elastic slightly out with his left, allowing the fingers of his right to ease slowly beneath. He just rests his hand on the flat, firm plain of the bigger man's lower stomach, feeling the Soldier breathe harder, his left arm moving back around the bigger man's waist.

The smaller man is suddenly hit with a memory very like this, but in reverse. *Don't assume this is okay with him,* one of the many voices of his subconscious whispers as he feels the ghost of Brock's grip on him. They've kissed, rubbed, even lightly grinded against each other's legs and stomachs. But they haven't directly touched like that; Buck has never overtly given Steve permission to.

"Can I?" he asks softly, voice husky.

"Please," Buck responds, barely above a whisper, his tone almost pleading.

Steve's hand slides lower, fingers just grazing the thatch of hair at first, then carding through the coarse curls lightly to gently brush the base with his fingertips, teasing. Buck gets hard so fast (every time they do anything, honestly). The blonde can't deny that feels like a compliment, even though he's aware the other man's lack of sexual experience is probably a factor. He grips him only loosely at first, sliding his hand so very slowly to the head and back, making Buck whimper. God, he feels like iron wrapped in velvet.

He has watched the Soldier jerk his cock - openly, without shame - on many occasions. After what happened the first time they touched themselves together, it didn't seem like an issue to just openly gawk at him while he did it. If anything, Buck appears turned on by the smaller man watching. He doesn't handle himself the same way every time, but there are some common themes - not too rough or too fast, working the whole length, never doing it dry for very long.

The mechanic has been squirreling away slick stuff to rub one out with for a long time. There's not exactly an endless supply of lube or olive oil or watery lotion in this world, after all. While he hadn't have the urge that much until recently, he was never dead below the waist like some people thought. He has a tiny bottle of unscented massage oil he pilfered on a run sitting in a bin, with various sundries, on a shelf of his headboard. Steve pulls his top half away from Buck to grab the little vile.

"Would you like me to finish myself?" Buck says low, voice gravelly with need, but not at all demanding or whiny. He sets the book down with his left hand. When he reaches for himself with his right, Steve wraps his slender leg over the Soldier's forearm, pinning it to the bigger man's thigh with his calf.

"Patience, patience." He peppers kisses along the bigger man's back as he puts a bit of the oil onto his palm and fingers, tosses the sealed container on the bed beside him.

When his hand finally wraps around Buck again, strokes slow down his length, the bigger man let's
out the most delicious, surprised moan.

"S-S-Steve…?" he manages right after, the blonde's hand now moving back towards the base.

"Yes, Buck?" Steve tries to sound non-chalant, even as he slightly tightens his grip, begins to put a little twist in his motion, careful to have his curled pointer finger rub the sensitive spot just under the ridge of the head on each pass.

"You f-feel so good." Buck's hands come back, lightly brush from Steve's knees to his thighs. "I want to touch you too, so badly."

_Fuck._

"Just relax. Enjoy yourself," Steve coos, working him just a bit faster.

Maybe it's what Buck says next that makes him do it.

"I want...I want to look at you," he barely gets out between hard breaths.

"I want...I want to look at you," he barely gets out between hard breaths.

Steve stops, presses his forehead between Buck's shoulder blades then slides his hands and legs from the bigger man. He scoots to the side and climbs off the bed, moves to stand a few feet in front of the Soldier. Buck is panting lightly, looking a bit confused like he has perhaps said the wrong thing, cock painfully noticeable in his pants. His hands grip the edge of the bed as if for dear life.

The blonde gazes at him a long time, and that's when he decides to do it completely on a lark. He reaches down, grips the hem of his nightshirt, and pulls it off over his head in one swift motion. Buck's eyes go wide with surprise - he stops them when they start to trail down the smaller man's naked body, nervous, unsure.

"It's okay. You can look. Wherever you want."

Steve holds his arms out sideways a bit, palms facing the Soldier as his gaze resumes its path. His eyes move side to side as they go towards the floor, mouth slightly open like he's taking in some work of art. They rest a bit longer on the "forbidden zone," between his lower belly and upper thighs, then continue down his legs to feet that - like his hands - are awkwardly big for his small frame. The Soldier is smiling lightly as he looks back up, meeting Steve's sea-blue eyes.

Then the blonde does something even more unexpected. He turns slowly around, making one complete rotation and then another half, so that when he stills his back is to the bigger man. The Soldier takes in the wiry muscle the little mechanic has built up in his shoulders, arms and upper back. The beautiful shape of his slender neck, the narrow little hips he so enjoys touching. The surprisingly round swell of his cheeks, always hidden in too-big pants or coveralls.

Just as Buck had suspected before, the scars he had seen on the blonde spread in both directions. They covered his lower and mid back, growing more sparse as they expanded up to stop about halfway over his shoulder blades. They also ran down his buttocks, thinning out towards the soft curves where they met the tops of his legs. There are a few there too, lightly dotting the cream-colored backs of his thighs. They were of all shapes and sizes and seemingly from different sources. He can just make out teeth marks on Steve's left side in the soft meat below his ribs.

Buck very badly wants to press his mouth to each one, to tell Steve they are _still him_ and as such just as desirable as the rest, that he never needs to hide any part of himself. He does not have the words yet for such things, and knows the blonde does not like to be touched from behind. He sits in silence and waits.
Steve turns. They give each other a small smile before he comes forward, grips the waistband of the bigger man's pants.

"Lift your hips," he gently instructs. When Buck complies - putting his weight on his hands - he slides the sweats down and off. Steve is pleased to see his big reveal, ugly as some of it was, has not at all dampened the Soldier's arousal. That gets Steve's libido going again immediately. He steps closer between the bigger man's legs, kisses him deep and slow before whispering, "lean back on your elbows."

The brunette slowly does as he's told and let's Steve, gripping his hips, ease his body forward towards the blonde, positioning his bottom just a bit off the edge of the bed. All Buck's body weight rests on his forearms, lower back and feet. The mechanic grabs the vile off the bed, pours more of its contents into his hand, rubs it lightly all over two fingers on his left and across his entire palm and the inside of his digits on his right.

"Is it okay if I touch you here?" Steve questions softly, proud that he manages to sound sultry instead of scared as he moves his left hand low between the Soldier's legs. His fingertips almost, but not quite, brush the bigger man's hole. Buck just nods, open-mouthed, eyebrows up. The blonde strokes over the puckered skin lightly, up and down at first and then in slow circles. He'd done this and more to Sam a few times with the pilot's direction. It's never been lost on him how much Buck likes to touch himself here, his sounds far more unhinged than when he strokes his cock.

When Buck's face starts to look more drunk than surprised, his breath quickening again, Steve gently eases one finger into him. Fuck, he's hot there and so tight. Breathy little sounds come out of the Soldier as the blonde gently works himself in deeper, starts to slowly thrust. They get louder when he slides the second digit carefully inside to join the first.

The blonde changes angle, speed, depth until Buck begins to make that (by now) very familiar sound. After, he works him for all of two minutes before he starts to get wet there, the mechanic's fingers moving more easily in and out. Steve was vaguely aware that was possible for some men, but he didn't think it was common nor was it anything he'd personally experienced. The blonde can't lie that it gets his own cock even harder - it visibly twitches. That doesn't go unnoticed by the bigger man.

"You...You can put yourself inside me if you want," the Soldier manages brokenly.

Fuck.

Steve moves forward, aligns his own cock with Buck's. He wraps his long, clever fingers around both of them, rocking his hips to slide his length against the other man's, simultaneously pumping them both with his hand. The feel of it is incredible with the oil, especially with how silky smooth the Soldier already is. The blonde is struck by how similar in size they are, even though their shape and coloring is quite different. It had been brought to Steve's attention in the past that his cock looked almost comically large on his small body, even though it was by no means unusually big.

Buck cranes his neck to watch Steve work them from where he is still resting on his elbows. He moans, long and loud and overwhelmed, again and again, the little mechanic's fingers pushing deep into him with each forward thrust of his body. Steve lets out quick, gutteral sounds as he rolls his hips fluidly, pushing his length into the slick space between Buck's own and his hand as it slides up and down them. He curls his fingers lightly inside the Soldier, better stimulating the sensitive spot there as he speeds up the rhythm of his hand and body, rocking against the bigger man with abandon.
"Oh! Oh! Oh Steve!" Buck basically screams, voice going as high and loud as ever. His release arcs onto his own chin, neck and chest. Steve practically growls at how fucking hot that was to watch and follows suit, hips thrusting forward fast and hard as he lets out a series of deep, short groans, spraying onto Buck's belly.

The Soldier's breathing slows faster than Steve's, his right arm lifting off the bed high enough so that he can gently rub his fingers along the blonde's hip. The mechanic opens his eyes to see Buck gazing at him like there is no one else in the world. Steve feels like a big, warm hand reaches inside his chest and squeezes his heart so hard it may burst. The feeling terrifies him, knowing with crystal clarity in that moment that he is in love with this person.

The blonde cleans them both up slow and careful, him noticing - and Buck commenting on - how unalike what had came out of them looked. The Soldier also mentions how different it smells and tastes, running fingers though the blonde's release and bringing it to his face. Steve figures, after everything else he has done tonight, why the fuck not. He swipes a finger tip through Buck's load, puts it near his own nose and then in his mouth. It tastes vaguely like a hard candy without being cloyingly sweet, bringing to mind something emulating fruit but not a specific flavor.

They fall asleep ten minutes later, wrapped together naked between the sheets.
Steve knew that Buck had been loud the previous evening, but he didn't know how loud until they got to the pub.

"Oooh, Steve...can you pass me an apple?" Clint asks, while they're at the cold line. The smirk on his face tips the blonde off right away something's up.

"Oh, Steve...can I cut ahead of you?" Greta requests, sliding in front of him in line. She'd started eating with them more since the Soldier had become her number one fan.

Were they referencing...?

"Oh, oh, Steve...can you hand me the ketchup?" Nat queries at the little condiment station.

Yep. That's what they're referencing.

The mechanic says nothing, cheeks turning pink. He hands her the ketchup with his lips squished together so hard they turn pale.

"Oooooooh, Steve, can you pass salt?" Win questions when they're all settled at the table.

"Et tu, brute?" he asks. She grins.

Buck picks up on this repetition surprisingly fast, eyebrows getting closer and closer to the center of his forehead the more times the phrase is uttered. By the time it comes out of the welder he's finally figured it out. His eyes narrow.

"You are mocking what I said last night during sexual activity," the Soldier declares at a totally normal volume that all close by can hear.

Steve puts his face in his hands. Everyone else in their little group breaks into raucous laughter. They keep at it for what feels like a small eternity, the mechanic now leaning on his fists, propped up on his knobby elbows, eyes on the ceiling. His face is getting more red by the second.

"Perhaps if any of you were having satisfactory physical relations, you would not be concerned with mine," Buck says pointedly, not coloring in the slightest.

They all stop laughing but Greta, who only does it louder.

"Sick burn," Wanda says from Buck's right. She offers him a fist and he carefully bumps it, one of the many friendly gestures he's been practicing performing more gently. Being amiable with a super strong, metal handed man could lead to injury. "You noticed we didn't feel the need to bring it up," she continues, gesturing back and forth between herself and Simon, who's smirking as he feeds Violet in his lap.
"You guys heard him?" Steve aggressively whispers leaning forward to look at her around the Soldier. They don't live on the other side of the community but they aren't terribly close either.

"Everyone heard him," Phil chimes in from the next table.

Phil lives next to Nick. The thought of Fury hearing what his boyfriend yells during orgasm is more than a little disturbing to Steve.

"Our relations are more than satisfactory," Clint finally retorts, sliding an arm around Nat's waist.

"Too little, too late," Win, sitting to his right across from Steve, elbows the archer lightly in the ribs.

"I live next door to you two and it's been pretty quiet over there lately," Greta says with a smirk, popping a strawberry between her lips. "In fact," she begins, talking with her mouth full, "the last time I heard you two loud enough to blow the doors off the place was a few weeks ago. I remember because Buck was over alone right before and that doesn't usually happen."

Nat and Clint are suddenly looking everywhere except at Steve and Buck.

"Nosey!" Win points at the older woman.

"Bored," Greta responds. "Besides, I flagged him down for a card game."

"Did you make out with him after?" Nat asks quietly

The mechanic can practically see the gears turning inside the Soldier's head so hard he's afraid smoke will come out. Buck turns suddenly to stare down Clint and then Natasha, face scrunching up like an irritated child after a few seconds of looking at the redhead.

"Your instruction was not intended to be helpful," the brunette says to her curtly.

"I don't think you wanna have this conversation right now," she smiles, sounding chipper but with an obvious under-layer of tension, as she gives a quick head nod in Steve's direction.

"What's all this about?" the blonde questions.

"I finally beat him at cards. Right, Bucky?" Clint raises his eyebrows at the Soldier. "It's okay, big guy. Nat maybe...misled you a little after she offered to help. But she's very sorry."

"Very sorry," the redhead repeats.

"And she won't do it again." The archer turns to look at her. She gazes back in silence for a moment, then frowns.

"And I guess we...I won't do it again," she says to Buck with a sigh.

The bigger man makes something like a growl in return, then starts eating his food in silence.

They all go their separate ways after to get prepared for the run. Buck leaves the pub with barely another word and heads to Nick's office. Steve knows he and Fury need to finalize mission details and review the most recent aerial footage but he is a tad concerned at how the Soldier practically stormed out. He's gotten fairly used to Buck's glowering silences and figures they'll have the ride when the Soldier finally decides to tell him what's bothering him. They meet back up at their assigned truck an hour later.
"Where's Win?" the blonde asks, adjusting the rifle strap on his shoulder. The gun was ancient but reliable and easier to find ammunition for than some. Greta had shown him how to maintenance it and Buck had also felt the need to meticulously check it over.

Steve is fully outfitted for the road - cargo pockets on his pants (held up with his most reliable pair of non-stretch suspenders) and jacket packed with supplies and extra ammo, a medium sized hunting knife in a holster strapped to his belt. He has a bandana tied around his neck ready to be pulled over his mouth and nose, goggles high on his forehead to be slid down at a moment's notice. The wind kicks up the sand and dust constantly outside the wall and it needed to be kept out of the eyes and airways. There could also be smoke and flying debris during the fight. He'd tucked his slingshot into the back of his waistband and had one easy to access coat pocket specifically filled with stones, lug nuts and other small, hard objects just for it. The old one that had served as his lone projectile weapon when he was on the road, pre-Brock, had come in particularly handy against reavers.

Clint is there too, leaning back against the cargo box. His arms and ankles are crossed, two full quivers and Cecelia leaning against the tire. He has a few small knives tucked various places, including a switchblade he's rather proud of. Wearing a flak vest over a sleeveless shirt (show off), heavy leather gloves, thick black jeans and the boots he'd crushed the would-be rapist's skull with, Steve begrudgingly admits he looks pretty badass. The archer's fancy goggles are strapped on, resting on the top of his head, flattening his eternally spiky hair a bit. The blonde resists the urge to make fun of him because he's still got cologne on.

"I have asked her to stay home," Buck answers flatly, "and go on your normal rounds with you today."

"I...I don't understand," the mechanic responds, eyebrows knitting together as his lips purse.

"You are not going on the mission. You have important work to do here." The Soldier sounds calm, like what he's saying is no big deal. His face is blank.

"What the fuck, Buck?" the blonde demands, stepping into his space, head leaning back to look up into his face.

"Yeah, what the fucky, Bucky?!" Clint chimes in, standing upright. "Baby brother always goes on runs with me. What's this shit about?"

"We've talked and talked about this run at home! I even sat through your stupid fucking little meeting with Fury, not that either of you listened to a word I said, because what do I know about reavers. I guess I just did this to myself." Steve yanks up the left side of his shirt, reveals the bite scar there Buck had seen the night before. "And you planned to bench me the whole time?" Steve's eyes are as fierce as the Soldier has ever seen them.

"No. The decision was made this morning," Buck responds, maintaining the bland, toneless voice he had used when he first arrived.

"By who?! Fury?" the archer demands.

"He did suggest I reconsider including the two of you," he looks from Clint to the blonde, "due to your invaluable services within the community..."

"Oh fuck that noise!" the archer cuts in.

"However, I made the final determination." Buck turns to Clint, "I need to speak with Steve."
The archer gestures to the blonde as if to say *have at it*.

"*Alone.*" Finally a bit of emotion comes back into the Soldier's voice, cracking his robotic facade.

Clint looks at Steve, who nods, then walks off.

"I can't believe you'd do this! Especially after..." Steve looks around to see if anyone is near, lowers his voice, "*after last night.*"

"Last night only cemented my decision," Buck says softly, a look in his eyes that's difficult to read as he gazes down at the smaller man.

"Because of what everyone said this morning? Are you... embarrassed of me or something? Is that why you don't want me to go?" The hurt on the little mechanic's face twists something in the Soldier's gut.

"No, of course not." Buck carefully takes Steve's hand. "Last night made it even more clear that you need to be protected."

"I can take care of myself!" Steve rips his hand away.

"You are brave and resourceful and clever but you are small -"

"You're taking Nat! Fuck, she's shorter than me!" the blonde argues.

"She is a trained fighter!" the Soldier's voice gets slightly louder, surprising even himself.

"I know how to fight! I was on the road over a year, completely alone, after I left Brooklyn."

"You are not a warrior! Not a soldier!" Buck's tone gets uncharacteristically intense, his eyes starting to change color a bit.

"There are a lot of people with fucked up faces who would disagree with you! I always got myself out of a bad spot!"

"Yes, until Brock captured you and tortured you." There is a simmering rage under the surface of his words, but it is not directed at Steve.

"Don't do that! Don't throw what I told you, *what I showed you*, back in my face to try to win an argument!" The blonde's face contorts in anger, sadness, disgust.

"This is not an argument. An argument indicates two sides attempting to sway the decision of the other. I do not need to sway your opinion and nothing you say will change mine." The Soldier's voice is firm, final, back in control. It makes the blonde even more pissed off.

"Oh, so you're the boss man now? Whatever you say goes? *Fuck what I think?*" Steve's voice gets even louder. He's dangerously close to really losing his temper. The mechanic knows it is absolutely unacceptable to hit his significant other, even if it will do all the damage of a bug squashing against a car windshield, and he's been trying really hard to tamp down his violent impulses since the fight at the pub. Still, his fists ball up.

"What *you think* is of paramount importance to me in every situation, save this one. Yes, I am in charge. Of these people, this mission. I cannot properly perform my duties if I am distracted thinking of your safety." He sounds earnest enough that it cools Steve's rage a bit.

"What about your safety?" The blonde's voice breaks the slightest bit. He lowers his volume again.
“Reavers use fire.”

Buck laughs softly.

"This of all things you find funny?" the mechanic practically yells.

Buck reaches out, slow and cautious, and takes Steve's hand again, pulls it to the side of his face. "I am flattered by your concern, but there is no need to fear for me, little mechanic. They are only human and I am very fast." He rubs his cheek side to side across Steve's palm, then places a soft kiss there, just as he had done that first day he admitted his feelings. "The moment I step off the truck upon return, I will come find you."

With that he turns on his heel and walks off, leaving Steve to stare daggers into his (dammit, oh so muscly) back. The mechanic storms back down the line of trucks, plotting to snag Win and go to the yard or get good and drunk. They're sure as fuck not doing rounds. He's almost past the last truck when he hears a familiar whistle from above. He looks up to see the welder with her head over the edge of the trailer roof, the top of the crow's nest she'd built there when they were readying the vehicles just visible behind her. Win tosses him down a rope.
The gang explores the reaver hide out.

The trucks roll into a town that looks completely empty. Not so much as a tumbleweed graces the streets. They get into formation in the center of the tiny downtown square and everyone disembarks as planned, snipers taking to the rooves to provide cover that appears unnecessary. As planned if the reavers didn't show themselves, three quarters of those on the ground spread out - Buck running lead on a bigger group headed to the school - preparing to search the neighboring buildings. The remainder form a tight circle around the trucks with Greta in command.

Clint makes his way to the bank - after a brief survey of the surrounding area with the goggles' thermal vision - then makes an impressive jump to grab the edge of the first landing of its fire escape. The ladder to the ground isn't down; he hauls himself up, remembering Win's push up comment.

*I bet you'd be impressed with my meat arms now!*

He uses the goggles to scan through windows - largely broken - as he climbs. There's no sign of anyone living. The second he makes it to the edge of the roof he has an arrow drawn back in Cecilia ready to fire. He's not alone, two human shapes defined in the thermal vision.

"It's us!!" the mechanic calls out.

"Fuck, Steve!" Clint eases the string back to a resting position. "Where the hell did you two come from? I was just about to put this through your eyeball." The archer yanks the goggles back.

"Snuck on the last truck. Jumped before others got on top," Win says, scanning what's left of the town with a pair of novelty binoculars they'd found on a run. They look like two crocodiles, each holding a lens in its mouth, with a wide plastic bridge connecting them. Clint liked to joke she was looking up their asses. She'd usually ask if he wanted her foot up his in return. They're too tense for such banter now.

"Hawkeye, are you in position? Over." The walkie, turned low, comes to life on his belt.

"Affirmative, Two-Three."

"Anything to report?" Buck's voice is eerily calm.

Clint stares Steve and Win down for a long moment.

"Negative. No sign of hostiles in the structure or immediate area. I'm seeing a lot of debris under the sand though. Watch your step. Over." There were large pieces of what appeared to be plywood and sheet metal flat on the ground randomly strewn about the area. They weren't noticeable from the aerial photos with all the blowing dust partially obscuring them. He could spot a few on virtually every street and a half dozen dotted the town square where their trucks were parked.

He slides the fancy goggles back down, surveys the side streets, alleys and areas around vehicles
below. Even the most expensive thermal vision can't see through thick objects. Anything with a modicum of insulation or density would block out the heat signature behind it. But they're still useful for flimsy structures or people hiding in the shadows.

Buck and his group start to advance on the school, the others breaking into small clusters to search the surrounding buildings. Multiple people report over the open channel that they find nothing. It's dead quiet otherwise.

"Maybe they took off in the night?" the archer suggests, switching over to binocular vision with a few soft clicks.

"Reavers don't run," Win says.

"They're playing hide and seek with us. I told Fury this would probably happen." Steve surveys the area with his own small, fold up binoculars. He'd found them in a house with a lot of bird watching books. It was hard to put his finger on why, but they'd made him really sad. He'd kept a few and buried the others with what was left of their decomposed owner.

More of the ground units call out the all clear from first floors and attics. The roof crew can see them moving past windows as they go room by room.

"They couldn't have had more than twenty minutes notice someone was coming," Clint says, using the binocular vision to survey farther out.

"Could have practiced. Ran drills. Hide fast," Win offers. She'd certainly prepared multiple scenarios for the factory being invaded but she hadn't expected them to get the big doors down. Steve was lucky he had a sweet kid face as she'd been very close to burning it off.

"They could have also had someone watching us, like we were watching them. Just the good old fashioned way." Steve holds up his binoculars. There wasn't a lot of cover around Claptrap, but definitely enough for one very sneaky person. And reavers were nothing if not sneaky.

"Two-Three, I've got a hole cut in the basement wall at the grocery store," Phil's voice comes over the walkie.

"Ditto in hardware," another ex ops, Hill, responds. "We've got moles. They're burrowing," she adds.

Several others join in the walkie chatter. A lot of the small houses were old enough that they didn't have basements, and the people in them report holes cut directly into the floorboards.

"Over there!" Win points.


"Reaver?" Buck comes back.

"She's wearing a baby skull necklace. You do the math," the archer responds.

"What is in her hand?" Win questions.

"It's an airhorn. Tell them to pull back!" Steve demands.

"I don't - " Clint starts.

"It's a signal, you idiot! Tell them to pull back!" the blonde yells.
Win takes aim at the woman as she holds the canister aloft, fires a second too late. The short burst of the horn and the crack of the rifle echo through the vacant town. The woman falls forward off the school, lands with a loud thump below. For a long moment nothing happens, everyone on the street standing at ready, eyes darting around. Steve is thinking about letting out the breath he's holding - he can just make out Buck semi-obscured behind a car, checking the skydiving cannibal.

Then practically in unison most of the plywood and sheet metal are tossed back and dozens of reavers emerge. Some are immediately hurtling already lit molotov cocktails, others raising glass jars and bottles of liquid to light the rags hanging out of them. The first volley lands on and in the fronts and backs of the structures most of the ground crews are inside of.

"Shit!" Steve runs to take position, yelling to Win, "Shoot the glass before they can throw them!"

He fires and one hoisted vessel bursts, raining liquid fire on the reaver holding it and others around them, several dropping their own lit jars, creating a pool of flames at their feet. Win joins in and they shoot one after the other, causing a similar effect throughout the cannibals. Clint starts lobbing arrows into the ones who aren't badly burning.

A second wave emerge from the tunnels carrying all manner of hand weapons - machetes, axes, even a few pitchforks - and descend on the Claptrappers escaping the burning buildings. On Greta's command the truck crews fire into the hoarde. Screaming, echoing shots and the sick wet thuds of sharp metal connecting with dense tissue and bone fill the air. Clint scans the area.

"Come on, baby! Where are you? Come on!" He finally spots Nat as she runs from a burning house, jumps through the air, wrapping her legs around a reaver's neck. She uses the force of her weight in the maneuver to flip him over and puts a bullet between his eyes with her pistol as soon as she's on top. The redhead is up in an instant, firing and kicking.

"Clint, she can take care of herself," Steve says, reloading. "Don't stop firing! The people in the square need cover!"

The archer goes back to the task at hand, arrow after arrow going into necks and eye sockets with only the occasional miss. It's chaos below, everyone surging, and there are cars and other things in the way. There are so many, but he has a hundred and twenty arrows. More than enough, right? His first quiver comes up empty when he reaches back. Only a few minutes have passed since the airhorn.

"Fuck!" the archer screams.

He drops the first quiver, straps on the second, falls back into the delicate dance of firing and alternating spots with Win and Steve. Suddenly there's the sound of an arrow cutting the air, different from his own. The bolt skims his cheek, leaving a stinging trail.

"Two crossbows on the western side!" He yells, crouching to dodge a second shot.

"I've got two more on the north!" Steve responds, joining him.

"One here too!" Win pulls back, narrowly avoiding a bolt.

"I can't believe they'll reach up here!" Steve reloads his rifle.

"Modern crossbow'll get sixty, eighty yards with accuracy. Even accounting for the drag of their firing angle, we're only maybe fifty feet up." Clint nocks another arrow. "Let's take those fucks on the north."
The three of them, crouched, edge closer to the indicated side of the building.

"On three. One, two…"

Schick

A bolt hits Clint from behind. Steve hears the impact loud next to him. Win whirs to fire on the reaver standing on the ledge, fresh off the fire escape. The woman flies off the building, crossbow in hand.

"Clint! Clint!" Steve screams next to the bigger man as he hunches forward.

"It's okay, kid. Vest slowed it down. Pull it out."

The mechanic complies. Only the tip of the bolt head is bloody, a small hole in the flak jacket a bit to the right of his spine just under the spot where the quiver angles across his body. It would have went into his kidney, probably a death sentence without quick medical care.

"Oh fuck! I'm so glad you're okay!" Steve throws his arms around the bigger man's neck, head resting on his shoulder.

"Okay, kid. Okay, don't get all sloppy on me." Clint grins, pats the blonde's arm.

"Kiss each other later! We have company!" Win yells, firing right after. Reaver's are pouring off the fire escape onto the roof. Steve takes a firing position on one knee, just like Greta taught him, takes his shots carefully. Clint is up on his feet firing arrow after arrow into faces and throats in quick succession, avoiding body shots due to their leather clothes and homemade armor. They're fast picking off the oncoming cannibals but not fast enough.

A woman with a bone through her septum tackles Win. They struggle for the rifle. Steve picks off the man, wearing a full human rib cage strung together with wire, that tries to bury his axe in the welder's head. Win wraps her pointer and ring finger around either end of the nosebone and yanks, hard, tearing it free with a spray of blood and pained squawk from the reaver. As soon as she can get two hands on it the welder slams the butt of her rifle into the other woman's face, quickly turns and fires on a second that runs at her with a large knife, then shoots the first before she can recover.

Steve and Clint have their own new friends to contend with. The archer cries out as a guy bites off part of his left ear, a woman grabbing his right arm as she stabs him in the shoulder. He jams an arrow into the man's side, pulling forward hard to cut a wide swath between two ribs into the cannibal's lung. Clint kicks the woman off the building, landing a foot solidly to her chest. He shoves the guy off too as he stumbles backwards, blood foaming from his mouth.

The archer had lost his bow over the side when he got tackled. He pulls the knife from his shoulder, throws it into the temple of one of the guys on Steve. Buck had taught him that. The blonde has a whole office carpool on him. He's staying low, taking kicks and punches as he blocks his head with one skinny arm, dodging machete swipes. He slashes one guy's belly with the hunting knife Greta had given him, and shown him how to sharpen, his intestines bulging through the wound. Blood sprays onto Steve's jacket and face as he stabs a woman in the leg, right in the femeral artery - Buck had told him blood pumped easily through there, kissing over it softly when they were alone in the shanty.

Win - finally out of ammo - clubs one of the reavers on the mechanic from behind with the butt of her rifle, then smashes it into his head again and again until he's twitching on the ground. Steve springs up, burying his blade under a guy's chin. The man falls back, taking the knife with him. His
rifle is ten feet away and there's no opening to grab it so he dives on the nearest reaver, buries his teeth in their neck and pulls back til the flesh tears. He didn't actually learn that from Buck but the similarity isn't lost on him.

*Fuck, just let him be okay.*

The gunfire below has become more sparse, but hasn't ended. The blonde can still hear the smash and whoosh in the distance of firebombs being tossed. He links his hands together and swings the double fist into the chest of the bleeding cannibal, knocking him off the roof. Clint is in a hand to hand scuffle with a huge guy and Win is tangling with the last reaver on the ground.

The welder grabs the hair of the woman under her, as she stabs Win lightning quick in the side with a stiletto-like object, and smashes her head into the ground over and over. She screams while she does it, keeps forcing the broken skull up and down long after the other woman is dead. Steve jumps on the back of the man tussling with Clint, gets him in a chokehold long enough for Clint to pull out his switchblade, open it expertly one handed and stab the huge cannibal in the heart.

They all fall back on their asses, panting, covered in sweat and blood.

"Bet you're happy to see us now," Steve rasps out.
Fire, to destroy all you've done.

Chapter Summary

Buck finds focusing on his mission difficult.

The ride to the reavertown is painfully devoid of distraction for Buck, sitting in the back of the box truck with Greta and some of the others. With nothing to focus on save the nervous, idle chatter of the few who bother to speak, the hum of the ground beneath the tires lulls him deeper into his thoughts. All he can see at first is the pained and angry looks on Steve's face during their conversation right before he had left. They fill him with guilt, sadness, worry.

At Gurminder's suggestion the Soldier had taken to examining his emotions as they occur, picking them apart mentally and naming them. It made it a little easier to keep from being overwhelmed when he felt several at once. The doctor had even given him a book, one of the few things of his that the Burners had not destroyed, that talked about how to identify feelings - what did a certain physiological or psychological reaction or sensation mean. It had seemed absurd at first but after he worked at it for a while it greatly cut down on his level of frustration and reduced his outbursts.

The blonde had been quick to apologize the last time he had offered harsh words to Buck, yet the Soldier knew the fault for this disagreement was largely on himself. It was not right for him to make decisions for others, devoid of their input, as had been done to him for so many years. Yet his intentions were not malicious - he had only wanted to keep the little mechanic (and Win) from harm. He realizes suddenly that he had called the blonde the diminutive nickname at the end of their discussion. The bigger man had long referred to Steve as that in his head, yet never allowed himself to say it, unsure if the smaller man would find it condescending.

His mind searches for an escape from his fears, going back to the night before. The memory of their calm, silent time in the big tub and the feel of the blonde's hands in his hair is pleasant. Something so simple and yet the warm feeling he had now felt so many times had blossomed in his chest. Buck had yet to name that feeling, but knew the frequency with which it occurred frightened him. Its hold on him remained through the night and into the next morning and had weighed heavily on his decision about the mission.

The unexpected reveal of the blonde's body had only made things worse. The Soldier had long wanted to see what was hidden beneath his nightshirts - if the freckles spattering his shoulders and speckled light across the tops of his cheeks and over the bridge of his nose travelled anywhere else. To know the shape of his musculature and skeletal structure, if he had hair in any of those unseen places and what color it was. He understood that some of this was driven by lust and some by simple curiosity, but mostly it was motivated by his need to know him. To know every part of him, to be close and trusted in a way no one else was.

The little mechanic had given him that and then so much more.

The Soldier had penetrated and stroked himself many times and he greatly enjoyed doing it, even more so when he could kiss and touch Steve while the blonde sought his own pleasure. Yet never had it been so arousing or satisfying as when Steve had done it for him. The way the mechanic's fingers moved inside him was indescribably amazing and had drowned out his thoughts in a haze of sensation; he was as shocked as the other man when he had offered himself up to be entered.
He was curious why Steve had not accepted, but he was not disappointed; the sexual act the blonde had performed after - with his hand around them both, rocking their bodies together - had felt incredible. Buck was unaware that maneuver existed; the human sexuality book had not mentioned it. Even here on the cold metal floor of the box trailer, prepared to go to battle, the thought of how intense his orgasm had been - and of Steve's that promptly followed - makes him start to get hard.

After they had both reached release and cleaned up he had expected the blonde to cover himself, but he had made no attempt to do so. Waking with him, Steve's soft milky skin exposed everywhere and against his own, made him feel close to the other man in an entirely new way. With permission, he ran his fingers lightly all the places he could easily reach, learning the feel of him, watching how the smaller man reacted to the touch on different parts of his body.

Buck's hands ranged down the little mechanic's thin but corded arms, over his narrow boney chest and flat firm belly - there was just a bit of hair trailing below his naval to the nest of sandy light brown curls around his member. They are the only places he has hair save what is on his legs, forearms and armpits, all of which is quite light, some if it almost white. The Soldier massages over his shoulders and back, easing down to lightly cup his buttocks (and that was met with a look of surprise and only thinly disguised arousal from the blonde), then lower to brush the backs of his thighs. Buck felt the many different textures of the scar tissue under his flesh fingers.

"I enjoy touching you so much," the Soldier had offered softly, needing the little mechanic to know how much he liked all the parts of him.

Steve wore a little smile through it all, amused at the brunette's curiosity. He had also giggled - a bright, high sound - when the Soldier's fingers grazed feather light over his ribs. It had taken the smaller man some time to explain "being ticklish." Buck recognized in his own way that choosing to be unclothed together after being forced to disrobe for the agendas of others was an important thing for them both. Letting his body be explored like that was most likely something the blonde had not done with anyone else. It made the warmth flare in the Soldier's chest even stronger. He knew with certainty he had to keep this person, and what they have together, safe.

Buck swears he smells Steve when he exits the truck, a faint but seemingly fresh hint of him in the air like when he entered a room after the other man had just left it. The Soldier assumes he is picking up the scent somewhere on himself, possibly in his hair, or on one of the other people present such as Clint. Still, the longing it inspires brings back all of the negative emotions from earlier. He wonders for the thousandth time what he will be returning home to, if in his attempt to protect what they have he has irreparably damaged it.

So much for removing my distraction, he thinks as the mission advances.

Suddenly the situation at hand changes and he is in the thick of a fight. Buck manages to avoid the first wave of reavers and their fire, quickly dispatching many of them with his automatic weapon and dodging the few volleys that make it from the reavers' hands. When the second wave of cannibals swarms him, over a dozen trying to wrestle him down and take the gun away as many others bash and chop at him, he is suddenly stabbing and hurting them in every direction. He unclips one side of the mask, bites his attackers with abandon.

Normally he would not be so blatant with what he is in front of the others, but there are so many of the enemy and there is no time for propriety when lives hang in the balance. He tears off limbs, puts his metal fist through skulls, rips out jugulars with his teeth. There is so much blood on him by the time he has a moment to pause his movements that it runs off him in little rivlets, dripping down onto the dirt below.

More reavers come, keeping their distance, making hand signals and strange calls to each other.
One emerges from a shed with a girl, no more than twelve, held up like a shield with a knife to her throat. The man is moving her slightly back and forth and adjusting his own position constantly and at random, making it difficult for Buck to ensure a kill shot - he fears simply injuring the man will lead to him fatally cutting the girl. Others dart at the Soldier from their hiding places, distracting him with the need to dispatch them, as the cannibal backs away with the child.

The Soldier pursues them into an alley, weapon trained in the general area of the reaver's head, waiting for that split second with a clear line of sight. The cannibal is weaving back and forth so much that the bigger man does not notice him sidestep a certain area on the ground. Buck walks over what he realizes too late is a heavy tarp covered in sand, plummeting into a concealed pit lined with spikes, impaling himself several dozen places. The reaver looks down from above, laughing.

Buck breaks his flesh arm free - yanking it sideways and busting off two sharpened wooden sticks, nearly two feet of each sticking through his bicep - and shoots the man between the eyes. He and the girl topple into the pit. The Soldier manages to get his metal arm, still without a scratch, up quick enough to catch her before she lands on the spikes. A long metal rod with the end bent into a hook juts down into the hole, wraps around the strap on his weapon and yanks it free from his injured arm while he is distracted.

A reaver leans over the edge and attempts to shoot his own weapon at him. It will not fire. He lowers the girl next to him at the side of the pit, carefully avoiding the sharp poles sticking out of him. There is just enough space for her small body to crouch between the dirt wall and his feet. He pulls both sticks from his arm and huddles them into the cannibal still uselessly trying to fire the automatic weapon. Unfortunately when they slump over dead they do not drop the gun into the pit.

More of them appear from above. Buck shows his teeth, growling, yanking spike after spike out of himself and slinging them at those above, impaling several. He sees them start to light the rags hanging from their accelerant jars. There are still so many spikes in him at odd angles - through his feet, legs and torso, many of them made from sharpened rebar and other pieces of twisted metal rather than just wood - so he cannot simply break free and jump out.

The first fire bomb that falls he is able to smash with a swing of his metal arm, little droplets of liquid flame raining down all around him. Suddenly there are a half-dozen of them lobbed into the pit nearly simultaneously. He curves his body over the girl protectively as several burst on his back, another falling behind him and lighting up the bottom of a pantleg. The vest, slacks and boots will take a while to burn through but some of his exposed parts are in flames, the skin blistering and scorching darker by the second.

The Soldier grits his teeth at the searing pain from his flesh arm and the back of his neck. Accelerant burns on parts of his metal arm as well and the intense heat transferred through to the delicate tissue inside is awful. But if he moves, if the child is struck with a firebomb, she will die. The girl coughs, the pit filling with acrid smoke. He pulls his dangling facemask from its remaining mount, the air vent in the front already closed to keep out the dust, and pushes it over her face.

As soon as she complies with his order to hold it tight, he digs frantically in the side of the pit, covering her in earth as two more firebombs burst on his back. One of them sets the ends of the hair at the base of his skull and crown of his head on fire. The burning trails of the liquid slide beneath the vest in several places and he screams in agony, a terrifying, animalistic sound.

Once the girl is buried, protected, he shoves his arms in the soil of the dessicated pit wall, then throws more earth onto his back and legs. Buck barely has the flames out before another volley rains down on him and he is engulfed anew, the superheated air scalding his lungs. The Soldier
knows he needs to get out, to pull free of the remaining spikes, but his body - losing blood from multiple wounds and severely burnt - is going into shock as he tries to remove more of them. His hands stop obeying him.

Suddenly there is no pain and the world grays, the smashing of another bottle and the crackling of the flames that consume him quieting into the background as he starts to go slack. The Soldier's last thoughts before everything goes black are that he will not get to apologize to the little mechanic or tell the blonde he was correct about everything. Buck knows Steve's pride well enough to believe the words "you were right" would mean more to him than "I love you."
Sunday stroll

Chapter Summary

The gang goes looking for their compatriots.

Clint's walkie is toast after the rooftop tussle. Steve has a whopping five bullets left for his rifle, Win zero, and the archer about three dozen arrows (but his bow is on the sidewalk). As much as all of them would love to stay high above the battle raging street to street below, their friends are in real danger and it is only a matter of time before more of the cannibals ascend. At least on the ground they have more room to maneuver, the archer can grab Cecelia and they can possibly get more ammo from their compatriots. The trio head down the fire escape, Steve running point despite Clint's protests. He has to shoot two more reavers, and their progress halts when the building shakes lightly from several explosions in the distance, but at street level most of the fighting has headed elsewhere.

Only the rooftop snipers are left to defend the vehicles from the cover of their crow's nests, hatches beneath them so they can pop back into the truck if needed the same way they'd gotten on top. Greta must have taken her crew out to help the others. A quick exchange reveals that none of the truck toppers have ammunition that will work in the welder's or the mechanic's rifles. The archer gets his bow back and Win finds a nail studded baseball bat on the corpse of a reaver. They are saddened to see a few of their allies dead on the ground (and they have been stripped of their guns, possibly by the truck team as they advanced).

"We find Nat, then we head to Buck, regroup, make a plan," Steve says as he grabs several knives off the dead and slides them into his belt. He'd recovered his own from the cannibal on the roof and returned it to its holster, cleaned of blood like Greta taught him. Win follows suit, grabbing multiple blades off the maroon-stained earth and putting a hammer through the strap on her pants after she shakes the wet brains off of the head. The blonde pulls out his slingshot and readies a fat, short screw to fire.

The area a block out from the square is utter chaos - they can hear the sounds of fighting inside and in between buildings around them. Multiple structures are fully engulfed and there are bodies in the sand everywhere, including a number of severely wounded. If they are reavers, Clint helps them along - its ugly business killing someone when they're down, but it has to be done. If they're Claptrappers, they carry them back to the trucks where a few wait in the safety of the boxes to provide medical care. It takes them ten minutes to find Nat. She is in the center of a circle of bodies piled three to four deep, covered in blood, reaver machete in hand as she chops the head off a final attacker.

"Hey, girl. You come here often?" Clint calls to her from behind.

She turns, machete raised, then drops it as she breaks into hysterical laughter. The redhead jumps on him over the small wall of corpses, arms around his neck and legs wrapping his waist, kissing him like her life depends on it. Steve and Win can't help but grin despite the situation. They meet up with Phil and Greta - both bloody but with only minor injuries - minutes later.

"Everyone's scattered! We couldn't stay clustered with the firebombs," the older woman informs them. "There's so many more of the bastards than we thought and the tunnels seem to run
everywhere. They hunker down and then pop out. I've got a solution for that though!"

She opens her jacket to reveal a row of grenades, takes one off, pulls the pin and tosses it in the nearest reaver hole. It explodes with an impressively loud rumble as the tunnel collapses, dirt, debris and body parts fanning up from the entrance. Well, that explained the several booms they'd heard as they descended.

A horrific, almost inhuman scream suddenly fills the air. *Buck.*

Steve runs in the direction of the sound at full speed, Clint yelling at him to wait as he and the others give chase. He's quick - little and slippery - as he snakes through burning debris, over cars and between people desperately fighting for their lives. The first pull of his slingshot launches the screw, luckily pointy end first, through a reaver's eye as he runs past - they were very close to bashing Hill's brains in and it drops them where they stand. Win and Nat are in quick pursuit, slashing and bashing where necessary. The archer fires into reavers as they run at his friends, snatching the arrows back out as he passes the bodies as he'd done when they'd gotten down into the town square. Unfortunately a lot of the recovered arrows aren't reusable, heads snapping off in the dead or shafts bent. He adds the ones that look passable to his quiver as he goes.

Greta and Phil take up the rear, him covering her as she blows reaver tunnel after reaver tunnel. In some places the ground above completely collapses, creating a deep impression in the earth. When she's out of grenades, she starts pulling dynamite from her pack. One quick cannibal tosses a stick back out of their tunnel - it lands under a car, launching it into the sky, glass and twisted metal flying in every direction. An ex ops in body armor and a helmet shields the older woman from the debris, then goes back into the fight.

Not even the massive blast slows Steve down. He finally spots a group of reavers around what looks like a pit in the ground, hurling in Molotov cocktails. The Soldier's distinctive automatic weapon is on the ground near the edge of the hole, which is billowing black smoke. The blonde launches object after object into the glass jars the reavers hold aloft with his slingshot, spraying the accelerant on his enemies. Two really light up and topple into the hole - he hears them get impaled before he can see in and it dawns on him the pit is an elaborate trap. One deep and dangerous enough to catch a super soldier so you can rain fire down on him from above.

*No. Nonononononono!*

The blonde shoots car lugnuts, marbles and rock-hard hunks of sharp edged glass block scrap into the faces of the cannibals. One runs at him, tackling him to the ground. The mechanic has a knife out of his belt and into their side fairly quick and when they pull back, howling in rage and pain, he takes a second from his waistband and crams the blade just under their sternum. Win runs up, kicks the knife deeper into the man's chest. Her bat crashes into his skull as soon as he's on his back, just to be sure.

Nat dropkicks a cannibal hard in the stomach then breaks their neck in a swift, double-handed move when they bend over. Arrows fly in quick succession into the remaining few reavers as Steve scrambles to the edge of the pit. Buck is limp, body held upright by a dozen sharpened spears and metal poles crammed through him. He is burning.

Clint tackles the blonde as he tries to jump in. "Are you fucking insane? That's a tiny pond of liquid fire filled with spears!"

"I have to help him! I have to help him!!" he screams, flailing against the bigger man.

Win grabs a large piece of sheet metal laying on the ground twenty feet away, the former ceiling to
a reaver hole. "Help me!" she yells at Nat. They use the wide flat object to scrape sand piled up next to the buildings into the hole again and again until the flames inside - including on Buck - are smothered.

Clint shoves Steve down again, jumping up quick. "Let me! Everything's scalding hot. I've got gloves!" He eases down into the pit, puts his ear close to the bigger man's mouth to listen for breath. "He's alive." He starts trying to remove the spikes through his friend.

"There's bolt cutters in the truck!" Greta yells to Win.

The welder takes off, Nat joining to watch her back. Steve slides into the pit, wraps his coat sleeves over his hands to help Clint pull a blackened, smoking pole out of Buck's thigh. The women are back minutes later sweaty and panting, handing over the tool. It takes Clint and Steve together to force the cutters through the thicker rods, but eventually they're able to free Buck, Greta joining in the hole to help hold him up as they pull the last few. The three of them below and Phil, Win and Nat above manage to get him out of the pit.

Once they're all back on the street, Steve tilts his head toward the school - its one of the few structures that isn't on fire. "There!"

Four of them lift him, Greta and Phil providing cover with their few remaining bullets. The fighting seems to be dying down and other Claptrappers are finally radioing in on the older woman's walkie. They move Buck inside, trying to get defensible cover to check his wounds, but many of the rooms are barricaded or boarded shut. They bust into the gymnasium, cutting the chain on the double doors with the bolt cutters.

There are people inside, nearly a dozen chained in various spots to the ancient heat radiators and pipes. Greta guards the door into the hallway as Phil sweeps the perimeter, ensures the doors to outside at the back of the room are also chained and padlocked.

"Stay the fuck back!" a man yells as Steve and the others come near. He's on his knees holding an old woman behind him, protecting her body with his, his fist raised with a length of chain wrapped around it. His friend looks terrified and confused, babbling nonsense. They're both restrained at the wrists, ankles and around the waist.

"Yeah, yeah, calm down. We're the good guys, kid!" Clint responds as they carry the Soldier over to a wrestling mat on the ground a few feet from the prisoner who had spoke.

"Holy fuck. Holy fuck! Winter? Winter?!" the guy exclaims. Steve finally turns to look at the captive - he's a bit older than the blonde but not much, caramel complexion, ringlets in his dark chin length hair. He has big green eyes. "What did you fucks do to him?"

"He's our friend, dipshit. The cannibals lit him up," the archer snaps.

"Shit! Oh shit. Let me loose!" the young man requests.

"We'll get to you! Patience is a virtue," Nat barks.

"I can help him! I've seen him get burnt before!" The captive crawls to the end of his lead chain and onto the edge of the mat.

"Woah there, pretty boy! You weren't invited to dance with the prom queen." Nat puts a knife to his throat.

"It's cool! It's cool! I know him! We're... associates." The younger man has his hands held aloft,
like it's a stick up, the redhead's blade making a small dent in his skin. "He got lit up before. It wasn't nearly this bad though. Just part of his shoulder and upper back. Bullet wounds, stabs, that's nothing to him but this..."

"You know what he is?" Steve asks.

"Yeah, yeah I do. A hundred percent. You're wondering why he's not healing, right? He told me a deep tissue burn kills the nerves, destroys the blood vessels. If it's bad enough there's no blood flow so the skin can't repair itself. He'd have to wait for it to basically die and slough off and then he'd grow more but that takes weeks."

The young man removes Buck's goggles - they're partially melted to his face and some skin comes with them. The bigger man groans in pain, the first sound he's made save the wheeze of his labored breathing.

"Sorry, buddy, sorry!" the younger man soothes.

"Buck? Buck?!" Steve scoots in closer. The Soldier's eyelids flutter but don't fully open.

"So that's your big solution? Leave him horribly fucked up for a month and hope he sheds it like a giant sunburn?" the archer demands.

"Fury can't see him like this," Phil chimes in. "I think you know that." Nat looks at Clint, nods.

"Before, he cut it off. The charred skin. He had me help with what was hard for him to reach." The younger man is working on removing Buck's vest. "We need to get all this melted shit off him and then...we basically need to flay the burnt parts."

"Shut up, new guy!" Win exclaims.

"You're out of your goddamn gourd, kid! Been hanging out with that dementia case too long."

Greta gestures to the old woman, in heated conversation with a blank spot on the wall.

"Listen, Granny Clampett, unless you've got a PhD in vampire medicine I suggest you shut the fuck up!" the younger man yells at her, unclipping the last strap on Buck's vest. "I lived with him for six months. I know what I'm talking about."

"What's his favorite food?" Steve asks.

"He really likes fruit," the captive responds immediately.

The mechanic pulls a knife from his belt, holds it up in front of himself, stilling the young man's motion for a long moment. "Let's do what he says," the blonde finally rasps, offering it handle first to the prisoner.

"Are you fucking insane?!?!!" Clint screams. "We don't know this guy from Adam. He could be a reaver. It could be a trick!"

"Yo, busted ass Robin Hood, I've literally pissed in these pants and I'm just sitting around in them. You think one'a them would be that devoted to their act?"

"He does stink," Nat adds.

"We're doing this!" Steve takes another long knife from his belt, starts to cut Buck's slacks away. Win goes to work on removing his boots. All of the punctures are healed, new skin there in circles
that stand in stark contrast to the black and red flesh around them.

"There's just one problem. Judging from those marks, he's already lost a lot of blood and he'll lose a ton more when we cut him," the young man says, "which I'm sure you think isn't a problem for him, but when he loses enough he gets a little crazy."

"Crazy how?" Clint asks.

"Feral. His need for blood'll be enormous and he won't be himself. He could attack us. Last time we took a lot less skin than we'll need to now, and he still got hangry really quick."

"He obviously didn't kill you though," Steve replies.

"But he wanted to hurt me. I could see it. He prepared."

"Prepared?" Win questions.

"Yeah, he kept some of the guys that burnt him alive, had them tied up nearby. As soon as he was healed, he pushed me out of the room and then…Well, it was a huge mess when he finally came out." The prisoner pulls the last strip of the vest away. "I guess he'd got hurt bad enough at some point before that he knew that would happen. Lucky me. He was still super hungry after too even though he was in control."

"So we pull in some reavers. There's bodies everywhere," Greta offers.

"I can do you one better," the young man responds.
Blood in the cut

Chapter Summary

The gang tries to help Buck and Steve wonders who the fuck this handsome stranger is.

After Steve and the others free the prisoners, the young man entrusts his elderly friend to one of the women that had been chained nearby. He leads the mechanic and his friends, save Win who stays to watch Buck, to a side office with a large floor to ceiling equipment locker. There are three men inside chained to the wall of the metal grid structure, all in some semblance of body armor and leather; they've clearly been beaten senseless and picked over. Their boots are gone and they each have several toes missing. One has bite marks on his face and another is missing an ear. Clint finally remembers his own, reaches up to find a large chunk of it gone. It hurts like hell but it's clotted at least.

Steve and Greta recognize the remnants of the white X painted on each prisoner's chest immediately.

"Some of those shitbirds that attacked you in the desert," the older woman offers, pointing to the mark. She had seen the corpses heading back from the yard. "I say we listen to the kid, give Buck these marauding bastards. A few less scumbags in the world." She spits in their direction.

"You're gonna die for that, bitch," one of the men says to the older woman.

"Not before you, fucko," she responds.

The younger man snags a set of clothes - sweats and a thermal shirt - folded up on a chair. There's even socks. He shakes the dust out of it all and strips out of his filthy clothes, down to his birthday suit, behind the desk. Using some wetnaps he found in a drawer (along with the unlocked office door's key), he cleans up quick before putting the new-to-him clothes on. Steve can't help but notice in addition to being absurdly cute he's in good shape, his compact body fairly muscular and broader than the blonde's. How exactly does this guy know Buck?

"So we unlock the cage, bring Winter...Buck...in, skin him and then bounce quick, closing every gate and door between us and him," the young man offers. "Normally it wouldn't slow him down much, but he'll be weaker until he eats. Hopefully after he does, he'll be back to his senses. If not, we run like hell and hope there's enough of those cannibal fucks outside still breathing for him to get his head back on straight."

"Hey, we don't know these people. I mean, that one's a dick clearly," Clint motions to the man that threatened Greta, "but just because they've got some X painted on them doesn't mean they should all be...vampire chow." Clint crosses his arms as Steve picks the lock on the cage. "By the way I'm really pissed off you lied to me about that, like, a whole bunch of times. I mean...I had my tongue..." the archer trails off as he sees Nat shaking her head violently out of the corner of his eye.

"They destroyed our settlement then tried to get in good with these reavers by giving us to them. The country jamborees in this town only serve barbecue, if you know what I mean. Isn't that right, fumehead?" The former prisoner kicks the boot of one of the X-marked captives with his worn out
sneaker. They're a sallow, twitchy fellow with bulging eyes. "Reavers just don't give a fuck about deals though, do they?" He smirks at the guy, glaring up at him. "When we showed up the cannibal queen ate their point man's face off in front of us while he was still alive and her people put the rest of these fucks in here. They started taking some of them each time they took some of us. My only consolation to the fact that these shits got dozens of my neighbors killed is that the cannibals already ate two thirds of their friends too. No great loss to humanity there."

"Fuck you, beaner trash. Your whore mother should have stayed in Mexico instead of squeezing you out on American soil," the bug-eyed captive replies.

"Okay, definitely let Buck kill that guy," Clint sneers.

"Actually my mother was Guatemalan and my father was Puerto Rican," the young man responds, unfazed, like he's heard it all. He turns to Steve. "Last guy that called me a racial slur Winter practically ripped in half. He didn't even know what it meant, he just didn't like his tone. He really hates assholes. That's how I know you're good folks." He flashes his pearly whites at Steve.

_Great, he goes from cute to gorgeous when he smiles. Can I put him back where I found him?_

"Do you have anything douchey to say? I'd really like a clean conscience about this," Clint addresses the third captive. "I mean you do have a toucher face, but I'm not sure that's a good enough reason." Clint's left eyebrow cocks.

"A what face?" Nat snorts.

"You know, the face of a toucher. Someone who touches people in a not right way," the archer responds. "Like the type of guy who gently brushes your ass while you're in line ordering a pastrami on rye at Jeff's."

"That's oddly specific," the redhead returns.

"Why would they wanna get in good with reavers?" Steve questions, circling back to the matter at hand.

"To prepare the way for glory," the third man in the cage offers suddenly.

"Man, I hate riddles," Clint responds. "What does that mean, dickwad?"

"If the ones with the X know a big chunk of our fighters are here, keepin' busy with the cannibals, their own group could attack Claptrap while the defenses are weak," Greta offers. "Phil, you need to radio Fury. And don't lie to me that you can't - I know you've got that fancy doohickey on you to report back to him." She walks up to him, pulls a knife quick as lightning and puts it to his throat. "And not one fucking word about Buck. Not one."

Phil nods and she backs down. "I need to go to the roof to use it."

She nods at the other freed captives. "Take them with you. If you can see a clear path to the truck, get'em there."

"The reaper has not yet arrived. He sits and waits and bides his time," the third captive continues, "but he will always finds you."

"Who are we talking about again?" Nat asks, sounding mildly bored.

The man juts his arms up as far as his restraints will allow, one forearm facing forward and
crossing over the other to form an X. "CROSSBONES!" he screams, grinning wildly.

"Crossbones!" the fumer agrees.

"Crossbones," says the racist.

"Crossbones?" the redhead questions. All three men say the name again.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah..." Clint responds. "We get it. Who the fuck is that?"

"Crossbones is their leader," the freed captive offers. "I only saw him once, at a distance. The X, they copy that from him. He has a big one painted on his body armor. White shit on his mask too. They say he has powers. That he like...mutated or something. Which would have sounded nuts to me before I met Winter but now..." the young man trails off.

"He's coming. He's coming! He won't be denied! CROSSBONES IS NIGH!!" the zealot continues from the cage.

"Crossbones!" the fumer repeats.

"Crossbones," says the racist.

They decide to gag them all with jump ropes, then head back out into the gym to get Buck. The young man turns to Steve, both of them on their knees with Win and Nat at different quadrants of their friend's prone body, ready to lift him.

"The queen, she was saving Muriel's granddaughter and me for victory dinner. Did you see a little girl out there anywhere? They took her earlier."

"Sorry, no," the mechanic responds.

"Pit," the Soldier rasps.

"What, buddy?" The young man leans closer.

"Girl. Pit. Under...dirt," Buck manages. "No air."

"There was a pile on one side, but I thought he was trying to put himself out. I'll go check the hole!" Clint runs out. Steve knows its been a rough day when the archer doesn't even giggle after uttering those words.

They carry the Soldier to the cage. After a few minutes of discussion, the young man goes over the basics of the plan again.

"Okay, we have to make this quick. Get as much as you can, but it doesn't have to be flawless. We can clean up the rest later when he's in better shape. The second I say break, we run like hell. I'll shut the cage once we're out. Steve, right?" The blonde nods. "Steve, you head straight to that office door and be ready to lock it as soon as we're through. The keys are in the doorknob. Then its out in the hall and the old lady chains the door. That's three layers he'll have to bust through if he comes at us. Normally that's not a problem for him, but he'll stay pretty weak til he eats." He lightly strokes the part of Buck's face that isn't scorched, bending over so his own is quite close. "Winter, buddy, can you hear me?"

The Soldier groans, his eyes open slightly. "Luis?" he barely forces out.

"Yeah it's Luis, big guy." The young man smiles down at him fondly.
Steve is decidedly not smiling - *who the fuck is this guy?* He decides now isn't the time to act like a jealous high-schooler. But, fuck, he's good looking. And way too familiar.

"Am...dead?" the Soldier rasps.

"No, no you're not dead." Luis laughs softly. "You thought we were in hell together, huh? You are burnt up bad, but we're gonna help get the charred parts off so you can heal."

Buck breathes out raggedly, "No...attack you..."

"We've got some tasty deserving here for you, pal," Luis replies. "This is gonna hurt real bad, but you've gotta keep still, okay?"

The Soldier makes the tiniest nod, the burnt flesh of his throat cracking.

Luis takes the belt off his ruined jeans, folds it over several times. "Bite on this, buddy," he offers as he eases the leather between Buck's parted teeth. His fingertips lightly graze the Soldier's cheek again, a comforting gesture, and Buck hums gravelly and soft. Steve can't help the hot stab in his gut, the formless anger that he knows is immature and a needless distraction in this situation.

The former captive turns to the others. "Don't cut too shallow, or you're hurting him for nothing. Watch me for a second, then do what I do. This is how he showed me."

Steve can only nod. Is this really happening? Are they actually going to cut him up? He feels queasy, dizzy, but tries to shake it off. Luis starts seconds later. The sound of it is awful, even more nauseating than the smell of Buck's burnt skin and hair. They watch the young man carve a long slice of scorched meat from the Soldier's arm like a well-trained butcher and then all turn to their task, quick and silent. Buck whimpers and groans, biting hard into the leather, his canines and the pointy teeth next to them punching through first, the flatter (but still sharp) teeth in the front sinking in eventually. They all extend out of his gums a bit, then the pointy sets seem to start getting longer more and more by the second. The brunette's eyes glow aqua, turn ice blue and then go almost white, blinding in their intensity. His sounds become more animalistic, the mat beneath them and their pants where they kneel down sopping wet with his dark blood. No one will notice with what a mess they already are.

The younger man stops, cleans his blade, turns and slashes across the tops of the prisoners' bare feet with his knife, drawing blood and grunts of pain.

"Okay, go, go!" Luis is up and out of the cage so fast, holding the door. There's a brief second where the others worry that he will close it on them, but he doesn't. The young man shuts it the moment they get clear. They hesitate momentarily, watching new skin knit together all over the Soldier's body as he thrashes in pain. Suddenly he goes still, silent.

"Buck?" Steve whispers, fingers twining in the grate of the cage as he peers in.

The Soldier sits up slowly, the belt dropping from his mouth. He bares his teeth, growling low in his chest and starts to crawl forward. The prisoners sit stockstill in silence behind him.

"Run!" Luis instructs, pulling Steve from the bars as Buck jolts forward, all snarling teeth. The blonde barely has the key turned in the office's heavy steel door, locking it between themselves and the Soldier, before Buck bursts out of the cage. He runs straight at them, smashing his face into the thick panel that serves as a small window in the door, screaming incoherently.

"Buck? Buck?!" Steve calls out to him on the other side as he bashes his face into the glass again and again. The blonde looks very close to tears.
"He's not himself right now," Luis says, not unkindly, to the mechanic. The Soldier's metal fist smashes into the door, denting it severely, then crashes into it a second time nearly tearing it from the massive hinges.

*He almost bit off my fingers after all*, Steve thinks absently. The mechanic feels like his grip on reality has snapped, and he can't pull himself together. He's never been afraid of Buck, not after their first meeting, even when he knew logically he should be.

"Need to go!" Win grabs his arm.

Nat and Luis help physically wrestle the blonde out of the room, Greta slamming the double doors and chaining them. They have two long thin window panels as well, just big enough to pop an arm through. Seconds later they see the steel office door give way, fly from the jamb then land with a loud clatter. It slides across the floor to the far wall. They watch in horror as Buck stalks out, looking like a monster from a horror movie, eyes blazing, teeth massive. He's even drooling. They prepare to run but suddenly he stops, tilts his head back and scents the air like a dog - he must smell the fresh wounds of the prisoners. Buck turns on his heel and runs back into the storage room at full speed. The muffled sounds of screaming and chains rattling against metal just reach them through the doors.

Minutes later a naked, red-blood spattered Buck emerges from the office. He stumbles all of eight or ten steps then faceplants into the wood flooring with his arms stretched out like Superman. His bare ass and his flesh arm, back and legs - save a few small spots - are gray again. They all stare in silence for a long moment before his flesh hand half lifts up off the floor and he groans, "help."

They steal clothes off bodies to dress him, boots too since his are run through in multiple places, sole's sporting inch to inch and a half wide holes. He can't stand let alone walk and barely gets words out. Luis slides under one of his arms and Steve beneath the other - it's all they can do with Greta pushing from behind to keep him upright. Nat and Win each pick up a leg and they carry him. The younger women release him once they hear other Claptrappers approaching and the men and Greta walk-drag him to the truck, trying to avoid prying eyes as Win and Nat distract the onlookers.

They meet up with Phil and the other freed captives - he swears he said nothing to Fury about Buck and chastises Greta for what he considered an unnecessary threat. Nick's drones don't see anyone approaching Claptrap or in the vicinity of the burning town, so they breathe just the tiniest bit easier at that. The small group stuff Buck into a corner of a truck box with his knees folded up to his chest and his weapon in his lap, Steve under one arm propping him up, trying to make it look like they're having a celebratory cuddle after the fight.

*Yay, we're alive and shit.*

It feels like an agonizingly long amount of time while Win, Nat, Greta and Phil go out to help the other Claptrappers once again comb through the dead and dying for their allies. Luis heads to find Clint, taking Muriel with him. The junktowners pick clean what little the rubble has to offer. There is certainly an abundance of hand weapons, plywood and sheet metal. Greta orders it all put into the truck that the blonde and the Soldier are set in, leaving only enough room for Win, Phil and Greta to ride back with it, keeping others away from the Soldier. When people ask where Buck is, each one of the Claptrappers who had been with him in the school tells a different lie, so that no one is aware which truck he is actually riding in or what his state is.

Clint and Nat ride in the truck with the medics, the archer clutching the hand of the little girl he had found buried in the pit as they work on her - she has serious burns on her legs and she wasn't breathing when he found her. His other fingers hold Buck's mask.
"He put it on her," the archer whispers to his wife, "even though he must have known that the heat from the fire would burn him from the inside out. What the fuck do we do about his lungs? You heard how he was breathing."

Luis lingers nearby, maintaining control of Muriel. She seems to drift in and out of awareness of what is happening to her grandchild, becoming briefly hysterical before collapsing in on herself to mumble and whisper. "He'll heal, with time," the younger man reassures. "And enough..." His eyes dart around to the strangers in the truck. He has no idea how much these people know. "Enough food and rest."

When they're finally ready to go, all the trucks loaded and the doors closed, Greta comes and sits down near Steve and Buck. She pushes the hair back out of the Soldier's face. "How you feelin', kiddo? You gave me quite a scare."

"I'm so tired," Buck whimpers. He sounds on the verge of tears.

The older woman eases him away from Steve, leans his head against her chest. She wraps her arms around him and rocks him back and forth.

"I know sweetheart, I know. Go to sleep," she soothes.

In that moment Steve realizes that Greta had been a mother and his thoughts, for the first time in a long time, go to his own. He had been very close to having to pull sheets over a lot of people today. The mechanic grips Buck's metal hand and sobs, finally letting the reality of the day set in.
Playing house

Chapter Summary

Luis thinks back on his time with Winter.

To say Luis had been terrified of the creature at first was an understatement. He had no idea where he’d got the cojones to try to reason with it or ask it for mercy after it dragged him, kicking and screaming, into the basement apartment and tied him to the heavy wooden kitchen chair. Honestly he was surprised at that stage, with no one left to give a shit about or to give a shit about him, that he even cared if he lived. What was life worth when it only boiled down to survival? Since he’d left Queens he’d known nothing but hunger, pain, exhaustion and fear.

It was not necessarily the thought of death that spurred him to speak, so much as the clinging guilt of letting those assholes he’d been running with hurt the old man. There were maybe no priests left to confess to, and he wasn't sure that the thing before him would even understand what he was saying, but he needed to get it off his chest if he was about to die. It had just looked at him, blank-faced, and then left the room.

Luis was shocked when it returned the next morning with an open can half-full of cold spaghetti, a bottle of water and an empty bucket. It released him from his bonds without a word exchanged between them and left the room. He heard the footsteps stop not far away and realized it was waiting for him to eat and do his business so it could put him back in the chair. That's their routine, he guesses around seven a.m. and six p.m., every day for nearly two weeks. After the first three days he'd worked up the courage to ask for a fork and it was in his can the next morning.

Then one day the thing comes in empty handed in the middle of the afternoon. It's four pointy teeth look bigger than ever (the others maybe a bit longer too) and it's eyes are glowing a crazy shade of electric blue that reminds him of a neon sign in his mother's beauty parlor. The fear ramps back up in him - this is it. It's probably killed all the others (they're far enough away in the big building that he virtually never hears them; no loss there) and it's his turn. Luis tells himself he won't beg. He grits his teeth, closes his eyes, says a silent prayer in Spanish his grandfather had taught him as a boy and waits for the thing to rip him apart like it had Al.

It bends down without a word, pushes his head to the side with one hand and his shoulder down with the other and sinks its teeth into him. Luis cries out from the pain - it's like someone's closed a small bear trap on his neck - and thrashes against his bindings. He whimpers and, yes, begs it to stop. It's not just the pain; he can hear its slow, measured swallows as it drinks from him, feel the pull of it lightly sucking even as his own heartbeat forces the blood out of him into its mouth.

After a long few moments, the pain starts to fade gradually into the background. A gentle pulsing replaces it, spreading from where the thing's teeth are buried in him up and down his neck a bit more with each beat. By the time it branches out into his spine he starts to involuntarily relax - he can still move, but it feels like he's underwater, every motion slow and requiring great effort. It gets hard to form words and soon he finds he doesn't really want to bother.

A tingle, similar to the feeling when someone had rubbed their fingers lightly over his arm or he'd watched an ASMR video, spreads with the pulsation. They both get steadily stronger. He feels it reach up the back of his head to the crown, prickling pleasantly along his scalp and then down to
light up his vertebrae one by one. The pulse - and the sensation that follows it - fans out across his back, around into his ribs, down into his hips and legs, until it buzzes lightly through the soles of his feet.

It's hard to describe how it felt when he's questioned by the creature later - dumb with shock as it's the first time it had spoken to him, it's voice a bit deep but calm and soft - but he tries his best. Luis can't really explain why, and he knows it's probably stupid, but he's less afraid. The creature releases him from his bonds, takes him upstairs to the dining area and let's him pick three different cans from his stash of food. It even allows him to heat them up - there's still gas in the tank outside for the stove - while it observes silently. He offers to do the same for the green beans it's eating with its fingers and after a long, flat stare it holds the can out to him.

He cautiously asks later if he can not go back in the chair at night, reasoning to it that there are bars on the basement windows and the thing already locks the apartment door (the style of deadbolt is very sturdy and requires the key for both sides) - there is no way for him to get out. It looks at him for a long time, blank faced, then nods. That evening, it carefully ties him to the small bed in the basement apartment where it had been keeping him. Luis' heart drops into his stomach - he definitely knows what it would mean to the type of people he had been with when he arrived here to get restrained in this way - and asks the thing over and over "please don't hurt me." It just throws the bedcovers over him and leaves.

When the creature bit him next, over a week later, it had been just as unceremonious as the first. He was anxious but overall far less scared - Luis certainly wasn't thrilled about spending so much of his day tied up, but at least the thing was meeting his basic needs and started letting him free to help loot the apartments (though supervised closely) as well as continuing to release him regularly to go to the bathroom (unsupervised thankfully, though it was never far away if he was loose). The creature bound him to the bed every evening. When Luis quietly asked one night if he could lay on his side, it paused, nodded and let him move into a more comfortable position before it went back to restraining him. At this point, Luis feels he has to focus on any small comfort that he can - he's alive, dry, warm, fed, (relatively) non-abused and sleeping on an actual mattress with sheets and blankets.

Luis also has to admit that he had liked whatever it had done to him last time and hoped that this time would feel the same. Certainly it was a better alternative than the agony of the creature's teeth buried in the meat of his neck as he felt it suck him down like a human juice box. He doesn't offer struggle or protest when the thing grabs his shoulder and pushes his head to the side, but can't help his body going tight. The pulsing started precisely as before, but it escalated quickly, getting stronger and stronger until it was a dull throb through his whole body.

The tingle got intense, spread everywhere, wave after wave of sensation washing over his skin and through his muscles. He grits his teeth, tries not to let on how good it feels. After a bit he can't stop himself - drugged little sounds spill out of him. The thing's moan in response is audible, even with it's mouth clamped on him, and he feels the sound rumble through its chest as it presses itself closer to him.

It leaves him in the chair even less after that, letting him pick his own food and eat daily with the creature in the dining area. The thing even allows him to be at a greater distance from it when he's unrestrained. Maybe he's crazy or weak or a coward for not resisting the creature keeping him like a pet and blood bag but how would he escape it and where would he run to if he did? They finish looting the building they're staying in and he compiles a big stack of stuff to use; the thing seems indifferent to him taking anything that isn't a weapon or food. With little to do one day and some modicum of personal freedom, he spends most of the afternoon flipping through magazines on a couch in the lobby. The creature sits on the floor taking apart and cleaning its weapons across the
coffee table from him.

Eventually Luis realizes that the thing has gotten very quiet. He looks up to see it staring at him, eyes slightly glowing that eerie but somehow pretty blue. The creature has a thin line of saliva coming from one corner of its lips. It occurs to Luis in a vague sort of way that its mouth must be watering. The thing slides the coffee table aside with an effortless gesture and then it's on him, the metal arm sliding around his waist as the other hand grips the base of his skull, maneuvers him. He tries his best not to tense up or cry out - the pain of the bite only lasts seconds, the pulsing ramping up to a hard throb very quickly.

The sensations rock through him, turning from pleasant to pleasurable so fast that he has no idea at what point he goes slack or starts moaning. The thing pulls him off the sofa, holds him so high his toes don't even touch the ground, pressing him close. It makes its own sounds of enjoyment again and again right along with him. The experience seems to stretch on a long time, everything else melting away.

After, he's vaguely aware of it carrying him to his bed, covering him, coming back in over and over to push it's flesh hand to his pulse, chest or forehead. Luis is so relaxed and warm, his thoughts swirling slow and dreamlike. The creature seems mildly agitated, pacing, eventually settling in the chair nearby as Luis finally gives in to his intense urge to sleep. When he wakes he's not bound and the deadbolt is unlocked. The thing is nowhere to be found.

Luis has a long debate about his next move. He realizes what happened the night before is probably clouding his judgment and maybe the logical thing to do is get the fuck out. But it seems the...man?... doesn't intend to hurt him, despite how blatantly homicidal he was. Perhaps they had started as captive and captor but that arrangement had clearly ended; they would be something else if he chose to stay. Luis couldn't blame the guy for tying him up, for thinking he was bad news, since he had reluctantly helped the others try to kill him - he'd even shot him in the leg.

He has food here, shelter, other creature comforts. The man obliterates any threat that arises (the area gets its share of less than friendly visitors, most of whom end up one more bloodstain on the man's clothes) and seems relatively open to requests to meet his needs. Luis also can't lie that he very badly wants the man to do again whatever he had done to him last night. His body still aches pleasantly with little after shocks from it and he had gotten his best sleep in years.

It should be weird, having another dude clutching at him and pleasuring him and moaning against his neck. He's not homophobic but he'd never so much as thought about holding hands with a guy and had a laundry list of ex-girlfriends. But Luis knows on some level that what the man did to him was not about sex or romance. The act and the feelings it creates - pleasure, relaxation, a need for closeness, a type of shared simple intimacy - don't have an easy label based on human behavior because the man isn't human.

Still, he can't lie when the guy finally comes back hours later he feels some kind of relief and tentative connection to him. Luis surprises himself when he offers his own name to the other man; he says nothing in return but does address him as Luis the next day. They fall into a pattern - first they eat breakfast together in silence, then the man quietly outlines their scavenging plans for the day. They each pack a small bag and loot another area of the suburb they're staying on the outskirts of. Eat lunch in silence. Loot more. Trek back. Eat dinner in silence. Sort their haul. Go to bed once he's tired.

_It's just like the racist old white people thought_, he laughs to himself, staring at a portrait of the most tense WASP family he's ever seen, _the brown guy has come from the city to take their shit. I bet they never guessed gray guys would be involved_. Eyeing their dead security keypad, he
imagines what an infomercial for a vampire home defense system might look like and chuckles out loud. That earns him the tiniest movement of the man's eyebrows. Luis thinks of it as Facial Expression #2 from then on, the man's usual blank look being #1.

At night for a few hours before bed, or when the man just decides for whatever reason they'll stay in all day, he is mostly let alone to do what he wants. He hangs out in the fancy common areas, including a glassed in patio on the fifth floor and the roof deck next to the long-dry pool. He even gets the man to play ping pong with him after he teaches the rules (the bastard wins every time).

Eventually he starts asking a few questions here and there, getting the man to tell him his…Well, it's not a name exactly. Winter Soldier 23. No, he's not a cyborg or an alien or supernatural in origin. Yes, he is a science experiment. He elaborates a bit on that when pressed but not much. The soldier doesn't answer why he's there or what his plans are - if any - after this place.

Winter, as he takes to calling him out of convenience and also because (unlike "soldier") it feels more like a name than a title, feeds on him regularly. It surprises Luis how often he can do it before the smaller man starts to feel out of sorts. Winter seems to notice, doting on him for a few days, insisting he stay on the couch with a blanket and bringing him hot food and water. He even leaves for an afternoon and comes back with medical supplies, hooking an IV up to Luis. He's more careful not to do it so close together after that.

It feels more amazing every time, despite the fact the bigger man just sort of finds Luis wherever he's at in the building when the mood strikes him and latches on without a word. Finally one day he's had enough of being man-handled. Winter charges into the kitchen as Luis is about to make dinner, a very familiar glow about his eyes as he drops down on the floor next to where the smaller man is digging through a cabinet for a mixing bowl. He grabs Luis by the upper arm with his metal hand, his other going to the back of his neck, yanking him forward.

"Hey! Hey! No!!" Luis doesn't know what possesses him to yell and push against Winter's chest, nor why the bigger man actually stops. He looks at the smaller man with Facial Expression #2 (maybe it will even be a #3 because there's a faint hint of annoyance mixing with the confusion).

"Hungry," Winter says, quiet but insistent.

"Yeah, well so am I. Fuck, can I at least eat and take my boots off first? We've been home all of ten minutes."

"Home? This is home now?"

Yep, definitely adding a #3 to the list. There's subtle irritation on Winter's features. He lets Luis shake his metal hand off and pull back from the one on his neck, sliding a few feet away.

"And you don't need to be so rough!" He pulls up his t-shirt sleeve to show the new and old finger shaped bruises on his bicep. "I don't even try to fight back, so I don't know why you think you gotta grab onto me like that. Plus you could, ya know, ask me."

"Is that a #4 expression maybe? Winter's eyes go ever so slightly wider as he surveys the marks, mouth turning down the tiniest bit at the corners. Luis would never notice if the bigger man wasn't literally the only person he'd seen for nearly two months and wasn't around him twelve plus hours every day. He leaves the smaller man alone until the late evening.

Winter knocks on the basement apartment door (another thing Luis had finally complained about after he'd walked in on him changing for the dozenth time). When he's told to come in he walks to the edge of the bed where Luis sits and kneels down in front of him.
"Please," Winter whispers, voice thick and gravelly. "I need it."

The feeding is the best it's been so far that time, Winter's pulse buried in him, flooding him with pleasure. Luis is embarrassed the next day of how loud he'd moaned, seated on the bigger man's lap where he'd been gently pulled. Winter had been hunched over him, his own sounds frequent and needy, as he sucked from Luis slow.

He doesn't hesitate to tell the bigger man what he thinks after that, earning him a lot of #3 and #4 looks. Winter seems particularly affronted when he brings up his hygiene or cajoles him into doing something outside of his very limited comfort zone. Luis sees something in him, a spark of a personality, he hopes isn't just his imagination. He tries carefully to fan it into a flame.
The gang deals with the reavertown aftermath.

There's no easy way to smuggle Buck back to Steve's shanty. Claptrap doesn't exactly have standard sized roads and the large cargo truck will not fit anywhere near his home. Gurminder takes charge of Muriel, leading her to medical to see her granddaughter and help Bruce assess the old woman's state. Clint had stayed back to help with Buck, letting a medic take the child to Dr. Banner - she is stabilized but not out of the woods. Steve had urged Luis to go with the psychiatrist or the little girl, but the young man insisted on staying to help "Winter."

Steve was already really over him calling Buck that.

It's Win's idea to put the Soldier on a piece of sheet metal and cover him with a tarp, surrounded by random stuff they'd salvaged from the reavertown. The welder and the mechanic were always hoarding scrap and engine parts for their various projects. She helps Steve, Luis, Greta and Clint carry it through the junktown, Buck invisible to passersby. When they're sure no one is around, several of them hurry him into the mechanic's place and put him on the floor on the tarp. Then they all casually take the junk pile to the lean-to on the back of Win's they use for storage, letting others see them and hear them talking normally. Fury had ears and eyes everywhere.

Nat and Phil head to give report to Nick and make excuses for the Soldier's absence. They're counting on at least a few nosy people having overheard the fight between him and the blonde before the run, and it having got back to Nick. They plan to tell him that Buck had entrusted them with the mission information so that he could go and smooth things over with his boyfriend. If that doesn't work, they'll turn things on their head and say Buck and Greta are furious with Nick for not having caught on to what the reavers were up to in his aerial footage, maybe even insinuate that he had intentionally withheld information. Some of the gang had discussed just that before they had parted ways.

Steve and the others make a big show of shooting the shit and organizing the scrap. Random people stop to talk to them about the mission. They assure them it was successful, though they all turn sorrowful when discussion of casualties comes up. There is no official final count yet, but they place the number at somewhere around fifteen with another two dozen severely injured and many more suffering cuts, contusions and broken bones.

The blonde invites the others in, loudly enough but not too over the top, for a drink. Once they're inside and the door is shut, a whirlwind of activity ensues. They strip Buck out of the filthy reaver garb and Greta and Steve start cleaning him up with wet, soapy rags, working around and after Clint and Luis, who trim the few remaining charred patches off him. The Soldier whimpers but is otherwise still. He has been mostly out of it since falling asleep on Greta, the old woman chuckling softly when he'd drooled on her. Once he's as sanitized as he'll get without a bath, Steve and Greta get him into his sweatpants and they all lift him up onto the bed.

Luis grabs a straight razor - another great find from the yard that had needed minimal clean up and sharpening - from where it sat in a tin cup on a shelf. Despite how smooth-faced he looked, Steve had to shave every other day to stay that way, growing a thick beard the sandy color of his brows.
fairly quickly. Buck also developed stubble over a good portion of his cheeks and jaw - with his hair so dark it was virtually always visible through his skin even when freshly shaved, though it took a lot longer than the mechanic's to grow to any length (Steve had zero problem admitting that the almost permanent five o'clock shadow the bigger man sported was pretty hot).

When Buck met Luis he had a thick raggedy beard a few inches long, matted with filth, that the younger man had fairly quickly talked him into cutting off. It was the only thing he found gross when Winter bit him (after the first few times at least). Buck thought about the young man every time he shaved, because for several months Luis had done it for him. Brock had insisted Steve do it as well, but not for hygiene. The blonde had a good idea in addition to being a rapist pig, the ex ops sadist was probably a pederast and liked that Steve looked - at least back then - about fourteen when he was clean shaven.

Luis climbs in the bed with Buck, shimmying up against the headboard, feet on either side of Buck's head just above his shoulders. The young man's knees are bent up towards his chest.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Steve questions, taking a few quick steps to the edge of the bed, as Luis unfolds the razor.

"Easy, blondey. I'm just getting the burnt hair off." Luis starts sliding thin swaths of the brunette locks between his thumb and the blade, shearing off the ends. He stops every few minutes to hold random pieces out on either side of the Soldier's face and head, checking that they're the same length like a professional stylist would do.

"You look like you know what you're doin' there, kid." Greta sits on the foot of the bed and watches.

"I grew up in my mama's salon. I saw her razor hair hundreds of times. I used to cut his for him every three weeks, like clockwork. I sucked when I tried it with scissors - it looked all blunt and choppy - but this I figured out pretty quick." He works fast, placing the cut off pieces in a small pile on the headboard. "Help me turn him?"

Clint assists him in rolling Buck on his left side so Luis can go to work on his right. There's a long silence while they all watch, then they flip him to the other side.

"Okay soooo now that shit has calmed down a little… How the fuck do you know our friend and why were you grooming him on the reg?" Clint pulls up a kitchen chair and faces the back to the bed. He sits on it with his legs splayed, watching Luis, arms folded on the top of the chairback. The faces Steve has been making since the younger man revealed he had some kind of relationship to the Soldier weren't lost on the archer.

"That's a very long story. Suffice it to say we met under bad circumstances and helped each other out," the would-be hairdresser responds.

"So you and him weren't….?" the archer queries.

"Weren't…?" Luis has a tone, like he either knows exactly what the archer's asking, but is pretending not to, or like he's maybe being a smart-ass and letting them know it's not their business.

Steve doesn't like that one bit. Clint just lifts both of his eyebrows and smirks, as if to say don't play dumb with me.

"Look, when I met him he was basically an animal," Luis starts, not pausing in his work. "He was filthy, his hair just a bunch of snarls with blood crusted in it. I didn't want to look at him like that
everyday."

He starts to ease Buck up into a sitting position, motioning for Clint to help him. Greta puts her arms around the Soldier's upper back as far as she can and eases his forehead against her shoulder so that Luis can cut the back of his hair.

"Also, I guess... I guess I thought there was a person in there somewhere under the crusty exterior. I was never sure how far I got with helping him discover that, but it seems like you guys are all his friends so maybe I did something right."

"He is our friend," Win says, coming over to lightly rest her hand on Buck's arm. She makes a concerned face. "He doesn't feel warm enough."

"I've noticed him like that before," Steve comments, "when he hasn't...fed recently. I'm sorry I kept that from all of you, that he has to do that. I didn't want anyone to be afraid."

"The injuries and then what we did to him took a lot out of him. Just the three guys aren't nearly enough to get him back to normal. He'll be weak like this for a while and he'll need to drink a lot more."

Luis is finally done cutting. Steve brings the garbage bag with the reaver cast offs over and they throw the scorched hair in. Greta and Luis lean Buck back against the young man, the Soldier's head resting against the middle of his sternum, his back over Luis' now crossed legs. The young man's arms hang loosely around Buck's chest.

Steve doesn't like that one bit either.

"He told me about it months ago," the welder says softly. "The need."

"I figured it out pretty quick too," Greta adds. "I mean, look at those teeth. And then you two volunteering to be alone with those bodies we found in the shed. I saw his face when he looked at all that blood in the pails. Like a dog looking at a sirloin."

"Well why the fuck was I left in the dark?" Clint demands. "And shouldn't we...get him some then? Maybe from the cows?"

"Stalls were very busy with people when we passed," Win responds.

"Because you have a really big mouth, Clint, and also I didn't want you doing anything stupid like asking him to bite you," Steve scolds the archer.

"So he's never bitten any of you? Not even you, blondey?" Luis questions. He had been sure the little guy and Winter had a similar arrangement to the one they had shared in the apartment building.

"No, of course not. I mean, he said he can feed on people without killing them, but..." Steve trails off. "I thought about offering - because it's so hard for him to get enough here when he can't really risk attacking people - but I figured he'd be weird about it, since it'd be painful for me."

Except earlier. Earlier he had wanted to rip you apart. Steve had always thought that Buck, even at his most hungry, would never hurt him. Right from the beginning when the mechanic found out what the Soldier was, he had this unexplainable, naive trust in the man.

Luis chuckles. "So you guys don't know?"
"Know what?" Steve furrows his brows.

The mechanic's tone, though trying to sound controlled, turns into something that Clint recognizes as angry. Fuck, the archer had some inkling the kid was the jealous type - that's why he'd kept his little make-out session with the Soldier hush-hush - but Steve turns practically as green as Luis' eyes when their new ally lifts his hand and gently runs his fingers through Buck's hair.

"Under normal circumstances, it's totally fine for him to bite you. He's actually really good at it, really careful. He used to feed on me all the time."

Clint thinks that Steve's face is practically an open book now, big bold italic letters asking why Buck has never done it to him then.

"You let him do that to you?" Greta questions in surprise.

"He didn't exactly ask, not at first, he just did it. It took a lot of work to get him to understand boundaries with other people. But then, yeah, I let him." A ghost of a smile crosses Luis' face as he looks down at the top of the bigger man's head. "Hey," he eyes Greta, "can you sanitize a small, sharp knife for me? I can feed him, show you guys it's no big deal."

She does as he asks, avoiding the mechanic's withering gaze. Luis tilts Buck's head back, craning his own neck forward. "Winter, buddy, can you look at me?"

"Nnnn," the Soldier responds, opening his eyes. They're glowing blue again.

"I'm going to let you drink from me, okay? I know you're really tired and it'll be hard for you to bite me without it being a mess, so I'm gonna make a little cut and then hold it to your mouth. I just need you to remember that you gotta be careful, okay? Don't drink too fast or squeeze my arm too hard. Can you do that for me?" Luis' voice is soothing and quiet, his thumbs lightly stroking Buck's jaw.

Steve desperately wants to stop this, to get the guy the fuck away from the Soldier. He knows Buck needs to eat though, and if this works maybe he can do it for him too. He feels incredibly silly and childish at how worked up he is at the whole situation and tells himself it's probably just the stress of the day. Steve had not lost anyone dear to him thankfully, but it had been so close. There had also been acquaintances among the dead, all decent folks.

Even those he did not know had someone here who cared; the mechanic's heart went out to them. He presumed they were all fundamentally good people. As shit as the world was, Steve still usually assumed most people were good deep down. He decides to try to give Luis the benefit of the doubt. Even if there had been something between the young man and the Soldier before, even if there were a lot of things that the mechanic hated about himself and found unworthy of affection, Steve can't deny the way Buck looks at him says he is in love with the blonde.

When the Soldier nods to the young man's query, Luis jabs the point of the blade a fraction of an inch deep into the lower part of the inside of his arm. He quickly presses his bleeding forearm to Buck's mouth. The bigger man goes from looking barely conscious to extremely alert, eyes going wide and glowing brighter as he brings his hands up quickly to clutch Luis, to press him tighter to his mouth.

The bigger man groans, long and low in his chest, and it's only a few moments before he starts to look drunk. His eyelids go half-closed over irises turned violet. He makes soft sounds of enjoyment again and again, and Steve can see where his fingers are lightly denting Luis' flesh. The mechanic can't help but think about what Buck's soft lips must feel like against his skin, about the vibration
of his little moans through his arm.

"See? No big deal. It doesn't even hurt after a minute." Even with the flat fronts of Winter's teeth just pressed against him rather than buried in, he can feel the bigger man's pulse. Luis can't help but think back to their many times together. He had been trying all day to block out the thoughts of it, to focus on what his friend needed rather than his own wants.

After a bit, he softly asks Buck to stop and to heal him. It takes a second for the Soldier, so obviously drugged by it, to comply but he does. Luis strokes his hair for a little while longer, telling him what a good job he'd done. Then he asks the others if any of them want to try it. Greta goes first, then Win, both commenting on the slight tingly feeling that they get from it once the pain stops, but when Steve approaches the bed Buck says no and turns his face away.
Chapter Summary

Nick throws a wrench into the gang’s day.

"Greta, Greta, do you copy?" Suddenly Phil coming in over her walkie breaks the awkward silence.

"Copy, Phil. What's the sit-rep? Over," the older woman responds.

"He saw Buck in the pit on the drone feed! He saw us pull him out, carry him in and out of the school. He saw us put him in the truck. The ex ops guys are armed up and they're heading to Steve's. I don't know what the fuck you're going to do, but you better think of something quick."

The walkie goes silent.

Before Fury approaches the shanty, all twelve of the ex ops team circle the tiny building in combat stance, automatic weapons raised. They're in full battle armor - some bloody from the reavertown fight - and helmets for those who still have them. There had been twenty of them when they arrived at Claptrap years ago, with Nick, Phil, the pilots and Hill. They had been sent out at least a few to a time on every run since the beginning and their need to take point in dangerous situations had taken its toll.

He has Natasha with him. Phil had apparently been left behind - no doubt Fury had allowed him to spin his lies for some time before the taller man had revealed he already knew precisely what had happened. Steve is standing at the front door, rifle in hand pointed directly at Nick's face. Greta, Win and Clint are on the roof, their own weapons trained on the approaching ex ops soldiers. Luis had even tagged along, the older woman giving him a handgun.

"Hiiiiiiiiiii," Natasha says - in a fake, high pitched voice that's intended to be funny and diffuse the situation - as she steps forward. "It seems to me like we may have gotten off on the wrong foot. How about we all put our phallus representations down and talk about this like grown-ups. I don't know what Phil told you, but Nick just needs Buck to go on a little trip, and then he'll be right back. No one needs to get hurt."

"I really like you," Steve responds, "and I hope tomorrow we're still pals, but if you take another step towards my door I'm gonna put a bullet in your shoulder."

"Baby," she calls up to the roof, "please come down here and tell your brother from another mother to stop pointing that thing at my boss before I have to take it from him and shove it up his ass."

"No can do, baby," Clint responds, "Sort of busy here."

"This is really the hill you want to die on, Barton?" Fury queries. "For that thing."

"He's my friend," the archer responds, "which is more than I can say for you. I don't believe for a second that you didn't know they dug that trap, or the tunnels, or that there were so many of them. Is that what you thought it would take to kill him or get him weak enough where you could? Throw an entire army of cannibals at him, fuck how many of us died in the process."

"That's why you didn't want Steve and Win to go," Greta adds. "You knew what would happen and
you couldn't lose your wunderkinds or this place would fall apart. But the old bitch and her crew are expendable right?"

"They must have laid the scrap out at night, you idiots," Nick blasts back. "If they started digging inside the houses we'd never see it. I will admit, I should have noticed the shit in the streets increasing bit by bit, but with all the sand..."

"You know you can't trust him, Nat," Clint calls to his wife. "If you're not on my side now, then I'm not sure that's an option you'll have in the future."

Nat turns and looks at Nick, searching his face for the tell. She doesn't see it, but she backs up next to the house anyway, pointing her wrist electro disc unit at one of the nearest ops guys. "Sorry, Fury. This is the post-apocalypse and good D is hard to find."

"Do you really think I would send you, my soldiers, Hill...fuck, even Coulson, into a situation I knew they definitely wouldn't all walk away from?" Nick demands.

"Why not? You're doing it right now," she answers calmly.

"There's no winning this. We have you outnumbered and outgunned," Fury insists.

"We may not take your whole team, but there sure as fuck won't be many of them left after," Steve seethes. "You really want to sacrifice them to kill someone who isn't even threatening you?"

"Walk away while you still have one good eye, shithead! I won't let you kill one of my boys!" Greta adds.

"What part of I need him alive do you not motherfuckin' comprehend?" Nick yells.

"And after you get whatever you want from him you'll just let him go? My skinny ass. What's your plan? You think you can restrain him while he's weak to fix the neural net?" Steve accuses, slightly lowering the rifle.

One of the ops guys surges forward, attempting to tackle the blonde. Clint has an arrow in the guy's leg before he gets five feet from the house.

"Hold your fire!" Fury puts up his hands. "Last chance, kid."

"Go fuck yourself," Steve spits.

"Fire on my order," Nick calls out, "non-lethal if possible. Deadly force authorized if necessary."

"Even if I have to drag him out of here over your corpse, he's not gonna be anyone's puppet again," the blonde declares.

The door whips open behind Steve, the Soldier standing there in just his sweats, looking like he's been run over by a truck. "Enough," he says softly.

"Go back inside!" Steve moves to stand directly in front of him. "We can handle this."

Buck looks over at Fury. "Ammunition for the type of gun your people carry is very difficult to find scavenging. Judging from the way they are carrying their weapons, some of their magazines are completely empty, others have less than a quarter mag. Clint has approximately twenty-two arrows, some of which may no longer be usable as they have already been fired at least once. Greta has fifteen bullets, Luis six, Win is empty. Steve is probably empty as well."
A split-second after he stops speaking Steve points his rifle up in the air, fires it off with a loud crack that echoes through the tiny junktown, brings it back down to level it at Nick's face again as he moves the bolt to eject the casing.

"You can't have him," the mechanic says again, voice raspy and broken.

Buck steps to stand beside the blonde, reaches over, calmly puts his hand on top of the rifle and pushes it down to face at the ground. Steve stares up at him in surprise.

"If you ask your personnel to stand down and leave the area, I will allow you to come inside and we will have a discussion. I am very tired, but I can and will still kill them if they attempt to harm us." His eyes flare as he stares down the older man. "I do not wish to tear them apart, or you, in front of our friends."

Fury hesitates for only a moment before ordering them to stand down and return to the small building they use as their home base. The Soldier steps aside, motions him in. Buck sits wearily down on the edge of the bed, Steve settling in beside him with the rifle still in his hands and Nat leaning against the wall with her arms crossed. The others stay up on the roof, just in case, but the hatch is open.

"I know what you desire. You want me to unlock the asset," Buck says to Fury after only a brief silence.

"Asset?" Steve questions.

"The large metal crate you aided in recovering from the barn in the edge of the wasteland," the Soldier explains.

Steve's brows furrow in confusion. "Who told you about that?"

"He was there, tracking it down same as us. You were just ready to murder me and some people you've played cards with dozens of times over him. Except he's not here for you. He wants the crate, and he knows it's nearby but he can't figure out where we put it. Probably figured if he got in good with you, you'd tell him."

"You said it contained emergency supplies Nick - medicine and whatnot - that you added to the public coffers. That was all bullshit?" The blonde points his finger at Fury.

"What's in the box?" Clint's head pops through the hole in the ceiling.

"Two hundred grenades. Thirty pounds of plastic explosives. Forty-eight automatic assault rifles, seventy two pistols, six thousand rounds of ammunition, four rocket launchers, sixteen rockets, twenty four grappling hooks with climbing rope, forty eight sets of multi-system display binocular-capable goggles and carbon fiber masks," Buck rattles off.

"That's enough shit to bring down a small country," the archer responds, dangling down through the hole by a double grip on the opening's edge, flexing his thick arms.

"Yes, that was the idea. The crate would be air-dropped along with the Winter Soldiers on foreign soil. We would recover the asset and utilize the tools inside to take down a government hostile to the military's interests. The asset is designed so that no one can open it save a Winter Soldier, so that we can safely leave it unattended in the field and return to it as needed to rearm," the Soldier states.

"Is there, like, a special whistle or some shit? I remember seeing that thing and it just looks like a
huge steel box, no handle, no control panel, no seams, nothing." Clint sits at the table opposite Nick.

"It requires placement of a Winter Soldier's hand in a specific area. Chemicals unique to our makeup that exist in the oil of our skin are read in tandem with our pulse signature, which also differs greatly from a human. This is why he needed me alive."

Nick nods. "Those weapons could protect this place, allow us to scavenge safely even farther out. I thought, maybe, if Steve got chummy with him, I'd talk the kid into talking him into opening it for us."

"The crate contains new-grade WS series weapons. Aside from the plastic explosives, they would be less than useless to you." Buck gets up, crosses the room to retrieve his automatic rifle. He hands it to Fury. "You can remove the magazine to ensure that it is loaded, but it will not fire. The trigger functions the same way as the panel on the box, as with all WS series weapons manufactured post 2030, including this mid-series which accompanied me to the second facility."

Nick checks the mag, reloads it, ensures it's ready to fire. He aims at Buck - Steve sucking in a sharp breath - and pulls the trigger. Nothing. "Well fuck me."

"I don't understand," Clint says. "If you're on our side, and you can use the weapons to help us, and you know no one else can use them, why haven't you just offered to open it?"

"One. Fury would not grant me access to such an arsenal. He has an emotional reaction to my kind due to his facial injury. Once I opened the crate he would attempt to destroy me. Two. Based on the records that I reviewed, the crate was also used to hide another item, one which I cannot allow any human to have access to. Three. I am not the only Winter Soldier and I do not know the status of the others. It is better that it remain shielded and undetectable rather than others discover its location and obtain what is within. Four. I...did not want to reveal that I had an ulterior motive in entering the community with Steve."

"Face it kid," Fury says as the blonde's expression twists, "you got way too chummy. I knew you wouldn't listen to me, maybe you'd even turn against me and help him find it."

"Can you blame me? You're constantly playing little games with everyone. Sprinkling in half-truths." The mechanic scowls.

"You mean like your boyfriend?" Fury questions. "I watched him on the drone feed for months outside the wall before you brought him here and I kept doing it after. While he was supposed to be under your supervision, he snuck out at night regularly to murder people in the scrubland."

"Only the deserving!" Buck interjects.

"He'd killed four different clusters of those folks with the white X on'em before the ones you all ran into the day you found him in the sand. Now, I know how he knows the crate is here, but the signal was completely blocked well before any of them showed up. Which means those people probably aren't looking for the crate. Bet he didn't mention any of that. Then you just so happen to find some of those people with the X at the reavertown where there just happens to be a trap good enough to capture him."

"What do you hope to gain by telling him these things?" the Soldier barely whispers.

Fury glares, leaning forward. "I want him to know the type of person he was willing to shoot me in the face for."
Buck turns to the blonde, face sad and guilty. The little mechanic will not look at him. He turns back to Fury. "Where is the asset?"

"Over my dead body," Nick responds. "How do I know you're not bluffing about the weapons?"

"I am a soldier, not a spy. I was designed to kill, not to infiltrate. I was not trained to lie nor does it seem to be inherent in my nature to do so."

"Yet you have zero problem keeping things from me apparently. Crossbones' people. The crate. The hot guy on my roof," the blonde quips.

Buck looks at Steve. "Withholding information is not the same as lying."

"I told you that you two are painfully alike," Steve says to Fury as he stands. He crosses the room and walks out, slamming the door.

Hours later he's sitting on the hill around the yard eating a stale bag of nacho chips alone, staring out into the wastes. Steve looks out into the distance and thinks to himself that he should have - just for once - left well enough alone when he had noticed the glint in the sand nearly a year ago.
Chapter Summary

Steve contemplates his time before Claptrap.

***Extra trigger warning - intense discussion about and allusions to rape and abuse***

Steve had found the ancient suitcase under the old woman's bed when Brock was out of the room. What was left of her had melted into the mattress, and then dried out into a husk barely recognizable as a person aside from the remnants of a blue rinsed perm and the indestructible polyester floral nightgown. It was amazing how little what he deemed old lady chic had changed since a hundred years ago; this could be his great-great-grandmother based on their style choices.

The blonde had a similar "roommate" for multiple weeks while he was still alone on the road - he nicknamed the shriveled corpse in the recliner Florence after he put a sheet over her. Her closet only contained house dresses and nightgowns; since he had not had a clean set of clothes in weeks he said fuck it and started wearing them around her house. That was how he had discovered his love of the absurdly comfortable sack-like garment. After his talking to Florence went from a joke to something he just did without thinking about it, as if she'd answer, he decided it was time to leave and maybe find some actual people. What a bad idea that was.

He had a different suitcase back then, a fairly modern one with wheels and an extendable handle that he had taken from one of the other apartments in Brooklyn. Brock of course, being the overreacting piece of shit that he was, had thrown the entire thing away (including his innocuous items inside, like books and clothes). This suitcase was very different - probably twelve decades old and covered in robin egg blue faux leather, it had a rectangular hard body and featured an impractically small lucite handle with two massive, tarnished latches. It was a testament to the products of that era that aside from some scuffs it looked no worse for wear. He thinks of Taj's stories immediately. The older mechanic had served in three brutal guerrilla style wars and occasionally something would slip out about his time overseas while they worked.

The need for the suitcase stemmed from his increasingly unruly behavior as of late. From day one, he fought Brock or anyone else who tried to touch him, but he had been relatively reserved the rest of the time. There was no need to invite further assault upon his person. Now, however, there was very little logical or self-preserving (beyond survival instinct to eat, sleep, shit and try to stay warm) functioning in Steve's mind. The bullheaded part - the cynical, anti-authority, no-fucks-given part - was a molten pit of rage that didn't fear pain or injury and now it was usually in control.

Steve spent his days mostly tied up in the truck at this point because of his behavior - if Brock or any of his men were nearby or inside, he was constantly running his mouth and doing other things to fuck with him. He would talk about how small the leader's dick was or whatever else he could think of to embarrass the man. After Brock had taken to gagging him, he would find other ways to be annoying, like humming very loudly while he beat his feet or head rhythmically against the metal of the cargo box. One day Steve had quickly and silently untied the man's boots and then knotted the laces together in the middle. Brock, already barking out orders, moved to leave the
The blonde had cackled wildly, even through the fabric in his mouth, and continued to do so while he was kicked and punched, until Brock had beat him unconscious. It was four days before he saw another person, the light streaming through the back door of the truck blinding him after being in the dark for so long. Since he clearly couldn't be trusted to have his hands bound in the front, they were now behind him, so he was unable to even pull his prick out. Honestly pissing his pants was fairly low on his indignity list at this point and replaying the memory of Brock tumbling out of the truck, boots flying up in the air still tied together, was totally worth it. He is not surprised when the person in the doorway is finally recognizable as Jack.

When the blonde had first been abducted by the Rape Ape (one of the many nicknames he had given Brock), the leader had still shared a truck with his top lieutenant. They spent hours stuck in the back of the truck together, while Brock usually rode shotgun with whatever lackey he gave driving honors to that week. The blonde had only begrudgingly started to talk to Jack - the man had pointed out it was better that they pass the time that way than staring at each other in awkward silence. Ever with an artistic and structural eye, Steve had studied the man's unusual features.

The second in command was very tall and lanky with broad shoulders. He had multiple deep facial scars and one of his hazel eyes occasionally turned to look wherever it wanted - Jack said they'd put over twenty pins in his face to reconstruct it after a Humvee accident. He was lighter than Brock's olive complexion, but not as pasty as Steve, with a strong Cupid's bow lip shape and an aquiline nose. His dark hair was slicked back from his high forehead and reached the base of his skull. While he was not exactly handsome he was striking. Steve quickly learned that Jack was smarter and a lot more interesting than the others, and had a sense of humor unlike His Highness Fluffyhair MacMeathead. If Jack wasn't helping a group of uber-violent monsters burn their way across the countryside - if Steve wasn't imprisoned by his serial abuser friend - things could have been different between them.

Jack was a good fighter and quick witted, but he lacked Brock's sadism, charisma and commanding presence. The two men had traveled the world with their ops team, murdering people on every continent in the name of the United States of America - among other things - before the collapse. Now they worked for their own ends, taking whatever they wanted from whoever they wanted, some vague goal insinuated but never specifically spelled out. It was clear the two men were not of a single mind on many subjects; Jack for instance didn't involve himself in torturing and killing civilians, only joining a battle against marauders or reavers or another rogue military band who didn't want to play nice.

None of them - at first - explicitly talked about what was happening between Steve and Brock, but Jack was not stupid. He had never seemed too pleased with what Pope Phallicus Limpicus the Third referred to as his "arrangement" with the young man, and would do a number of passive aggressive things to run interference between them. Sometimes Brock would ask him to leave the truck, and he would just calmly cross his legs and put his hands behind his head, then complain about how tired he was, telling the other man that his dick could wait. It only took a few months of this before the leader settled the matter by "rewarding" his second in command with his own truck, arguing that it was better to store all of the explosives in one place under his strict supervision. The big man was their demolitions master after all.

That turned out to be a grave miscalculation on the part of General Giraffe Genitals, as Jack was unimpressed with the faux ass kissing and promptly booby-trapped every entrance to the vehicle, rigging them all up to a keypad that only he had the passcode to. The leader couldn't simply do away with the other man - if the truck or keypad were tampered with, blammo and he knew even under torture Jack wouldn't give up the code. Despite the broad skill-set that Brock and his other
followers possessed, none of them was highly trained in explosives. They regularly needed him to clear the road or get into buildings, sometimes even to fight other crews that had heavily armored vehicles. Besides, even if they could have guessed at volumes and figured out detonators until they got it right eventually, he now had all the boom boom under lock and key.

The big man never looked at Steve the way that Brock or some of the others did, but eventually the younger man got an inkling Jack had a crush on him. Maybe it was the complete lack of anyone around who wasn't an unwashed murder machine, or maybe it was just that Steve made him (often unintentionally) laugh and knew a little about a lot of things. Either way, it turned out to be an asset to subtly stoke that fire. Every time things got deeply dark and scary with Brock, every time that Steve was sure this was finally it, that he was at long last going to be murdered or horrifically maimed, Jack would find a way to intervene.

And here the tall man is again, stepping up into the truck, closing the door and turning on the overhead lighting. He takes the gag down off of Steve's face, careful not to press any harder over the raw spots extending out from the corners of his mouth, and then unwinds the wire from his wrists. He hands the blonde a warm can of broth.

"Drink it slow or you'll be sick."

Steve, for once, does as he is told. He knows he is reaching the end of his rope in terms of going without food. Soon he won't have the strength to even lift his arms, let alone take a swing at the President of Douchenozzles Incorporated when he shows back up. After he slurped all he could out of the container, he ran his long fingers around the inside to get the residue. When he finally looks up to Jack, the bigger man is staring at him with an intense expression.

Steve twists his face into a mocking, exaggerated grimace. "Oh, we're very serious today," he rasps. "Fuck, he's thirsty."

"I used to think you were so clever," Jack says, taking the can. "You pissed him off just enough to keep him interested, because you saw what he did to the others when he got bored of them. But you knew when to stop. Now you're just plain suicidal. Not that he doesn't deserve every second of humiliation you can dish out, but even he has a point where his infatuation with you won't overwhelm his desire to save face."

"Thank you for that little kernel of wisdom. Now kindly tie me back up and fuck off." The blonde makes a big show of licking his lips, then wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

Jack had been Steve's first human pincushion. Throughout the years he would accumulate several more; Clint had primarily served this role for quite a while but he'd done it to Buck more than once. Projecting all his frustration and anger onto people, who for whatever reason just suffered his behavior indefinitely with very little retaliation, had become something of a regular habit with him since meeting High Lord Taintly Knobgobble. Because his living punching bags themselves were far from perfect, he excused his own behavior towards them. After all, Jack had not stopped Brock, had he? So he deserved whatever Steve said to him.

"I'm trying to help you," the big man responded, handing him a bottle of water.

"Oh, you're super helpful, Jack! You just did so much to stop Brock from kicking my ass all those times. Or from fucking my ass all those times for that matter. Oh wait." Steve dramatically eyes the ceiling. "No, you actually didn't. You moved into your fancy truck so that you didn't have to listen to it." The blonde fiddles with the cap but can't get it off with his shaking fingers; Jack reaches over and unscrews it.
The blonde knows that talking about this subject makes the big man extremely uncomfortable, and he can see the guilt twisting his already permanently somewhat-twisted face. The better parts of Steve would feel some sort of sympathy for that, would argue that the man was in an impossible position surrounded by zealots who worshipped their paranoid, super violent leader with a fanatical devotion. They would say that Jack had already put himself at risk over and over again to give Steve what little protection or comfort he could offer. But those parts of Steve are usually silent these days.

"I was never okay with this, but what can I do?" Jack helps him steady the bottle as he tries to drink.

"Oh, gee, I don't know," the blonde says, tone dripping with sarcasm. "Blow him the fuck up."

"We're not gonna have this conversation again. Even if he was out of the picture, the others would stop us or chase us if we managed to get away."

"Better to die young in the woods than live long in a cage," Steve retorts.

"You wanna be given to the cannibals he recruited? To be flayed alive? Or tossed to the foot soldiers so you can get bent over by every single one of them? There are worse things than this."

"Easy for you to say when you're not being put in that position. Literally put in that position."

"Just, please, behave during the day. In front of the others," Jack picks up the wire, then puts it down again when he sees how mutilated the blonde's wrists are. He takes gauze out of a pouch on his belt to wrap them.

"I'm fucking bored, Jack." Steve pulls his arms away. "My whole life is this box and... and him." He grins, "maybe I need a hobby."

"What do you suggest?" The bigger man cocks an eyebrow.

"Well, fingering myself is out," the blonde says wistfully.

Jack blanches, stares down at his boots.

"I used to read a lot. Maybe you could get him to let me have a book." His tone for a brief second is almost hopeful, and he gives Jack a look he knows melts the other man.

"On the next loot, I'll see what I can do." Jack offers him a hint of a smile.

"You can't bandage my wrists. He'll know it was you." There it is, Steve offering a little crumb of returned concern for the bigger man to try to make a meal from.

The big man convinced Brock to let Steve come along as they search a cluster of houses a few days later. Five Star General Colon Polyp had grudgingly admitted in the past Steve was an excellent scavenger, finding things the others missed. The blonde knew in a way he was helping his enemies, but it was the only fun he had left aside from playing increasingly dangerous mind games with his captor. Besides, maybe one day he'd find a hidden blowtorch and melt Brock's deceitfully handsome face off so he could never use it to trick anyone again.

There was a bedroom at the back of the house, all boarded up, and after Captain Colossal Cockstain had assured himself there was no way out of the room and no obvious weapons, he ordered Steve to pick through it all and left, even closing the door. He probably thought Steve would be freaked out being alone with the corpse in the dim light.
"Hi, Edna," Steve says to it. Funny, the names people still used jokingly to refer to old ladies, given most of them now were named things like Braylen and Riley.

He'd seen the bookshelf filled with hardcovers first, then a bunch of crafting supplies - a sewing kit, glue sticks, two pencil grip type exacto knives with the blades too short to really think it practical for a successful surprise murder - and then the suitcase. He'd thought of Taj and a plan had formed. When he'd showed the suitcase to Brock ten minutes later, full of books topped with the sewing kit, the big man had scoffed.

"The fuck do I want with this?"

"I thought I could keep it. I'm bored," Steve shrugged. He stares the bigger man down, even as Brock moves to grab him roughly by the arm.

"Maybe I need to visit you more then." His hot breath on Steve's face makes him want to vomit, but the blonde's expression doesn't change.

Jack speaks, calmly, from the doorway. "May as well let him have it, man. You know..." He takes a few steps closer, lowers his voice. "Some of the guys joke about how he acts to you. If that shuts him up, why not?"

That was a gamble. Brock could just as easily have lashed out at Steve, maybe even killed him on the spot. Big man who can take a bullet but cannot handle being laughed at. Emperor Enema tears the contents of the suitcase apart, holds up the sewing kit when he's done.

"The fuck is this for?"

"I know how to sew. I can fix uniforms, stitch wounds. I'm useful for more than getting bent over." He adds a tone to the last few words, just for Jack. See, I was listening.

"I'll hold onto the needles," the big man glowers, putting the pack in his pocket. "Clean this shit up. If you can carry it, and lift it into the truck alone, you can keep it." He turns to the taller man. "You've torn your one ticket for helping him today."

When Brock storms from the room, Steve gives Jack the best smile he can manage with his busted face and the big man sheepishly smiles back. The taller man has no idea what he's just done.
All the small things.

Chapter Summary

Steve ropes Jack into part of his plan.

***warning, direct discussion of rape and abuse***

Steve had long made a habit of stuffing his pockets with little things that could be useful - buttons, bobby pins, twist ties - and anything small and hard enough to be fired from his slingshot. Brock had of course thrown the weapon away the first night. It was the only thing the blonde had that once belonged to his birth father; he liked it because he knew Sarah Rogers had almost put the thieving asshole's eye out with it the last time she'd seen him, as he tried to steal her ancient television while baby Steve screamed in the next room. She had never pulled any punches talking about Joseph Rogers, whose severe, once-hidden drug addiction to prescription pills had probably contributed to Steve's health problems and small size. The stress of a sick, expensive, constantly crying baby escalated Joe's behavior into blatant dependency and physical violence.

The blonde had learned many things from his mother - including sympathy for those struggling with the illness of addiction. Chief among the lessons was that abuse was not acceptable and not to be tolerated. No one had the right to hurt anyone else (reasonable self-defense or protection of another withholding) or use you, no matter what your flaws. Your body was not for someone else's comfort or enjoyment - not your appearance, not your sexuality, not your actions - save in a healthy, equal relationship where both parties acted to make each other happy. She taught him to see the parasitical, gaslighting behavior that abusive people would engage in, to understand that they had a hole inside them that could never be filled but they would try their damnedest by sucking up the misery and devotion of others. Sometimes he wondered if her teachings were all that kept him going with Brock aside from his borderline-crazy stubborn streak.

The blonde had done as promised once he had the suitcase and the supplies inside, no longer working to humiliate his captor or intentionally irritate the man. He spent his time silently sewing, reading and helping administer first aid when needed. Some of the men call him faggot and other less than pleasant names, but he just silently revels in the extra pain he intentionally causes stitching them up or hides boogers in the collars of their shirts (sometimes he sees them dried to the backs of their necks days later). He does an excellent job at his tasks and after a while most of them have less to say, even Brock.

There are members of the man's crew that can't look Steve in the face when they ask him to do a job - ones that feel shame at what is being done to him. This is especially true of some of the women. Certain men thinking women were objects to be used and discarded wasn't new to the world, only now there were no repercussions beyond what a woman and those she depended on could meet out. When the collapse happened, women became instant targets of degradation and homicide - the girl in the neighboring apartment that the guy could just never have, the ex-wife that had stilted someone, the female boss that had fired a guy because he didn't do his job, the total stranger who was just unlucky enough to be smaller and weaker.

Men now outnumbered women nearly two to one, especially if you excluded women who were in slavery from the general population. Even supposedly hetorosexual guys regularly turned their
violent sexual behavior towards smaller and more "feminine" men, like Steve, after the first few months of the fall. The easiest way to tell if a group were decent people was by how many (free) women - and younger men - were with them. As Sarah Rogers would say it was about how you treated people you didn't have to be good to that showed your character.

Of course there were plenty of hardcore women in the world, before and after the collapse, but society had a long history of keeping most women from being ready and able to defend themselves. Learning things like hand to hand combat and weapons was still uncommon for women when Steve was growing up, despite the ever-increasing time gap between the foundations of feminism and his era. There were more female soldiers than ever, but the average gun owner was still far more likely to be a man. Teaching women that they needed to be dependent on someone else to protect them, that the way to get things done and survive was to be demure and agreeable, was still the norm an uncomfortable amount of the time before the collapse. Meanwhile, Steve felt like all he had been told by society as a male since he was born was that the way to solve his problems was through aggression and crushing down things like empathy.

Now that the blonde was allowed out of the truck a lot more, since his behavior had improved so much (wink wink), he was pocketing anything sharp that he could find. Little pieces of glass or metal, screws, nails, small stones. His ragged clothes don't leave much to the imagination at this point, so Brock just gives him a quick visual once-over to make sure it doesn't look like he has a weapon and never goes through the formality of patting him down anymore. Every bit of debris the blonde collects makes it back into the truck with him.

Back in the old lady's room, he had used one of the exacto knives to make two small slits running on either side of the works for the handle over to the inside sections of each latch. Then he had slid a glue stick and an exacto inside each space and very carefully sewed the liner up with matching thread. To look at it, or even run your hand over it, just felt like internal supports ran beneath the fabric and the casing on that side of the suitcase. He sewed an identical seam around the inside of the back wall of the case as well, just for appearance's sake.

Whenever he had alone time in the back of Brock's truck, he'd open a book up about a third of the way, then cut a large rectangle out of the inside of the remaining contents, leaving about an inch border around the outside of the pages. Steve carefully glued every single page together of those with the big hole in the middle, forming a sort of box hidden inside with the first fifty to a hundred pages still normal. Then he would pack the secret compartment - as tight as possible, and with some of the removed portion of the pages shredded up in it, so that the stuff would not rattle around and make noise - with all of the pointy things he's collected. Once a hiding place was full, he'd glue down several of the solid pages over it to form a seal. This way he could still take the book out, flip through the front as if it was totally normal and no one could see a thing nor would anything fall out.

Once every book was hollowed out and refilled, save two (in case, god forbid, someone asked to borrow one), he would lift the case over and over to get stronger. He had to move it in front of the others in a way that it was not obvious it weighed a lot more than it had previously. Then there was the cut out paper to contend with. He'd eaten some of it at first (it was not like he was fed a lot and it helped his stomach feel full) but that had physiological ramifications after a while. He found the best way was to shred it super fine and fill his boots with the confetti, dumping then out the second his lower half was out of the line of sight of any of the others. Brock had taken to putting him on a heavy wire lead - like one used for a large dog in a yard, wrapped around Steve's waist and secured with a lock - so he could wander farther away to shit or help loot. It was easy to bury the paper with his waste or dump it into heating grates in buildings.

Steve still resists when Brock approaches him at night. The bigger man never threatens the
suitcase or really does anything to directly coerce the blonde into yielding sexually. The sadist tells the younger man he deserves punishment when he cuts or burns him, but never actually directly tells him not to fight back. It's fairly obvious that the bigger man likes the struggle. Sick fuck. Steve knows that this is his ace in the hole, no pun intended, because acting submissive would be the easiest way to make the other man lose interest.

There's a random day where the whole caravan is stopped, taking inventory and recovering from a fight. Brock is off somewhere getting reports from his unit commanders and leaves Steve outside tethered to the back of the truck to mend bodies and garments alike. The encampment is never without a plethora of armed guards, not at any hour of the day, so even if he did have something capable of cutting the heavy wire (or he picked the lock, which he was pretty sure he could do with a few minutes alone) he wouldn't make it thirty feet before he was shot in the back. Suddenly Jack sits down next to him, offers him a hot can of soup wrapped in a rag, a spoon already in it.

"I have an idea," Steve says as he takes it.

"Oh, you're welcome. My day's going great, thanks. Yours?" the tall man quips, digging into his own can.

"Hello, Jack. It's good to see you. Lovely weather we're having," the blonde says in his best Stepford Wife voice, wearing a plastic smile. "I have an idea." He takes a big bite of the soup.

Jack sighs, grins. "What now?"

The guards have wandered a bit off to avoid Jack. Even if the blonde isn't anywhere nearby, the big man bitches loudly about being spied on by the increasing number of patrols ever-loitering around. Brock's micro-managing and borderline fascist strategies have gotten to him.

Steve's face goes serious as he swallows, his voice turning soft. "You want me to be with you, right? I'd like that too."

Jack's cheeks color. "I'm not an idiot. You flirt and play with me, but I know you don't want me like that."

"Given the circumstances, I don't want anybody like that. I don't even want myself like that since I came to live in this fucking truck." It was true - he had tried to masturbate (to pass the time more than anything, but also because the thought of Brock slipping and falling in his load was hilarious) but he would just think about the time that the sadist grabbed his dick and couldn't even stay hard. "But that doesn't mean eventually things won't change if I was away from him. I like women, but I like men just as much." Jack gives him an unreadable look at that, takes a big bite. "Besides, I'm nice to look at if nothing else. A real trophy piece." Steve turns his face to show the most bruised part of it and hooks a finger into the corner of his mouth, pulling back to reveal two missing molars. "Total beauty pageant winner," he adds after he releases his cheek. "Really brighten up your truck."

Jack chuckles despite himself. "And how do you propose we make that move happen?"

"You said before that you thought I was clever, pissing him off enough to make him stay interested. That was never my intention in resisting, I just...I have to, you know? But you're right that he's kept me around because he hasn't broken me totally. If I stopped fighting, he'd get bored."

Steve takes another bite of food.

"Yeah and kill you!" Jack's brows knit together as he plops his own can down hard.
"Not if we maneuver him just right. I've heard you guys talking. There's some big job he really needs you for, something that has to be precise or whatever is inside'll get damaged. You can always act like you've lost faith in him to take you to that place. I know he's having trouble finding it. Get him to suck up to you, get him to offer you whatever you want." The blonde leans closer.

"He'll offer me to take someone else from one of the towns, or new equipment or some other bullshit. No way he hands over his prized possession." The big man's expression goes from intense to guilty. "No offense... I'm not saying...I know you're not a thing."

Steve waves his hand. "It's whatever." He sighs, both of them eating for a bit in silence. "But if he was already losing interest in me, already prepared to get rid of me, he'll see it as a two birds with one stone scenario if he knows for sure you're interested. I've always noticed that he's quick with the stick, but he also uses the carrot to keep a lot of his people loyal. He knows that giving you something you want will go a lot farther to keep you on course than trying to threaten you."

"If I asked for you directly, he'd know that we were up to something." The big man isn't wrong. Brock is no genius but he also isn't a fool and he's extremely suspicious.

"He's not as dumb as we would love to think he is, sure. I picked up on you liking me a really long time ago, and I'm sure he's seen the way you look at me."

Jack rolls his eyes. "What way?"

Steve runs his finger around the inside of the can, pops it in his mouth, pulls it out slow with his lips tight around it.

"Okay, point made. But how does that help us?" Jack looks down, scrapes his can.

"Well, I'll start to make things a little less interesting for him, plant the seed. If he complains to you, you can always throw out a comment about wanting to give me a try, getting me in line, something like that. He already knows you want to fuck me so put your cards on the table." Steve's voice is even, not a hint of embarrassment as he says it.

The bigger man's mouth opens and closes several times before he stammers, "I-I-I wouldn't."

"Yeah but he doesn't know that," Steve plays along. "Maybe he thinks that giving me to you will be an entirely fresh hell for me. You wear like a thirteen shoe after all." Steve gives Jack a shit-eating grin. "Plus he'll think that it will keep you happy, get you to stick to the mission."

"You're too fucking smart - and reckless - for your own good."

"No, I'm too fucking smart to spend the rest of my life chained up, reading the same twenty books over and over again while I fix holes in douchebags' uniforms and get came in." The blonde finishes his soup.

Jack sits in silence, just watching the younger man. "Okay, Stevie, okay," he finally says. "When do we start?"
Movin' on up

Chapter Summary

Steve understands his attraction to Buck a little better.

***warning, direct discussion of rape and abuse***

It only takes two weeks of Steve gradually resisting less and less for Brock to become irritated. He starts to do increasingly depraved things and beats the younger man even more violently, trying to get a rise out of him. One day the ex operative is sitting side-by-side with Jack, having breakfast, near the remnants of last night's fire. They've just finished their dozenth heated conversation about the mission, the scarred man again not so subtly questioning if Brock still has a bead on their goal. He knows exactly how to push the issue without coming off as disrespectful, an important skill when dealing with a narcissist.

The pair are finally eating in somewhat comfortable silence when Steve comes out of Brock's truck with the suitcase, putting it on the ground - he regularly sits on it outside. The lead is around his tiny waist already and after a wobbly stretch he plants himself cross-legged on the case and starts reading. His battered face looks like an impressionist painting it's so many different colors and he's moving like he's been thrown from a horse. The leader stops chewing and starts staring daggers at the blonde.

"Trouble in paradise?" Jack jokes.

He had realized early on that he could get a lot farther helping Steve if his associate didn't overtly know that he disapproved of what was happening. During the initial few months when they were all living together, he had played along to some degree as if it was no big deal, as if he was just annoyed with the intrusion of this snot-nosed kid (and Brock wanting the truck to himself so much) rather than dealing with any sort of moral issue. The few times when he'd directly asked (or insulted) Brock about it, he'd been met with harsh blowback and he only hurt Steve more.

Jack learned to frame his attempts to help the blonde as ultimately helping Brock - let me make sure your toy doesn't starve/bleed to death/hurt himself so you're not salty about your plaything being gone once you calm down. It's hard for the blonde to give the big man any credit for this - if roles were reversed, he'd cut Brock's throat in his sleep before he'd let him put a hand on someone else that way, consequences to them both be damned. It's years before he can admit to himself that Jack's way had kept Steve alive and maybe the bullheaded voice that said "better to have both died then" was wrong.

Brock glares at Jack, then his face softens a bit, twists into a smile that can only be described as menacing. "He's been...less fiery than usual. I'll have to give him some more encouragement. Nothing I can't handle."

"I seem to remember him getting pretty worked up when you threw him in to sleep with the dregs. He busted a lot of faces. Maybe he needs a little strange to get the adrenaline going." Jack smirks, chokes down his disgust.
"And you wouldn't have anyone in mind, would you, Jack?" Brock gives a knowing look to his lieutenant.

The taller man laughs. "Caught!" He leans in conspiratorially. "You've probably guessed I've always wanted to know what that ass was like. I could definitely help set him straight for you."

"Like I want your sloppy seconds." Brock makes a fake grimace.

"Well fuck," the taller man smirks, "I'd take yours. If you decide you're bored with him, pitch him my way." Jack openly laughs, claps the other man on the shoulder.

"Please, I've ruined that one for other men." Brock pops a pear slice into his mouth.

"For most probably, but I wear a size thirteen shoe," the bigger man smirks, Steve's words coming out of his mouth. It gets a genuine laugh out of Brock.

Over the next few weeks, Steve goes from offering moderate resistance to basically playing possum. The coup de grace to their "arrangement" comes after Brock desperately tries to force himself on the pliant Steve but can't get hard. The bigger man grabs him by the throat in frustration, hauls him up on his knees, twists him around to pin him to the wall. He's furious, eyes bulging out, red-faced.

The blonde had always refused to fellate him, repeatedly telling him that he would bite his cock off - regardless of what was done to him - if he tried to put it in his mouth. But this time Steve just looks up at Brock without a hint of defiance and takes a hold of his soft prick, leans forward with his mouth open. The bigger man slams his hand against the blonde's forehead, bashing Steve's skull into the wall of the cargo box.

Minutes later, Brock dumps the blonde's naked, battered body on the cold ground outside Jack's door. He pounds his meaty fist on the metal.

"Special delivery," the sadist grins when Jack cautiously opens his door.

"This a loaner or a gift?" the bigger man makes a show of nudging Steve with his huge boot.

"I know we've been at odds a bit lately, but the mission will be successful. This is to show you that your faith in me as your friend is not misplaced. He's all yours."

The two men shake hands, both smiling. "Consider me convinced, old pal," Jack responds.

Steve is severely disoriented, the back of his bleeding head leaving a trail on the step up and the floor as Jack makes a show of dragging him roughly up into the back of his truck.

"Sorry, sorry," he soothes a few moments after the door is sealed and Steve is sat up against the metal side of the truck body. He gently rubs the red spot where he'd grabbed the blonde's forearm, then tosses a blanket over the smaller man's lap. After checking the peep holes all around the vehicle, Jack steps out and comes back with the suitcase. Brock must have chucked it out of his truck.

The blonde's mind is fuzzy and he grays in and out. He's only vaguely aware of the bigger man bandaging his head, washing him up (he can smell actual soap), then putting some sort of cream on the open wounds on his back and face. Jack keeps him awake til he's responding somewhat
normally and can drink water on his own, fearful of letting him drift off with a possible concussion. When the big man finally lets him lay down again, he has his first full night of rest in over twenty months.

Steve goes through a long sleep-eat-bathroom-sleep-eat-sleep-some-more-then-repeat phase. Maybe it's finally having a bedroll and blankets, maybe it's feeling relatively safe for the first time in a long time, but it's like almost two years worth of exhaustion and hunger hits him all at once. When he's consistently awake normal hours, but still eating everything in sight though, he and Jack fall into an easy routine. The bigger man makes their meals, checks the blonde's injuries, comments on how nice they are or are not healing (doctoring them up in the latter case), then asks about his discomfort level.

The smaller man sometimes, but not often, accepts half a pain pill to deal with his three cracked ribs. Everything still hurt, but that was arguably the worst of it. He doesn't like how it makes him feel during the day, dopy and slow, but even more can't stand the thought of becoming like his pillhead father. They're fine at night though, when he can just drift off after. Even the angry, paranoid voice doesn't think Jack will try anything so soon. It tells him Jack will attempt to win him over and then, when that doesn't work, he'll force him. It gives Steve two months, tops. As soon as he can stand not to, he refuses the pills all together.

Unlike the leader, the scarred man takes the blonde wherever he goes once he's well enough. They ride together in the cab if it's a travel day (no one else is allowed in Jack's truck, not even a driver, even though he's more than important enough to have one), or loot together when the caravan stops. No one comments on the lack of the wire tether because he never leaves Jack's eye-line - doing that would invite Brock or one of the others to mess with him. If there's a battle, Steve is sent to the cargo trailer. He's in no position to argue - he's about twenty pounds under his scant normal weight, limping a bit and still gets tired easily.

At least twice when they're caught unawares during scavenging he jumps on some bigger guy's back to slow him down while Jack finishes him off. Brock wouldn't take kindly to him having any kind of a weapon, even as weak as he is and even if it was non-projectile. Neither of the ex operatives have any idea Steve could pick most of the locks on the explosives' storage containers if he wanted. Jack religiously inventories the stuff - he'd know if some went missing - and the blonde isn't ready yet to say fuck it and blow the whole thing with himself inside. Plus he doesn't know how to use the detonators.

The two months his inner monologue gave him come and go without incident. The scarred man teaches Steve about his work after he notices the blonde watching him - positioning C4 and setting up the equipment to blow it - with rapt interest. He's always been impressed with the smaller man's mind, commenting on how quickly he learns and how clever he is, and that admiration seems to only increase the more time they spend together. Jack asks one day if Steve thinks the large lump of explosive he's holding will be enough to take down a heavy steal door with multiple locks the others had been battering at. The smaller man answers, without hesitation, that he just needs a little to blow the sheathed hinges off - no one that had apprenticed with him in the service or ops had gotten that question right the first time. He teaches Steve how to set the detonator as his reward.

Jack finds out the blonde can drive his manual transmission truck (and lets him sometimes, much to Brock's chagrin) and maintenance its diesel engine. The smaller man can also fix a lot of other things, knows tools and how to make certain parts work for things they weren't intended for. What a waste, Jack commented, having him imprisoned all those years while thing after thing fell into disrepair. They had legions of killers, but virtually no one with other practical skills. Like Buck, Jack knew about destruction, but very little about creation.
It's not lost on the leader how increasingly comfortable Jack and Steve are with each other. Brock glowers at them as they chat amiably and share meals sat a bit apart from the other men around the fires they so often light. The blonde notices and makes a big show of touching the scarred man more, leaning against him or putting his hand on the bigger man's leg, smiling and laughing often, even kissing his cheek once. The tall man is a bit upset when he tries to mirror the affection in private and the blonde gets standoffish.

"So you're just doing it to piss him off?" Jack sounds impressed and disappointed all at once.

"Yes. No. It's just... scary when we're alone," Steve explained, looking into his lap. And it's true. He's found despite Jack's many sins, and the warning voice, he doesn't mind them touching when he's sure it won't lead to anything he doesn't want. Even Brock had never taken him in front of the others and he certainly knew the bigger man - who barely liked to leave the truck shirtless he was so shy about his body - wasn't going to.

"Okay, Stevie. I get it, just... You don't have to be scared of me. Don't think because you let me put my hand on your shoulder, or wherever, that I'm going to take that as an invitation to anything else. What I said before was true. We don't ever have to do anything you don't want."

Liar, the seething internal voice replies. The blonde just nods. He wants the voice to shut up. He wants to believe Jack. He wants to think about something, anything, that isn't revenge, especially now that he knows how to use the detonators.

Jack plays along with Steve's game, laughing loudly at the smaller man's whispered jokes, his arm slung around the narrow shoulders when they're with the other warriors. Brock slowly behaves more and more erratically as it eats at him. He knows he's been played, but under the unspoken rules of their crew he can't demand the gift he's given back without being seen as someone who breaks his word or (worse) is weak over a piece of ass.

The scarred man doesn't openly sew seeds of discontent against the leader, but he does subtly add water when he comes across any that are already planted. He and Steve hope, in private, Brock's other increasingly dissatisfied high command will rebel against him. The leader is picking fights constantly, acting more paranoid and violent than ever, even knifing a low-level follower when they don't attend demands to his satisfaction. None of the poor souls he picks off the road last more than a day, which fills Steve with intense guilt. It wasn't like he stopped abducting and forcing other people when he held Steve captive, but it was fewer at least.

Steve starts to be cautiously physical when he's alone with Jack, letting their legs touch when they sit near each other or fixing the bigger man's hair, even occasionally slipping under the blankets to press against his back when it's cold or he's had a nightmare. Jack had woken him from one once and the blonde grabbed the knife from its holster on the bigger man's belt, put it to the scarred neck for his trouble. It took long minutes to talk the blonde down, his shaking hand moving the blade around just enough to draw blood. Steve had apologized and then went blank, inside himself, shutting out the flood of emotions. When he woke the next day, a fold-up style pocket knife was on the floor next to his bedroll. It's not lost on the smaller man it's also referred to as a jackknife.

"If that makes you feel better, keep it. Don't use it unless you have to though."

It's also not lost on the blonde, years later, how much his early time with Buck mirrored this period with Jack - minus the attempted throat slitting - or the many similarities between the men. Both were tall with dark hair and light eyes, had extensive military training and a bit of a strong, silent type thing going on. The brunettes obviously felt unworthy of the smaller man's attention, even though they craved it, just as on some level he felt undeserving of their devotion. Like Buck, Jack gave zero shits about the comments others made about the nature of their relationship.
Maybe that's why Steve had gotten comfortable with the Winter Soldier so quickly. Maybe that's also why he'd looked for any excuse to not admit his feelings. Maybe that's why he literally ran away and is sitting in the blazing sun on a dusty hillside next to a dump thinking about things he's blocked out for years instead of being in his own clean, comfortable bed comforting his exhausted boyfriend.
Chapter Summary

Jack gets more than he bargained for with Steve.

One evening Steve and Jack are making a display of flirting in front of a blatantly staring Brock when the scarred man gets carried away and kisses Steve's neck several times. It's soft and dry - more affectionate than erotic - but still sends a little thrill though the blonde, the kind he hadn't experienced in years. That night, or more precisely early the next morning, his mind reproduces the feel of Jack's lips and big, warm hands on him while he sleeps. He smiles groggily at the tall man when he wakes him for breakfast in the middle of it. Normally he'd let Steve sleep as long as he wanted but the caravan is on the move early today.

The blonde yawns, propping up one elbow as the bigger man sets an open can of pineapple next to his bedroll.

"I was dreaming about you," the smaller man says.

Jack grins as he stands, stretches his big arms up to hold onto one of the pipes in the ceiling, showing a tiny sliver of his flat stomach and the trail of hair there. "Yeah? Was I skiing?"

"It wasn't a cold dream. It was a hot dream." Steve's tone, and the warmth in his blue eyes, makes the bigger man still for a moment.

A look of fond irritation spreads over Jack's face as he puts his hands at his sides. "What have I told you about that? You don't need to lie to me."

The scarred man's voice isn't angry, just matter of fact. He's told the blonde repeatedly he doesn't need to flirt with him (outside of what they do to piss off Brock) or insinuate they'll have a sexual relationship for Jack to keep protecting him. He has no plans to remove Steve from his truck, regardless of whether their situation remains only friendship.

"Would I lie?" The blonde bats his massive eyelashes.


Steve impulsively pushes the blankets down to his thighs, reveals his tented sweatpants. The bigger man freezes, open mouthed. Steve gives him a smug I-told-you-so look, eyebrows popping up and back down suggestively.

"Do you... want some help with that?" Jack asks, cautiously optimistic, pink spreading across his high cheekbones.

Steve, still grinning, pulls the covers back up. "Not today," he says pleasantly enough.

"Okay, Stevie." After a pause during which Steve can see the big man carefully packing his libido away, Jack adds, "You are lying to me though," as the blonde sits up.

"About what?" Steve asks innocently, putting a dainty bite of fruit in his mouth.
"That's a very heavy suitcase," Jack replies, as if it's an answer, dropping down to squat on the floor.

"Books are weights for the mind." The blonde smiles at him beatifically.

"Little smart ass. So is what's in there for Brock?" The big man fixes him with a look.

"He's not much of a reader." The smaller man shrugs, picking up a big pineapple chunk burrowed deep in the can with his long, clever fingers.

"Not the novels. The IED." Jack sits down right in front of him, the small metal cylinder the only barrier between them.

"Now, how would a sweet faced little thing like me know what that is?" Steve reaches to Jack, slides the fruit in his mouth, staring the other man down with a flirty look as the blonde's finger tips graze his lips. This was a maneuver he'd end up using again.

"Well played," the bigger man responds, around the huge chunk. "But I know all your tricks."

Jack chews intensely, their eyes locked in the millionth small battle of wills they've fought with each other over the last few years.

"The improvised explosive device, just missing the explosive bit. Which I can't help but notice you've conveniently maneuvered yourself into a truck filled with." Jack doesn't sound mad. Maybe even a bit impressed. But there's a hint of something there, an undercurrent of that you'll get us both killed tone the blonde has heard many times before.

"Mmmm...still not ringing a bell." Steve has the art of chewing sarcastically down pat - pushing the food in slow exaggerated arcs inside his cheeks, first to one side and then the other, making as much noise as possible.

Jack's voice goes low, finally done with their game. "The goddamn shrapnel bomb you built, Stevie."

"Oh. Oh that." The blonde chuckles softly. "There was this guy I used to know, Taj. He told me this story... about a suitcase bomb. He said that's what happens when the military fucks with the little guy. They make anything they can into a weapon."

He stands up, walks to the shelf the suitcase is lashed to, and reverently opens the two foot by three foot monument to his ingenuity, perseverance and need for revenge. A dish best served cold, his narrow ass.

"I'm a little guy. And this is my weapon."

"And how did you plan to use this weapon, if you could arm it?" Jack twists on the floor to watch him.

"You said it yourself, it's not enough to just kill Brock. His men would come after us, the devoted ones at least."

"There's less and less of them everyday, though." The big man moves to join him, standing beside him rather than behind, which he knows the blonde doesn't like. "If we wait...."

"How many more people does he rape and murder while we wait? How many more people do they all while we wait?" Steve sets his hands on the books, a silent prayer to the god of the boom - as
Jack likes to call it - to bless him.

"They're not all like him. Some of them hate him just as much as...." Jack trails off.

"As much as me?" Steve's head whips to look up at the bigger man. He laughs bitterly. "I highly doubt that."

"Still. I served with a lot of these people. Things would change if they were in charge. If we were in charge. We could right this ship if a few people just went overboard."


And it started as such a nice morning.

"You know I don't think of you like that." Jack's eyebrows furrow as he reaches for Steve, then aborts the gesture. "I want him dead too. I thought about it now and again, before you were even in the picture, when I started to see what he really is now that there are no rules, no one for him to answer to. And I should have, years and years ago, before he was the personal Jesus of an entire congregation of savages. By the time he snatched you, I was thinking about it a half dozen times a day, then it was thirty, a hundred. Now the thought is always there, no matter what."

Steve turns towards him abruptly, pokes one of his long, spindly fingers into the center of the scarred man's chest. "But you didn't kill him did you?! You let him fuck me over and over for nearly two years while you hid in here!!"

"Things were different two years ago, with the other lieutenants. They still had blind loyalty. His guards watched everything we both did, every move we made and they still do. I would have been dead five minutes after he was and you would have been chained to some other asshole or a corpse right beside me!" Jack lightly grabs Steve's biceps when he turns to walk away. "And the world is still what the world is now, regardless of him! We need to be practical to survive. The caravan is the best way to do that. People don't last on their own, not even someone as dangerous as me or as smart as you."

"I was on the road alone a long time before you fucks! I can handle myself!" And didn't this argument with Jack flood his mind, years later, having almost the same one with Buck by the run trucks.

"It was only a matter of time before some other piece of shit would have done the same thing to you! Only someone with no truck to keep you in or extra food probably would have killed you a lot faster. And possibly fucking ate part of you first."

"I'D RATHER BE DEAD!" Steve screams up at him, wrenching his arms from the loose grip. "I would have rather died out there, quick, than have to die slow trapped here with him!"

"Then why aren't you dead? Why aren't we all?" He grips the blonde's wrists carefully and the smaller man only offers half-hearted resistance. "I know you could find a way into one of these crates. It's scary how fucking clever you are. And you know how to use the detonators now, I stupidly made sure of that. So why haven't you rigged up your suitcase and taken it to the fire when they're all there? You were so fucking smart, bringing the case around all the time to sit on. The guards search the rest of us, but they just let you haul that stupid thing right up and sit down, every council meeting. Pop it open, what's inside? A bunch of fucking books. Nothing to see here. So why didn't you do it?"
"Fuck you!" Steve screams in his face. Jack doesn't release him, only pulls him closer.

"Better yet, why not blow the whole truck? A few well-placed charges while I'm asleep or out taking a shit and blammo! So why aren't we all vaporized already? Why isn't the whole camp a smoking crater?" Jack hunches over him, inches from his face that's slowly caving in on itself. As the big man rants, the blonde's lips start to quiver, jaw working, cheek twitching; his eyebrows draw up and towards the center of his forehead, eyes starting to glisten. Steve can see himself reflected in the bigger man's pupils as Jack's expression softens, as he reaches up to lightly ghost the knuckles of his curled fingers over Steve's cheek. "Why, Stevie?"

"Unless you were in on the plan....there was no way to be sure..." the blonde practically whispers before dropping into silence, averting his eyes.

"That you'd succeed?"

"That you wouldn't get hurt," the smaller man's voice cracks as he looks up at Jack.

Jack leans forward, presses his forehead to Steve's. "Well I'm in on it now. We'll give it a month, and if the others haven't dealt with him...We'll do it. We'll blow the son of a bitch up and the rest of them too."

Two weeks later Brock thwarts an assassination attempt by several of his top people, then he cleans house. Virtually everyone who had spoken against him in any capacity, or were close with those who had, is summarily executed. Jack is in no position to argue or help them - it all happens very quickly and any question of his loyalty would have him on his knees next to them. Half of the other lieutenants are dead before he even knows what's happening, Brock ordering him to go back in his truck when he comes out. The leader promotes people from the ranks of the dregs, even cannibals (one step away from reavers), to fill the many holes in his war council.

The blonde and the scarred man ready the suitcase immediately, start going over best and worst case scenarios for its deployment. They can't just rig the truck and run with the insane amount of security Brock now has stationed throughout the high and low camps - they'd be caught and then killed in the blast or murdered outright.

A few days later they reach the place. Brock was intensely secretive about it - he'd only told Jack, not long after the collapse, that it contained high-tech weapons, ones they could use to rule half the continent if they wanted. The tall man doesn't need to take down the massive blast doors - they're unlocked when they make their way into the hidden shaft that goes to the underground lobby they face. The leader goes inside with his best twenty tactical soldiers - his screams of rage punctuate the air not long after.

"Someone fucking beat us here!" he hisses at Jack, reemerging. The big man puts himself more firmly between the furious Brock and Steve. "These are all inactive and one's missing!"

One of the ex ops guys comes out. "Sir, we've found someone."

An hour later Steve is watching a shriveled, ancient man even shorter than him drink tomato soup. Apparently he'd worked at the base years ago and he knew there was another. The missing weapon had been taken there for upgrades but never recovered from storage because of the increasing pre-collapse turmoil. Brock is ecstatic. The man is settled into his own truck in the second camp with a bevy of armed guards and equipment from the base.

"I don't like this," Jack whispers to him that night as they share a bedroll. They've done that every day since the tall man committed to killing Brock. Steve likes to pretend that he's doing him a
favor, that it's the least he can do given the circumstances, but he has certainly slipped beneath the big man's covers on his own plenty of times before. "There's something off about the guy. He looked like he was two hundred years old if he was a day. And what was all that shit they brought with him? I think we need to move up our timeline. I don't even want to know what's at that other base."

Their first attempt doesn't go as planned. Steve brings the big case to the fire like always, opening it calmly and taking out one of the books that is still whole. He closes it back up, slowly sits down on it next to Jack. He's already set the detonator and they're both counting silently the way that the bigger man had taught him to do to ensure that his timing was perfect. The plan is that Steve will say something about needing to go to the bathroom at a certain point, and he and Jack (ever his keeper) will wander off long enough for it to do its job.

Someone comes from the lower camp with news, whispered in Brock's ear quiet enough that they cannot overhear; he looks elated and then leaves. The shape of the man's teeth as he gave that terrifying smile, and the glimmer in his eye that accompanied it, scared Steve a thousand times more than Buck's appearance at its most monstrous ever could. At least part of the Winter Soldier was still human.

The second attempt cuts it very close. When Steve gets up to go to the woods, Brock grabs his skinny wrist as he walks by. Jack freezes a few feet away as the leader pulls the small man a little closer.

"You're getting kind of fat. And you've got that shit all over your face," he motions to Steve's now fairly thick beard. "Playing at being a man are we?"

Every line in Jack's body says that he wants to leap at Brock, but Steve gives him a look that stills him. The detonator is counting. There's no time for shenanigans.

"Why don't you just pull your little cock out here and piss? Show them all you're not a girl after all." He shoves the blonde lightly back. Some of the crew leaders taken from the dregs are chuckling, but most of the older ex-ops people just look terrified or uncomfortable.

"Sure, whatever you say." Steve unzips, pisses into the fire, unceremoniously shakes it off and puts it back in his pants. Brock just laughs as he stands and starts to undo his own fly.

"Brock," Jack says, his tone a warning.

"Mind your own fucking business, Jack. The old man can just punch some buttons and get me into the other place. You've become a whole lot less useful." Brock starts to piss on the ground a few feet from Steve's boot, slowly getting closer and closer as the blonde watches. Finally when it's only a fraction of an inch away, Brock turns and finishes going on a burning log, laughing. He zips up, turns to Steve.

"I wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire," he practically spits into the blonde's face. "Get this fucking thing away from me!" He gestures dismissively to the tall man.

"Let's go, Stevie," Jack's hand is firm on his shoulder, the suitcase under the other man's arm. There's no time to make it to the woods - they disarm it in the truck with seconds to spare.

They pick a better spot next time, one where they can easily make a beeline to the trees without the leader in the way. Steve stands, like before, counting inside his head as the time on the detonator silently winds down and Jack moves to follow.
"Come'ere," Brock beckons to the blonde.

"Just leave him alone, man," Jack says, standing.

Brock nods his head to some of the guards, always lingering nearby. Two of them grab Jack by the arms while the other pair drag Steve over to the leader. Brock pulls the blonde down onto his lap with their help, wraps his muscular arm around the small man in such a way that it pins his arms to his body.

"This is just like our first date," Brock coos. "You were such a pretty little thing then." He grabs Steve's soft cock roughly through his pants. "You'd never even been jerked off."

"Don't you fucking touch him!" Jack yells.

Brock's arm tightens, his other hand squeezing harder between Steve's legs. "So I've made a decision, and it's really weighing heavy on my heart. See, I'm a man of my word and I gave you to Jack. But Jack didn't get you fair and square, did he? You two fucks tricked me. I don't like to play the fool, not for anybody, not even you sweetie pie. Not even for my oldest friend."

He nods at the others again. With the help of a third guard they force Jack on his knees, the one in back pulling a pistol to put it to his head.

"Say goodbye to, Jack, sweetie pie. Say goodbye real nice."

Jack suddenly jerks violently to one side, right before the weapon goes off, as he slams one of his big elbows into the gut of the guy behind him. He grabs the guard's neck as they double over, snaps it and whips the body forward into one of the others. No one is allowed weapons at war council meetings save the guards, so the others sit and watch at first. He grabs the gun from the dead man, fires repeatedly into the other guards. One of the cannibal lieutenants flies at him and Jack shoots him twice. When he whirls to aim at Brock, the leader is already laughing. The gun is empty. Micro-managing bastard even knew how many bullets were in his lackey's weapon.
The tall man screams and runs at Brock, another guard shooting him in the bicep as he dives onto his former friend, knocking Steve sprawling into the scrub grass. A violent hand-to-hand scuffle ensues on the ground. Jack is bigger and well-trained, but killing people with his hands has been Brock's bread and butter for most of his life. As the tall man slams his big fist into Brock's neck, the leader pulls a hidden knife and shanks the bigger man between the ribs. Jack slugs him squarely, grasps at the deeply buried blade. Steve gets up, moves to jump on Brock, but Jack's words stop him.

"Tic tock."

Jack throws himself on Brock in a bear hug. The leader grabs the knife handle and wiggles it but Jack doesn't let go, not even when he coughs out blood.

"Twenty-five!" the scarred man manages to Steve over Brock's shoulder. "Twenty-four!" The remaining guards and several council members pile on him.

The blonde turns on his heel and runs as fast and hard as he ever has. He can hear Jack counting for what feels like a long time and then nothing but the sound in his own head.

15
14
13

He hears the crack-whiz of someone firing at him, the yells of those giving chase.

9
8
7

He scans from side to side, searching for the widest, sturdiest tree.

4
3
2

Steve flattens himself to the back of a massive oak as the explosion shakes the ground. Thousands of small objects pelt the trees like hail.
**What goes up must come down.**

Chapter Summary

Steve's time at Brock's camp comes to an end.

***Non-graphic depiction of sexual assault, semi-graphic depictions of injury and violence***

Turning the corner into less dark shit shortly, I promise.

It feels like a small eternity before Steve's ears stop ringing and his body is under control enough that he can move. There's something warm on his left arm. He reaches up and touches it gingerly, pulling it back red with blood. Apparently he had not gotten behind the tree completely quite quick enough. Investigation of the slash in his jacket shows the wound beneath is wide but shallow.

The blonde breathes hard and fast. He desperately does not want to come out from behind the oak, does not want to see what he fears will be waiting for him. Ironic that, to finally have achieved the thing that he daydreamed about for months and yet be unable to enjoy the results, to kill the person that he hates most at the expense of the only one living that he cares about. Slowly, he pulls himself from the bark and moves back through the woods towards the encampment.

Every tree, including the west facing side of the one he had been behind, had dozens of shards of glass, nails, screws and bits of metal in it. There are chunks of ceramic plates, bits of barbed wire, even hard pieces of plastic worn sharp by their time rolling around with rocks in the dirt before he finds them. The first body is about thirty feet from the trees, the entire bottom of a smashed glass bottle impaled in their cervical vertebrae, along with other smaller objects sticking out of the entire back of their body. It's one of the guards - he takes the handgun they dropped.

Some of the remaining lieutenants are still moving or making noise. He sees one of the cannibals that had given him chase crawling slowly across the scrub and shoots them in the head. One by one, he does the same to everyone he comes across that he is not positive is dead. Sometimes, in his nightmares, he still hears their sounds and feels the vibration up his arm as the weapon goes off. This was not what he had wanted, for these strangers to suffer, especially the ones that Jack had vouched for previously. None of them were innocent though; now neither was he.

Finally he reaches the tall man - he's face down on the ground and Steve's human pincushion analogy comes back to him with a sickening force. A few parts of Jack have no shrapnel. He was probably blocked by the men that he was struggling with, all of whom are shredded to pieces on the ground around him, some of them with their limbs draped over the big man. There are many things impaled in his back, in his skull, and when Steve turns him on his side and pushes up his bloody sweatshirt he can see nearly a dozen small holes where objects passed completely through, along with the gaping, almond shaped wound where Brock had stabbed him.

Judging from his location, and guessing about how far the blast itself may have pushed him, it looks like he dragged the entire pile of them closer to the bomb in his struggles before it went off. It's terrible to see him like that, worse still when Steve realizes he is alive. The blonde goes blank,
numb, as the big man struggles to breath, blood pouring out of his mouth, runners of it coming from his nose and ears, oozing from the holes in his chest and abdomen. If the smaller man were the most accomplished surgeon in the world, he could not save him.

He sits down on the blood soaked earth and takes Jack's hand because he doesn't know what else to do. It's already going cold. The gun is empty - he can't even end his suffering quickly, not that he has any idea if he could pull the trigger. Steve leans down and softly kisses Jack on the neck several times.

"That's what you were doing to me, in my dreams," he whispers in the brunette's ear.

"S-Stevie," the big man manages, his hand squeezing the blonde's for the briefest second and then going slack. Steve sits up, watches as his hazel eyes seem to power down like old fashioned headlights dimming once the switch is flipped.

Steve screams as his pain and rage and utter helplessness to do anything boil over. It's the most primal sound he had ever made, probably would ever make, in his life. He sits there for long moments, his breath making little clouds in the cold night air as he pants, mind scrambled. Jack's lighter - an ancient Zippo he'd watched him fill many times - lays on the ground glinting at him; he palms it and slips it in his coat pocket without thought. Slowly his internal voice starts to form sentences. One sticks out above the rest.

*Where the fuck is Brock?*

No more has he said the words inside his head then he is struck from behind by a piece of firewood. Lightning bolts of pain spread up and down his spine and for a long minute he's too stunned to do anything but sprawl face down on Jack's bloody corpse. A big, familiar hand grabs him by the back of the hair, bending his neck to look up; a fist smashes quick into his eye, then cheek, then mouth before he's dragged, flailing, towards Brock's truck.

The bigger man hoists him up and pins him against the side of the metal box trailer with a hand on the back of his neck. When Steve moves to resist, to reach behind himself, Brock pulls him slightly back and then slams his head into the side of the truck again and again. Everything is spinning and gray by the time he's stilled, a high-pitched, staticy noise inside his brain blotting everything out. Warm blood trickles down his face and from his split lip. He's vaguely aware of the bigger man yanking down his pants, of *the thing* being done to him that's been done so many times, the thing that he truly believed - this morning - would never happen to him ever again.

That very specific pain brings him back to himself enough to reach for Brock again, his fingers groping over debris embedded in the bigger man's shoulder and neck. He feels a piece of glass there, grips it with his long, spindly fingers and yanks it sideways towards Brock's windpipe in a quick gesture as he applies pressure. Hot blood sprays onto his hand and suddenly he's not being touched anymore. Steve turns to watch the thing, the monster that would haunt his nightmares until the day that he died, clutching at its throat with wide eyes as red pours between its fingers. It - he - looks very silly. And very afraid.

The blonde pulls his pants up, opens the back of Brock's truck, takes one of the gas cans lashed there. He unscrews the top. Brock is half on the ground now, probably woozy from the sudden drop in blood pressure. The bigger man clutches at his neck, but there's already a dark stain soaking down his mutilated shirt all the way to the waistband of his still-undone pants. Steve only needs to get about five feet away to splash him with the contents of the container. He pulls out Jack's lighter, flicks it down his leg like the scarred man had taught him, holds it up so he can see the flame reflected in Brock's eyes.
"I wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire," Steve says, a crazy smile on his battered face.

He tosses the Zippo at Brock and the thing, the monster - now a terrified, wet mess on his knees in the dirt - goes up like a torch. After what feels like hours of watching him flail and blacken, Steve's own personal devil collapses and stops moving. The blonde watches him burn with relish. Something like Jack's voice and the bullheaded part of him talk in the back of his mind almost in unison, reminding him that this is only stage one of the plan, that those in the low camp will have heard the explosion and are headed here.

After transferring the bags that they had prepared from Jack's truck to Brock's, along with the big man's bedroll (he leaves his own) the blonde sets the wires and detonators just like the tall man showed him. Then he gets out and, after a brief last look, seals up Jack's truck. No one can get in without the code, not unless they've got a cutting torch or a very heavy duty angle grinder and neither would get through in time.

He's not digging on Brock's smoking body to find his keys, and they may even be on one of the lackeys, so he just hot wires the (former) leader's truck. Steve's countdown is flawless. Right on time a massive explosion, punctuated by multiple smaller booms, shakes the ground beneath him as he drives, now over a mile away. In the rearview mirror, he sees the giant fireball shoot towards the sky.

"Goodbye, Jack," he says to it, watching the flame dissipate into the star-punctuated darkness above like it was his soul being released from the Earth. Maybe it was. Maybe the god of the boom had a nice place for people who spent their life blowing shit up, like a pyromaniac version of Valhalla. Steve says a silent prayer to whatever is listening that his friend makes it there.

It's only about four hours later as he's rummaging through a building for food, as Brock had greatly reduced their rations in the weeks leading up to his overdue demise, that he encounters Nick and the others. Apparently they had discovered that the small army was headed in the direction of their community and decided to be proactive, coming after them in the night rather than waiting for them to show up at their doorstep. They had already searched the blast site, drawn by the explosion, and found it littered with body parts and burnt corpses. Any remaining followers who were not caught in the explosion of Jack's truck must have scattered. Most of the caravan trucks were on fire, or damaged with debris, but there were a few sets of tire tracks leading away.

He told them everything, well...almost everything. Steve can't bring himself to talk about Jack, and hasn't since. It felt a little dishonest, taking credit for the whole thing. He did have the original idea, built the bomb, and Jack had let him put in the explosives and set the detonator. Ultimately Brock fell at his hand, even though the cost had been enormous. Certainly talking about the scarred man wouldn't bring him back, so he just left those parts out, along with the specifics of what Brock had done to him (not that Clint hadn't guessed).

It wasn't a lie. It just wasn't the whole truth.

He stays at the yard for days after running from Claptrap, from Buck, going over everything that happened all those years ago in graphic detail again and again for the first time since that day. The mindless labor of hauling trash helps free his thoughts up to shamelessly dwell on every minute detail. Greta and a group of well-armed trashers arrived to replace the current rotation on the sixth day that he was there. Those assigned to trash duty all camp inside the fenced scrap yard at night rather than some going home daily, look outs on the dump hill, now that they know the surrounding area could be much more dangerous than initially thought. She tries in vain to get him to go home.

"He's in a bad way," the older woman says, not bothering to define who she's talking about.
"Some rest, some food, a few dead chickens. He'll be fine."

The blonde doesn't even look up from where he is meticulously sorting the giant boxes of washers, cogs, bolts and similar objects into smaller containers. He's meant for a long time to separate them, even bring some coffee cans back of stuff he knows he'll need the most often. Besides, anything that isn't really usable - a fractured gear, a screw with the tip sheared off - can go in his pocket for his slingshot.

"I don't mean his body, you fucking idiot," she says with a lot less bite than her words themselves would seem to supply. It's one of the few times he sees her look genuinely upset. Her expression is not without effect on him, his brows furrowing slightly as he frowns and looks back to his work.

Greta sits down next to him, quietly helps him sort. She even pulls a retractable tape measure out when she realizes that he's separating some of the things by size.

"I don't need help," he says curtly.

The older woman sighs. "Everyone does sometimes. Even... whatever Buck is. Even you, stubborn as a goddamn mule though you are."

Steve says nothing.

"He's sorry. That he asked you to stay home," she says almost casually, tossing a washer in a resealable plastic box that once held spinach.

"It's not about that," he snaps.

"You're telling me you've never kept anything to yourself, from your friends, from a lover? I sure as hell have and still do."

"Everyone knows you and Samir fuck sometimes and then you and Coulson fuck other days," he says, looking back to his boxes.

She laughs. "Oh honey, that's not much of a secret. If phones still worked, I'd have a little black book. Live by the porksword, die by the porksword."

Steve suppresses a chuckle by glowing even more intensely.

"So he wasn't completely honest with you," Greta continues. "Have you been completely honest with him? I mean, really? Told him every person you ever diddled, every mistake you made, every hole in the ground you dragged yourself out of after a good bender?"

"Hole in the ground," Steve half-whispers. His head shoots up. "I know where they are. The others like Buck."
It takes all of them, even Nick, to rein Buck in when he tries to follow Steve out of the shanty. They can all see the immense effort it takes him to stand before he's gotten inches off the bed. First Luis wraps his arms and legs around him, but he just stands up with him attached, nearly bumping the younger man's head on a plant hook in the ceiling.

"Winter, stop! You need to rest."

The big man is wobbly, weaving a bit from side to side, making the smaller man nauseous quickly.

"Buck, please sit down," Win adds in Cantonese, grabbing his left arm.

"Don't be a shithead," Greta chastises, clinging to his right. "The kid needs some alone time. And you need bed, young man."

Clint puts his muscly arms around the Soldier's waist. They hang on him like dead weight but may as well be a jacket for all it slows him. Buck just keeps going, all of them attached.

"If you keep moving you might hurt us!" The archer knows exactly what to say, remembering the look of incredible guilt on the Soldier's face when he had shown up at Clint and Nat's house to apologize after the incident in the bar. "I mean, you were very scary earlier. Maybe you \textit{wanna} hurt us."

Buck freezes. "No! I do not wish to harm you. I...was not myself, before. I am sorry if I caused you distress."

"I'll go find him and bring him back once he's cooled off, if you promise to lay back down." Nat gives him her best smile.

"You are not a very honest person," he responds matter-of-factly, all of them still holding onto him. She snorts out a geeky laugh. "That makes two of us. Secret boyfriend. Secret gun box..."

"It is \textbf{not} a secret Steve is my boyfriend," he says, cross.

"You have a \textit{boyfriend}?" Luis, still on the Soldier like a backpack, twists around to look at Buck and the bigger man turns his face so they make eye contact.

"Sorry, pal. He's moved on," Clint says with faux sympathy, looking up into the confused green eyes.

The smaller man let's out a disbelieving chortle. "Wait, you guys thought....? Me and Winter....?" He starts to laugh so hard he's nearly crying. "He barely understood he had a dick, let alone tried to \textit{bang me} with it."
"I do not entirely understand it, but I find your comment offensive." The Soldier's irises flare very slightly.

"Aww don't be salty, buddy. Just...I mean...." Luis turns to look around at the others. "He used to walk around in the morning sometimes with half a chub, like it was nothing, and when I finally said something he just sort of...looked at it and then shoved it down. Like it was an inanimate object in his way." He laughs again.

"I do not find you amusing." Buck's now glowing eyes narrow. "And genitals, to my understanding, are an inappropriate topic of public conversation."

"I mean, I'm loving this conversation personally," Nat chimes in.

"Madre de dios. Is that what blondey was so bent out of shape over?" Luis grins.

"You're a hunk, bro," Clint shrugs. "And Steve's...mildly insecure."

"Extremely insecure," Win corrects.

"My husband thinks you're hot," Nat loudly whispers, winking at the younger man on Buck's back.

"Thaaaanks....?" Luis responds, mildly confused.

"Okay, so if you two didn't bone...what was going on? You're way too touchy," Greta looks around the Soldier to Luis.

"That's sort of...hard to explain. We lived together a while, in an old apartment building. He took care of me, I let him bite me. We were...chummy. Or as chummy as he could be then, since he barely said twenty words a day." His voice gets more firm. "We didn't get it on, and we were certainly never boyfriends. I don't care if guys are your thing..." he eyes Clint.

"Oh, they could be his thing," Nat chimes in.

"But they're not mine," Luis finishes.

"Our relationship was not romantic or sexual in nature," Buck adds, unsure of how far beyond that he wants to go. He only wishes to clarify to their friends that his situation with Steve is unique. He also has no language to easily define his feed-bond with Luis, equally different from his relationships with anyone else, or The Cling.

"Why'd you two...separate?" Nat questions.

Luis scowls at the Soldier. "He ditched me. I guess he got bored."

Buck turns to look at him with big eyes, faded back to their normal light turquoise. "That is not the case. I..." He again goes silent. This is not a conversation he wishes to have in front of the others. They are not - nor ever have been - a couple, but he still feels the younger man deserves a private explanation. "I need to find Steve." He starts to move again, then stops. "Please release me. I do not wish to harm you."

Nick takes out his communication device. "This is Fury. I need eyes on Steve Rogers. Don't engage, just observe and report. Over."

"Copy, sir," a voice responds. A few minutes later a follow up comes through. "He's doing maintenance on the extruder. Over."
"See, nothing to worry about. Let him work off some steam, he'll come back," Nick assures. "God almighty, you're both so dramatic."

"It is your fault he is angry with me," Buck grits out to the bald man, eyes brightening again.

"You did lie to him, pal," Clint says softly, gazing up at the Soldier, who frowns deeply.

"I did not lie. I was selective with what I revealed."

"You were dishonest. That is just as bad as lying sometimes," Win responds. "Especially to Steve."

With a resigned huff, Buck sits back down on the bed, taking them all with him. They can feel him shaking lightly with the effort it took to stand and support them all - he's certainly still very strong, could throw any of them through the window if he wanted, but he's also exhausted. Luis slides down off him and rubs soothing circles on his back as the rest of them slowly ease away.

"Come on, pal. I can see how worn out you still are. Just lay back down. Steve'll listen to one of us better than you right now, anyway," Clint soothes, putting his hand on Buck's shoulder.

"Please go and speak with Steve, Natasha," Buck says after a long pause. "Please ask him to come back. Tell him I am sorry for...being dishonest."

The redhead nods and leaves. Fury takes to his communicator. "Romanov will assume surveillance on Rogers. Over."

"Copy," comes a voice over the device.

Buck settles back with their urging, Luis sitting beside him on the bed with his knees up and back to the headboard, gently stroking his hair.

"So, you have a boyfriend? That's a big step for you, buddy. You do...know what that means right? Boyfriend? You know it's not a...friend who is a boy?"

Buck gives him an annoyed but embarrassed look. Luis knows him so well.

"I am aware it is a male you have a romantic relationship with, usually with the addition of a sexual relationship." His soft voice still gives away an undertone of irritation.

"Okay, okay. I'm just making sure. It's nice! I wouldn't have thought...." The young man trails off, not wanting to say anything insulting. Winter - Buck - is a person after all. And people mostly, though not always, have the same needs no matter how weird they are. Companionship, love, even sex. He's known for a long time that the Soldier can think for himself and feel things, so it makes sense as he got more open to the latter he'd want to have someone special. Still, it's hard to picture when he thinks about the filthy, blank-faced statue Buck used to be.

Nat comes over Fury's device about fifteen minutes later. "Hey, Nick. I just saw a skinny chicken hawk flying towards the yard."

"Well, since you all seem to have the fort held down here, I'm going to do some bird watching." The bald man stands.

Buck turns to look at him, suspicious.

"He's an amateur ornithologist," Clint offers, catching on to his wife's thinly veiled statement and knowing Buck doesn't get veiled statements usually, thinly or otherwise.
"Truce?" Nick holds out his hand. After a brief moment, the Soldier carefully shakes it.

Fortunately Buck falls into a heavy sleep soon after and doesn't wake until the wee hours of the next morning. Luis curled up in the bed a short distance away and Win asleep in his old sleeping bag on the floor. He's mildly hysterical when he stumbles to Nat's door, desperate to know where Steve is. She leads him calmly to Fury's office, where the bald man is already doing his morning review of the cams, and they show him the blonde on the drone feed working at the dump.

Buck crosses his arms and glowers when Nick refuses him access to transportation to venture there himself. "I will walk then."

"You most certainly will not. Fuck, you're as stubborn as the kid. The way you're moving, you'll keel over half way there." Nick crosses his arms in almost the same way, and it isn't lost on Nat how much alike they look in the moment despite their many physical differences. "Maybe I won't let you open that crate, but someone else sure as hell would use you too if they could find it. You're not helpful to this community, or Steve, in a cage somewhere."

Buck's jaw works angrily, but the redhead can see his gears turning, knows he can't deny the logic of Fury's statement, especially now that Crossbones' people had been very close to aiding the Reavers in causing his demise. The Xs just as easily could have wanted him weak and captured as dead. As Luis had so gently pointed out, Reavers just don't give a fuck. They probably decided getting the super soldier out of the way before they raided Claptrap was a great idea.

Eventually Buck lets her take him back to Steve's and, with Luis' help and her insistence, drinks from her. He falls back asleep right after and she babysits him while Luis cleans up and uses the outhouse. She had found the kid's devotion touching, but a bit odd, until the tingly feeling Buck caused had gone from mild to full body. It felt like she'd smoked some really good pot and then gotten a back rub from 1990s Brad Pitt. She could sort of get the appeal of being tactile with him after. Luis explains it was different with the others when he was weaker and they were all probably more than a little freaked out, given the circumstances. That if you're relaxed enough, and Buck is with it enough, it can be even better.

The Soldier goes to Fury's daily, multiple times. He insists on seeing what Steve is doing. Other than the small man's facial hair turning from scruff to a short beard, a whole lot of nothing changes over the next few days. The blonde eats his snacks alone on the hillside, looking into the waste, makes casual conversation with the trashers (but mostly avoids them). Nick tolerates only so much time per visit before shooing him out of his office, but even the amount he does allow surprises Coulson and Hill. His lack of any seeming plan to get control of Buck shocks them and Nat - he'd leave her out of it but she always knows his tells and the others'. Possibly seeing four people piled on him when he was almost running on empty, and him just holding them up like it was no big deal, tipped him off that his threat outside the house about tearing Nick and his team apart was not hollow. The redhead knew herself the violence she was capable of even ground down to nothing emotionally and physically and she wasn't a Winter Soldier.

After the second day, Buck had refused to eat food or drink from anyone. If he was not at Fury's he was in bed and barely said two words even to those sitting with him. Clint, as always, is good at getting things out of him and cajoles him into talking a bit.

"I have pain, in my chest. My breathing has normalized, but perhaps I am still damaged." Buck rubs absently at his sternum.

"Okay, well the doctor should check you out," Clint offers.

The bigger man's head whips up to look at him. "No doctor."
"Come oooooonnnnn. Banner's nice. In a....dopey, hyper puppy kind of way."

Buck's eyes glow nearly white and he shows his teeth. "NO DOCTOR!"

End Notes

So this is an epic multi-part series in my squidgy little dome. I hope you'll bare with me as this is my first slashfic. Think The Road Warrior meets the Marvel Universe with equal parts sci-fi and realism (probably few to no "super powers" but a few government experiments, possible mutations and whatnot in the mix).

It will get dark AF and has a lot of triggery material but there will also be humor and fun. I'll probably throw in a lot of original characters because they're there in my head canon and because writing some of the same old people can get tropey or feel like you're shoehorning them in.

Thanks for reading! Feedback and constructive criticism heavily appreciated.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!