Fools Rush In

by Andartha, Weirdlet

Summary

Rumlow discovers he's pregnant as he's recovering in the hospital after the collapse of the Triskellion. But that doesn't change anything- after his betrayal, Steve wants nothing to do with him or the baby, and so Brock is determined to get out, get away from HYDRA and raise the baby on his own.

But that's an awful lot to take on, alone and on the run. Fortunately, the Winter Soldier remembers his handler, a fellow omega assigned to him specifically for the calming bond shared between omegas in the absence of an alpha.

Kink-meme fill.

Notes
For bofurrific, who has cheerled, handheld, and enabled me this whole time, and continues to this day. I blame you.

Hey all! This is a kink-meme treat!fill, combining two prompts and spinning off into its own epic sprawl. It's a work in progress, and will be updated as swiftly as I can produce. Published first at Avengers Assemble kinkmeme, slowly moved over here and polished as I go, if you want to read it all (so far) in one gulp, go there and to the bottom of the Treats section.

Adding Andartha as co-author, because her ideas have helped give this story bones to last beyond the initial blurb and to really come to its fullest potential.

Original prompts can be found here- http://avengerkink.livejournal.com/19458.html?thread=46073858#t46073858

And here- http://avengerkink.livejournal.com/19458.html?thread=46090242#t46090242

So you know what you're in for.

Comments appreciated!
Chapter 1

In the elevator, he slips up.

‘Slips.’

“Hail HYDRA,” he hisses in Cap’s ear, just loud enough to hear over the crackling of electricity as it courses into that gorgeously-enhanced body and makes him dance.

Let that equally-enhanced brain chew on that. It’s the best he can do, all the give he can get because it tastes bad to gull a lover, one so stupid-tender it almost makes him want to believe. (And one whose true mate he’s been keeping under wraps like Mrs. Lovett, if the old pictures aren’t steering him wrong. God, isn’t that a recipe for sanguine reunions.)

If Rogers is worth any damn thing, he’ll figure it out.

He figures it out. It all rolls downhill from there on Brock’s end.

He keeps his head the fuck down as he goes about his duties. He’s been on BFF detail for the Soldier every time they’ve had him out in the last eight years, using the sister-bond people ascribe to omegas to keep things running smoothly. (Because Lord knows, he hasn’t clawed his way up the ranks or anything to get the position, and the respect, he has now. He’s more than a womb and a lure, he’s leader of the STRIKE unit, nobody’s bitch- except for those whose commands he’s privileged to obey. And those they assign him to.)

This time is no different. He grooms the Soldier, keeps him calm by his presence and familiarity when the docs and the techs work him over. Lets him breathe deep of his scent while he helps get him armed, goes over and over the mission parameters. There is no room for divergence, not here, not under Pierce’s gaze.

There never is.

The rest of his day goes pretty shittily as well. And then the Triskellion collapses on top of him.

He’d always known that there would be consequences to taking Steve Rogers to bed, but this was not one of them he’d been expecting.

It’s a goddamned miracle.

Or at least it’s a hell of a surprise. The docs start asking Brock about his choice in pain-killers, per the standard procedure, and he’s too floored to give them a decision right away beyond don’t take away what’s keeping my skin from burning. The baby will just have to tough it out, although given everything it’s stuck through so far, it might very well do it.

And that’s just- great. Because what he needs right now is a kid. A weak, helpless thing that will slow him down, weaken his resolve, that every government agency and two-bit terrorist ring in the world will want to get their hands on-
And Rogers doesn’t know.

Rogers doesn’t want to know, and he’s been trying, fighting against the drugs and the damage and even the doctors to get a message out.

It is not received.

That door has slammed shut, no thank you, goodbye. Brock can’t really blame the good Captain- it’s gotta sound like one of those slinky omegas from the old noir films, begging for help just one last time in a smoky voice, only to pull a pistol on the kind-hearted gumshoe when he shows up at the abandoned warehouse.

Only the difference is, he’s really pregnant, Rogers really needs to know, and Brock could really use some help here.

Rogers doesn’t come.

Rogers does not even give him the courtesy of a phone-call, or a bedside ‘you betrayed me’ lecture.

Brock puts all his focus on getting healed enough to bolt, and starts making plans of his own.

HYDRA has fallen- that doesn’t mean it’s dead. Just because one has been a part of the cult worshipping a powerful beast in hopes of gaining its strength, doesn’t mean that it’s not still a dangerous animal when the temple is shattered and the bars come down.

And wounded animals lash out.

It takes some doing, but he gets out before he can be arrested, and disappears. It’s a cool spring, so he can keep jackets and long sleeves over his burn-scars, his head down under a cap. He’s a returned vet, a survivor of one of the big disasters, fleeing an abusive alpha- anything that keeps him unnoticeable and easily let-go. No bodies either- when he steals he keeps it bloodless, though always keeping an eye out for HYDRA, for recognition.

His injuries heal faster, better than they should, even if they leave him road-mapped- it’s no surprise that part of the regular medical updates have really been upgrades, needles that make the loyal subtly faster, stronger, more resilient. Nothing like Steve, of course, but just enough to give them the advantage- and to test out what works and what doesn’t.

He spends a night shivering in a roadside motel when that one hits. What if he’d ended up like Blonsky? Like those poor fucks down in Cybertek?

It’s one thing when you’re full steam ahead for the only cause that’s ever done you right. But when you realize just how much they could have done you wrong… the order almost doesn’t seem worth the pain.

He touches his stomach that night, and tries not to regret too hard.

It doesn’t stay easy. He’d pulled a decent raid on the pharmacy at the hospital before he’d disappeared, set himself up with easily-cashed goods, but that can’t last forever. ID and passports he’s trying to find, but somehow everywhere is blown, no cover, no shelter to be had. Brock sees
headlines in passing, how the entire system got dumped to the internet, and he sees red for a minute.
Everyone he’s known, everyone he worked with, if they aren’t dead already in the failed coup they’re burned, burned just as bad as him. HYDRA, SHIELD- all smoked out.

The fluttering inside him is what brings him back, forces him to steady his hands and his breathing. He can’t let it throw him, has to stay focused. He’s gotten through worse than this, he has- it’s just time to fall back on his earlier training, the stuff that proved to Garrett he was worth a damn, back in the day.

There’s nothing for him to go back to, no matter how much that nagging feeling whines for comfort, or his traitor loins ache in the night. He is a grown-ass man, omega or no, and even if he needed the help, he wouldn’t get it. He is stronger than this.

He and his baby are going to be just fine, dammit.

Brock’s been feeling a prickle in the back of his neck, felt like he’s catching movement out of the corner of his eye for the last week, the absence of scent where it ought to be on the wind. It’s been enough to drive him to the edges, keep him moving past when his body starts to demand, and he knows he can’t keep up. He grits his teeth, puts on his game face, and does his damnedest to disappear again. Backtracks, lays false trails, takes buses and back-roads, and even some good old-fashioned woodscraft to get him the hell out of there. He steals a junker of a truck that’s no nameable color and repairs it by stealth and judicious theft of parts, and that seems to finally get him far enough.

He sings along with the radio, one hand resting on his stomach as he goes.

When he finally feels satisfied that he’s shaken whatever might have been tailing him, he reflects that he might be going just a little bit nuts, and looks into finding accommodations. It feels all wrong to be doing this without his boys, the rest of his team, but he’s trained them too well- if they were here, he’d be in a cage and shipped off to the depths without a second thought.

It takes most of the rest of his cash, but the rental cabin is a hell of a lucky break. He’s been on the run for two and a half months, and it’s a hell of a relief to be able to check the doors and windows, spike the jams, lay down on the moth-eaten couch and sleep.

In the morning he unloads the truck, trying to take his time as he hauls food and water, the necessary bits of a temporary household into the cabin. Things are starting to shape up, Brock’s really starting to feel satisfied even as the paranoia mumbles and grumps in the back of his head. He’s almost got the last of the canned goods in, when he suddenly leans his shoulder against the wall, dizzy- and can’t quite remember how to push himself upright again.
He wakes up with a light shining in his eyes and fingers checking how well he’s tracking, gleaming in the flare. Panic hits like a bomb, whiting out his vision and sending his limbs flying.

It does him no good- his blows are warded off and he’s pinned down as easily as a kitten, hands like steel bands making fifteen years of STRIKE team experience useless. What he sees finally makes him go still, because if that’s really him, then Brock would already be dead if he meant to do it.

The Winter Soldier is the one who has picked him up after fainting, is now holding him down on the cabin floor. His shaggy dark hair falls over his face as he checks Brock over as thoroughly and brusquely as any medic. Color, eyes, the same routine Brock’s done on him many times before and after a mission- and then it gets weird.

The Soldier keeps him flat on his back with one metal hand in the center of his chest, and with his other he swipes across a smartphone’s screen, staring intently as he thumb-types and then pauses, then hunts and pecks again.

Brock struggles, hissing for breath, but he can’t throw off the asset’s weight or the inexorable strength of his arm. More than just terrifying, this is embarrassing, even though he’s known that the Fist of HYDRA outmatches him in just about every way since day one, training under him as a shit-scared recruit and smelling that they were similarly out of place among the alphas and betas. But the Soldier just sits there, pinning him down until he’s done with whatever the hell he’s looking up on that phone (and just how the hell is he getting internet up here?)

Finally he turns his attention back to Brock, and it’s the most bizarre moment of his life to be gently shushed by a stone-cold killer, who then pulls up the fabric of Brock’s shirt and lays his head flat against the fragile curve of his belly.

He lays there on top of him like that for a full minute, eyes focused on a distant point past Brock’s shoulder, shushing him again every time Brock tries to move. His lips move every so often, like he’s counting off softly.

He can’t possibly be- can he?

The Soldier rises off of him, pulls away, leaving Brock to hurriedly pull his own shirt down as he scoots back against the cabin wall. He turns and puts the pen-light away in the duffle, occasionally casting looks in Brock’s direction, like he’s only just enough of a threat to bear watching.

“Within normal parameters.”

Brock snarls under his breath, only breaking off staring to forcefully close and button up all his layers again. None of his weapons are within reach, not even the boot knife, or the *other* boot knife. He can see them, laid out neatly on the floor- they’re just not in his hand where they’re any use.

“Your bedside manner could use some real work, pal.”

The Soldier doesn’t say anything, just zips the pocket he put the light in and stands, watching Rumlow. Brock knows this pose, this quiet- he’s waiting for an order, or a threat he knows what to do with. While Brock’s pushing himself off the floor, he considers, licking salt off his lip and figuring how best to test the waters.
“How far off his leash is he?”

“How far off his leash is he?”

“Mission report.”

The Soldier stirs, looks at him with one eye peeking through the mess of his hair. It looks like it’s been stuck under a cap for weeks, practically felted, then let to drop loose.

“Mission report, soldier.” He’s almost got his balance now, and he knows he needs rest, needs fluids, but first and most important of all he needs his weapons.

“I gave you an-“

The Soldier brings his foot down in a hard stomp, and there’s a flash as he moves, catches the knife that’s suddenly bounced off the floorboard and whips it forward. It lands quivering beside Brocks’ face, imbedded into the wall, and he freezes, staying very, very still.

The assassin is staring at him, nothing like expression but everything like implacability in his gaze, as he locks eyes with Brock.

“Don’t try that again,” he says quietly.

And just like that, he’s gone.

Brock takes his time getting to his feet, re-arms at least minimally before he goes for the sports-drink and cookies. He can’t let himself collapse like that again, can’t afford to be vulnerable. Not with HYDRA out there, not with the Soldier out and about.

He runs nervous fingers through his hair, takes it slow so he doesn’t throw up or faint. The rest of setup is pretty easy, he doesn’t need to haul anything heavy, just put things away, set up the air-mattress and the stove for dinner. Before that, though, he locks the place down. Boards and nails reinforce windows, the door is bolted and set with appropriate noise-makers. No one is getting in here without him getting at least some warning.

The next night the Soldier is there again, as if he’d never left. Brock doesn’t say a blessed thing, just sets his gun on the table and pours out a portion of stew, while nursing his growing headache.
It’s an uneasy truce they have- Brock can’t pretend to know what’s going on in the Soldier’s head, but he’s quiet, and doesn’t make much of a mess. He can tolerate his presence, especially since he seems disinclined to try and take out one of his former captors (or the ‘other omega’), despite being able to circumvent the traps he’s laid out. He shows up for food, stares at Brock or the scarred table-top the whole time, and then disappears into the woods again.

A week in, he shows up and Brock’s stripped to his shirt, while both kettles and all the pots are on the stove and full of water from the pump outside, slowly beginning to steam. There’s a basin, a couple of sponges, and shampoo on the table.

“You too- you’re starting to make me nauseous.”

The Soldier doesn’t move, and Brock is happy to pretend to ignore him while he starts, filling up the basin and soaking the sponge. It’s no Jacuzzi or hot shower but it feels so good when he starts, and in short order he’s stripped completely to the waist, scrubbing everywhere he can reach with hot water and soap. It makes him gasp when he finally leans over and dunks his head, the simple joy of being clean again, after marinating in his own gamey-ness for far too long.

The baby flutters, almost a proper nudge when he lets the water run down from swiping the sponge over his abdomen again. If Brock’s guessed his dates right, he’s about five months gone, and it’s definitely starting to show against his frame. Fortunately scent-neutralizers cover all sins, even the shitty brand that was all he could find at the gas-station. If he needs to go into town he can cover up and pass for a beta with a beer-gut, at least for a while. Hopefully he won’t need to very often-though with a second stowaway eating up his supplies he may not be able to avoid it…

Speaking of which, the Soldier hasn’t moved in all this time, even when Brock walks right past him to dump the (grey) water out the back door. The warm spring air is doing a fine job of drying him off, and he risks nudging him in passing as he heads back to the stove, refilling the basin with clean, hot water.

“I wasn’t kidding. Maybe you don’t take orders anymore, but you wanna stay under my roof? You scrub down.”

Nothing, just a flick of the eyes, a stubborn set of his mouth that would have earned him a ringing slap if he’d ever done something like that where the higher-ups could see.

“If you don’t, I’m gonna do this all over again, and you can wash with cold. And I gotta tell you, I would really enjoy doing that.”

That gets him to start easing off layers, and Brock smirks to himself. He’s been guiding the Soldier through this routine in various levels of craptastic circumstances for years- this time neither of them is bleeding or concussed, and nobody is fuzzed out from cryo or literally fried from brain-wipes-

Turns out he likes getting his hair washed at least as much as Brock did. The sounds he makes are embarrassingly vulnerable, even with Brock having been privy to all the between spaces, from awakened to armed to after-mission drop and cryo-prep, for years. He keeps up a steady murmur of nonsense, digging his fingers into the greasy scalp and working through the mats, and eventually he’s got the other man combed out and drying, content to sprawl bonelessly on the couch with his
damp hair spread out.

“Next time you’ll do it yourself, huh? Can’t be motherin’ you forever.” There’s no real response, just closed eyes and a moment’s jump at his voice- then a slow, cautious resettling, like a nervous cat that doesn’t want to give up its comfy place.

Brock takes advantage of the Soldier’s blissed-out state and goes for the small bit of mirror he’s got hung up on a nail. With lather and a very well-honed knife, he works up the sides of his head, doing the best approximation he can of his old favorite haircut. It’s not quite the neat job he likes, but it’s not like he’s got anyone who cares how well he keeps up appearances- and it leaves him feeling almost human again, for the first time in God knows how long.

The Soldier refuses a shave when Brock offers it, in a single word- “No.” He’s not sure if he should be encouraged or afraid that the independence the Soldier’s showing is increasing, even if he flinches afterward. He seems to trust Brock not to beat his choices out of him, at least enough to bother making them in the first place.

Either way, they’re both as groomed as they want to be, and the evening is quiet except for the hum of insects and spring peepers outside.

It’s a peaceful easy feeling, as the song goes.

“The hell are you sticking around with me for?”

Brock is rearranging cans on the rickety shelves in the pantry, calculating what needs replenishing and what he’d rather chew off his own arm than actually eat, while the Soldier lurks in the background as per usual. He expects it’s got something to do with ‘better the devil you know’, but his question’s half out of boredom and half genuine curiosity. The Soldier seems to understand enough that he’s not waiting for an extraction, he doesn’t seem to want HYDRA to find him. Does he think he’s already back in from the cold? Is Brock still the omega den-mother in the Soldier’s mind, and therefore the one to turn to in the wake of everything falling to pieces?

Doesn’t much matter, he supposes, turning with a can of distinctly-not-tuna in hand. It’s not the camaraderie of the STRIKE unit, the easy touch and laughter that comes of large men working cheek-by-jowl in small spaces, being all in on the same joke- but it’s something. Has to be enough.

He keeps talking because he’s always done so, and because the radio is old and fuzzy even when it’s perfectly tuned. So far, his little shadow is pretty-much monosyllabic, and only volunteers information in disjointed bits and at random. He doesn’t ask for food, merely takes it when it’s presented, and doesn’t request more though Brock knows from experience that he could probably eat as much as Brock could make.

This is the mythical ideal that HYDRA’s foot-soldiers are held to, who they dreamed of being. How could you not, when only the best of the best got the privilege of even knowing he existed? Hearing his voice call out cold analysis of their flaws, watching him demonstrate the skills as a living weapon they could never live up to- though God knows they were expected to try- knowing they were lowly maggots when those flat eyes passed over them without a hint of recognition beyond ‘potential target,’ even the favored students. Brock wonders if he was the only one who was disappointed when they finally got to work with the legend, and found that the ultimate expression of skill, stoicism and loyalty was only possible because there was no person left underneath.

All scourged away.
“You’d better have something to bring to the table,” he says to the assassin in his kitchen. “I’m already eating for two, I can’t feed a third for long.”

The Soldier seems to consider this, then pushes back his chair and stalks out of the cabin. Brock pulls out a bowl and flips the can-opener out from his multi-tool, humming a little to himself before he reaches out and turns the dial on the radio. The fish stinks to high heaven, but he’s gotta keep up his strength, do good things for his baby. Lord knows he’s found out the hard way before- nutrition is important.

That evening he walks outside and almost fucking shoots the dead deer that’s hanging from the beams of the porch.

His heart is still pounding as he re-holsters his gun, and he glares around at a conspicuously absent shadow while pulling a knife to finish dressing it. The thing’s only dead, barely bled, not cleaned at all, and there is going to be a serious talk about proper woodscraft after this. Man can clear a fortress if you give him the order, but try and hunt one deer…

His stomach roils queasily as he sets to work, and Brock ignores it as hard as he can because looking a gift deer in the mouth is pretty fucking stupid, even if it’s a hell of a lot of mess dumped in his lap.

That man is laughing at him behind his back, he swears to God.
The first night it rains, really rains, the Soldier stays. Most nights he’ll take his duffle bag and disappear into the wilderness, but this downpour is just too much, and he hides from it behind the walls of the cabin, staring out into the storm like an offended cat.

Brock finally tells him to lay down on the air mattress- the couch supports his back better, leaves him less achy in the mornings, and he’s sick of watching the other man pace restlessly, it makes him tired. A lot of things do that lately, but this especially just makes his fucking head hurt.

“I don’t care if you can’t sleep, lay the fuck down. And don’t pop that mattress,” he says, rubbing at his temples. The Soldier finally pauses his relentless patrol, peeling off his damp outer layer and carefully kneeling, arranging his weapons in easy reach before laying down. He still faces the windows, and does not relax.

The storm rattles on outside, and Brock curls around his stomach on the couch, well back from the streaming windows. His mood is shot all to hell and his shoulders are tight as iron bars, but he refuses to be weaker than he already is.

He still dreams of Rogers, the bastard.

He wakes whimpering, hating himself for the want more than the need. It feels like there’s still a warm hand gentle on his belly, and he sweeps it away as he goes from horizontal to almost-vertical. He squints at the dawn light, moves to lurch in the direction of the kitchen- then steps on the Soldier, who yelps like the guard-dog he’s been playing, having dragged the air-bed to lay directly in front of the couch in the night.

Brock comes suddenly awake in a fit of swearing while they struggle and try to untangle in the midst of a rapidly-deflating mattress.

“FUCK elite fucking warriors my fine ass what the shit was that-“

He storms around under a thundercloud for the rest of the morning. The Soldier stays out on the porch like a kicked dog, and has about the same expression on his face when Brock jumps into the truck and heads into town for a patch-kit, just as soon as the road has dried.

“Be straight with me. Are you just playing dumb?”

Assassin-turned-mighty-slayer-of-deer just makes a face, that knit-browed pout from whenever Pierce would smile over understanding something he didn’t. He turns back to the task at hand, twining string and twigs as he flawlessly repeats the snare that Brock showed him a few meters back. The Soldier is used to obeying orders and being given exactly what he needs to commit an assassination and no more- his handler is the one with actual, uninterrupted experience in the woods, and is supervising his first efforts at proper wilderness survival.

It’s all well and good to shoot the occasional deer, but even as deep in the forest as they are, there’s always a chance of someone hearing something and coming to have a look around- and too many kills could draw attention from worse than hikers. Better to vary it up with smaller catches, and isn’t Brock just lucky he’s got a fella who can spend all day tramping out in the woods and not have to
piss every five minutes like he does.

Speaking of which…

He gives the signal to stay, and leaves the Soldier working while he hunts for a spot out of the likely game-paths. His hips are aching as they try to settle, spurred by the day’s long walk, and the little flurry of movement inside of him isn’t making it any more comfortable to hold on until he can piss without ruining their chances at dinner.

When the words finally come, they come in a flash flood, short and devastating.

Brock’s busy flouring game meat for stew, calls him ‘Soldier.’

“Barnes.”

“What?”

“James Buchanan. ‘Bucky.’ Barnes. The only Howling Commando to give his life for his country.”

The Soldier has got the ugliest, sickliest smile on his face that Brock has ever seen.

He surreptitiously reaches for his gun, staying casual with a practiced ease while keeping his hand from straying too far.

“Where’d you hear that?”

“It’s true, isn’t it. Saw a whole museum piece on it.” It’s been months since the last time the Soldier- Barnes- was wiped. Brock thinks back, tries to calculate how often it was that he was thawed, how long the missions were- how long did it take before he got restless, got agitated, and God forbid, started asking questions…

Long overdue. Guess he knows why now.

Whatever shit Zola put into him, whatever other strange things HYDRA had done to him over the years, meant that the Soldier was too valuable to throw away and far too dangerous to let loose. Cut off a man’s limbs, he can’t run, but he can’t be useful either. Cut his tendons, he’s still mostly useless, but if those tendons can heal- wound him over and over, keep him balanced on the edge of useful and crippled…

Barnes must be healing without the constant brain-fryings. God knows no one properly mortal would have been anything more than a drooling idiot after even one or two of those sessions, and the Soldier was anything but that.

Which meant that instead of just a dangerous assassin with no one holding his strings, now Brock has an unstable, angry POW with a grudge against his captors and more stopping power than a tank on his hands. In a tiny isolated cabin. With just him, one of said captors- and his unborn child.

Two in the back of the head. Only way to be sure.

But Barnes turns himself to glance back at Brock, and for all he snaps his gaze away again, he can’t possibly have not seen the one hand half-drawn from his holster, the other splayed protectively across his rounded belly.

He doesn’t move.
He doesn’t move.

“’D’rather be nothing,” what was once the Soldier says, hunched in on himself. “Don’t want to go back. Wanna just stay out here and be- nothing, for a while. Hurts too much t’ be-”

A killer.

A betrayer.

A puppet with cut strings.

A man who knows what he has done.

“…the woodpile’s getting low, kid.”

The Soldier’s confused stillness has a new quality to it compared to what Brock remembers before, like a trembling fawn instead of a brick wall.

“You wanna be nothing, knock yourself out. Just make yourself useful while you’re doing it.” And make lots of noise, so I can tell where you’re at.

James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes shrinks in on himself again, and then pushes himself up from the table. Maybe he doesn’t take orders anymore, but a strong suggestion will do in its place. Soon after there’s a steady, rhythmic whock from the stump out back, and it doesn’t stop until the sun’s well past set and they’ve got enough stockpiled for winter, much less the summer.

Brock spends the next few days jumpy as all hell.
Chapter 5

Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neither of them seems really inclined to make a move on the other. A day goes by, then another, and no one is shot, strangled or knifed as they go about their business.

Maybe he’s lonely, and the Soldier is as well. Maybe there’s something to the old bullshit about omegas bonding together when there’s no alpha there to make them feel safe.

(Maybe the only ones who know what it’s like to live in Hell are those who were keeping it hot right there alongside you.)

There’s food to be put on the table, snares to check, water to pump, the million and one things that need to be done in a day when you’re living beyond the reach of civilization. Spring is turning into summer and the nights have grown short- but that still leaves hours, far too many, being carefully silent across the cabin from each other, with only the radio fuzzing in and out.

They neither of them want to talk about it.

But they’ve both got their own, inexorable processes going, and as Brock is finding his clothes can’t stretch any more, Barnes starts waking up screaming in the night.

It was whimpering before, when it was anything- muscles locked tight, barely shivering because to move was to invite death and danger. Now- something’s clicked into place, or he’s getting more things tossed up by his brain in his sleep, or maybe he just feels safe enough to howl.

What’s almost as bad as the screaming, though, is the mumbling.

Most of it’s wordless- sometimes Brock catches a bit of Russian or German, slurred acquiescence to orders or mumbled pleading, sometimes a flat order of his own- ‘give me a gun’ or ‘all targets down’.

‘What did I do?’ seems to feature prominently as well, usually just before he comes awake.

One night he catches a hint in English, something about ‘don’t throw up on me, no- aw, Stevie-!’ Brock spends the rest of that night clutching his favorite knife, waiting for the dawn. He can’t relax even when morning brings nothing more than un-caffeinated lurching.

Barnes looks more and more haunted by the day, and more than ready to fall into his instant oatmeal as he hunches over the table in utter silence. Brock doesn’t think he’s looking much better himself, and the constant reek of terror around Barnes makes him feel like he’s going to throw up. They both look like raccoons, the trap-lines go unchecked, and when he finds himself stumbling in the day he knows this can’t go on much longer. Exhaustion is bad enough when you’re at peak health and not growing a kid, and he can’t push things the way he used to. Not if he wants to get them both through this.

When next Barnes lays down, Brock walks slowly over to him, all business. Buck tenses, makes a confused sound- he’s not real talkative since the name incident, but he finds a way to communicate.
Brock doesn’t give him an answer, just barks “Stay there” and lays carefully down on the other side of the air bed- he’s not huge yet, but he’s a big man and already off-balance with his growing womb making him awkward, especially on less than solid surfaces.

“Kick me, and there’s gonna be trouble,” he says, and Bucky looks like he’s going to roll right off the mattress, let the bigger man take his spot completely, until Brock lays his palm down flat in the middle of his chest.

“Stay.”

Barnes stays.

They lay side by side, facing away from each other, and Brock thinks it’s only exhaustion that lets them do it without reaching for their guns. It’s just too much- they have to sleep and nothing else is working.

It takes a long while, pretending in the dark that they are still and quiet- but eventually, someone’s breathing starts to even out, then the other, and wakefulness turns to dozing turns to deep, heavy sleep.

Brock wakes in the darkness, freezes- goes through the checklist, and turns to glance over his shoulder.

Barnes is whimpering again- starting in on the lowest, quietest frequency and slowly escalating to choked sobs. He smells like pain and fear, sicky-sour. If it goes the way it has every night the past week, soon the snarling will start, noises of anger, rage and battle- and then the screaming, and the waking nightmare, and Brock knows a bit about that shit himself but never on such a grand scale.

So before it can get that far, he reaches across the gap between them, sets his hand on Barnes’ shoulder, and begins to gently stroke him.

He doesn’t murmur soothing things, because he’s not that far gone, but at the first touch the Soldier quiets, almost a startled inhalation of breath before he suddenly wraps himself around Brock’s arm with an iron grip.

“Ow-! Sshhh, shh….shit.” Brock winces at the strength of Barnes’ embrace- it’s powerful- and resigns himself to being a teddy-bear for the time being. It seems to have worked, at least, and for the moment, Barnes is soothed and seems not to be on his way to a screaming fit.

He has to wriggle a bit but he frees his other hand to stroke the other man’s head, and Barnes just leans into it, soaking up the contact like a sponge. Brock hates to admit it, but it feels- pretty damn good to him, too. But there’s nothing to it like the misogynistic bullshit about omegas needing more touch (he is so much more than that), it’s just to get Barnes to settle, to try and get something like sleep going so that he can stop feeling so lousy.

Or so terrified that he’s going to get sick, and that’s going to hurt his baby.

Having reached across it, the gap between them is now completely gone. Barnes is pressed against him all along their length, and Brock’s stomach is up against his, a tight hemisphere of skin under shirt and undershirt and armoring layers against even the midsummer night. Barnes is bare-chested under his thin blanket, exuding heat like a furnace, and for a second it’s like being next to Steve again, just come off a mission and still filthy but he’s already stripped down and wanting the comfort of knowing we’re still alive, isn’t it awesome.

That alone almost has him flip them both out of the bed. He’d rather drag out a blanket and sleep up
in a tree than play fucking pretend-games for his own indulgence, his weakness.

But Barnes is calm, metal arm wrapped in the sheet and the baby’s just a lazy bundle of little soft twitches right now, and their limbs are tangled and he’s so tired…

When the morning comes, he wakes alone, with both blankets over him. Barnes must have been observing him over the last few weeks, because the oatmeal’s still steaming, pot wrapped in one of their precious few towels off the stove.

There’s apples in it.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, all, let me know what you think. Comments are my life’s blood.

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Chapter 6

Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Okay, so the apples were a little tart- it’s about a month early for them, if Barnes has found a wild tree somewhere (and he must have, there’s no way he’s walking to town and back to buy them). The thought is appreciated, even if it’s the thought of a deadly assassin with a brain-pan full of scrambled eggs.

After breakfast Brock puts on his old cross-braces. It’s the only way his pants are going to stay up until he can get some new ones, or a decent pair of sweats.

“I feel like a fucking redneck,” he grouses, glaring down at how his stomach protrudes from under the joined straps, old soft shirt too small to pull down over where his unbuttoned jeans bunch under the swell. He can cover up with the jacket, but it’s getting warm for that (it’s almost July) and the bare spot makes him feel- under- armored. Besides, it gets cold.

There’s nothing for it- he’s got to make a trip into town.

He takes the time to go over himself in the scrap of mirror- shaves for the first time in three days, slow and careful. The scar tissue from the Triskellion covers his neck and arms, softer than it ought to be (the needles have been hard at work for a long time). There’s a couple of broad patches on his face, but for the most part, he still looks all right. The clean shave and season-appropriate sunglasses will help keep his face from being recognized, and as for the rest…

He looks down at himself first with an eye to disguise, and is pleased. Then he takes a moment for himself and grimaces, because dammit, he worked hard to be the lean fighting machine he was six months ago. With scent-neutralizer on every layer from the skin out, the paunch he’s got out in front reads as fat, not pregnant- especially with the loose hooded sweatshirt. His hips haven’t swung wide the way they will in the next few months, so he’s only waddling a little bit, and the right stride can still disguise it.

It’ll have to be enough.

It’s a fine morning out when he finally steps onto the porch, better than a lot he’s seen and better still for not being blood-soaked or ringing with gunshots the way too many of them have. Birds are singing, the light over the trees is pure gold, and the air is clean of the scent of most human beings for miles. Barnes is not in sight- probably finishing his early-morning perimeter check. The guns are gleaming, the cash is green…

Wait a minute.

Brock doubles back, stares at the surface of the porch picnic-table. It’s covered in an assortment of freshly, painstakingly cleaned guns, both lethal and tranq varieties, their assorted rounds stacked neatly alongside them. Behind that is a stack of cash sufficient for just about any level of go-bag, short of pulling some kind of gambling scam in Vegas. Hell, possibly even then.

“Santa, baby…”

Next to that is a stack of IDs and various sheets of official-ese paper, weighted down with an
unloaded pistol. Brock looks over a few of them- not guys he knew personally, but he knows those faces in passing, briefings of other cells, other agents. Names are fake, a couple different varieties of each, looks like they were road-tripping in a rental car but no other indications of specifics.

So Barnes has killed HYDRA before. It’s the only way he would have got these- they must be the contents of his mysterious duffle bag, along with the medical kit, the prenatal vitamins and the brick-sized book on the care of pregnant omegas currently weighing down a set of blank birth certificates.

The bag itself is resting on the table’s bench, full of under-ripe apples. A quick check reveals that the seams where the trackers are usually put have been ripped out and clumsily resewn with thread from the med-kit.

…

They’d come after him. He hadn’t just been paranoid, there’d been an actual retrieval team sent specifically for him, and what he carried.

And the Soldier had stopped them.

Brock thought he’d been over the shakes, but he was so, so wrong.

He sits down hard on the bench, shoving the bag sideways and spilling green fruit all over the floor.

The world greys out around the edges, and it takes a while of remembering to breathe, kid, breathe before he becomes aware of Barnes on the outer periphery of his vision. The soldier is standing off the edge of the porch, staring in through the mesh screen at his former handler sitting with his head in his hands, staving off a panic attack by sheer will alone.

“The hell are you looking at,” he mutters, sharply scrubbing at his face before he stands up, shrugging on his jacket in an effort to keep the whole horrible world out.

Barnes doesn’t answer, just keeps looking at him. Waiting. The circles under his eyes are a lot less prominent today, and with the scruff he’s sporting Brock would be hard-pressed to recognize that historic jawline.

It’ll do.

“Self-eval prior to a mission, Barnes,” Brock says, walking down the porch steps. “Parameters are reconnaissance and resupply in a lightly-populated rural civilian center. Goals are to purchase supplies without alarming the populace or being made, no casualties. You up for it?”

Barnes’ voice isn’t as rusty as it used to be, but it’s still startling to hear it in units longer than a word or two.

“I can handle a town trip.”

Much less so- cognizant.

Brock jerks his chin toward the truck.

“Then pack up the goodies and get in- we got shopping to do.”
Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your wonderful comments, they really make my day^^
Chapter 7

Chapter by Weirdlet

It’s a long ride into town.

About midway there, Brock finally speaks up, flicking off the radio before he does.

“So. You knew those guys?”

Barnes turns away from the window he’s been staring out of for the last hour.

“I followed a trail. They were on it. They were in my way.”

“Huh.”

A few more miles pass, and this time it’s Barnes who shatters the silence.

“I remember you.”

“I’d hope so, you wake up looking at my mug every morning.” Keep it chill, like it’s funny.

“I mean- I remember you, going back. You were always there, the last… the nearest years. Took care of me, before the Machine,” and Brock can hear the capitals and knows just what he’s talking about. *Wipe him."

“Yeah, that was my job.”

Barnes looks at him, and Brock stares narrowly down the winding, bumpy dirt road. If the Soldier is trying to express some kind of *gratitude…*

Sheesh, that’s fucked up. And while it might be beneficial- he knows from fucked up.

“You smelled- different. The last time. And it was like waking up, only *really* waking up. And I was scared.”

“I’d- been seeing a guy. Real heavy. Tends to screw with your signature.”

*Confession time. I was banging your alpha while helping keep you calm enough to stay a prisoner, oh, and now I’m knocked up with his baby. That wouldn’t happen to be why you’re hanging around, would it?*

“About those guys-” Brock starts again, because he *has to know.* Were there more, did it look like they had major backing, how big a team had it really been-

“They were in my way.”

“I get it if it was just for their supplies-“

“They wanted the baby. It wasn’t theirs.”

And that’s the last Barnes says until they reach the outskirts of town, hunching sulkily in on himself. Brock tries and fails to get anything more out of him, and at the end is more concerned with finding a good spot to park by the roadside and piss. Twice. The less he’s out of the truck in town, the better.
It’s a sleepy little place, home mostly to folks who may earn a little living off the hunting and fishing tourism, but don’t appreciate or encourage it. They like to keep themselves to themselves, and aren’t interested in the huge fish you caught or the bucks you’re going to bag, so Brock keeps up a little patter while he’s there, enough so that they dismiss him but aren’t annoyed enough to make a note of him.

Barnes tags along and lends silent weight to the cover, as he has the look of a lifestyle-hunter and not a poser in fresh-bought gear. Given a list and a wad of bills, he’s apparently capable of passing for a back-woods loner, one who’s been away from the social niceties a long time but still has to come in to town for human contact and shopping every once in a blue moon. He fits right in, they practically adopt him as a native, communicating their acceptance with nods and grunts.

The bag stays in the truck cabin- a little bit of Barnes’ cash goes a long way towards resupplying them for another couple months in the woods. It’s way too early to start laying in baby-supplies (and bad luck to do it too soon) but there are still some small comforts to be had. In among the cheap cans and toothpaste and the fresh fruit, the beer that lends credence to the gut he’s sporting, there’s a couple-pound bag of the chocolate he likes (and has been needing, more and more).

More to the point, Rumlow finds the clothes he’s been needing (it’s awfully hard to accumulate a paternity wardrobe when you’re constantly on the move and looking for enemy agents of all stripes over your shoulder). Nobody bats an eye at the dry-goods store, and he returns to the truck with all the sweatpants and oversized flannel shirts he could ever want. More, even.

“From redneck to lumberjack,” he mutters, but at least he’s not going naked. There’s also some stuff sized to Barnes, so that the former Soldier can stop going around shirtless in the evenings after he’s sweated through his increasingly ragged clothing. Clean socks, and more than two pairs of underpants- capitalist decadence, baby.

When they meet back up, nothing is on fire, no one is screaming, and there are no helicopters raining death from the sky. Brock counts it as a win and he and Barnes pile into the truck, along with all their new supplies.

On the way back Barnes drops one more bombshell, before turning on the radio to an old oldies station and cutting off all further conversation.

“They wanted you. You weren’t theirs either.”
By silent mutual agreement, Barnes moves the air-bed next to the couch. It’s shifted just enough that Brock can get up in the night without stepping on anyone (“If I gotta piss, I’m not stepping on a land-mine to do it.”), and Barnes can still curl around his arm where it hangs off of the taller bedding. Brock’s back thanks him for it, and Barnes- Barnes isn’t perfect, but he’s got something to cling to when the nightmares get real.

The Soldier never needed this- but the Soldier was never allowed to be this long. Just one endless loop, repeating, and once you got the routine down-

Made it easier to just do his job, rewind the tape at the end of every play-through and hand it in, then go back to his life. Which had involved fucking a guy he knew had someone out there (right there), waiting for him. He still doesn’t know how much is going on behind those eyes, how much he remembers or really understands- all he can hope is that Barnes stays protective, and doesn’t ask him questions he can’t answer without inciting murder.

The words stay intermittent, but Brock makes up for it. Evenings, he’ll be laying down with one hand resting on his stomach, the other gently scruffed through Barnes’ hair, while the day’s laundry steams dry on the line above the stove.

“I ever tell you how I got into this business?”

Barnes turns over, gives him that look he’s started to use lately, the ‘you kidding me?’ eyebrows that look so out of place on a face Brock’s seen either blank and solemn or focused and shark-like for years on end.

“Yeah, well, since you haven’t killed me yet, I figure you’ve made your peace with it. Either that or you’re waiting until I get lulled into a false sense of security, in which case, just make sure to get it right the first time.”

“That’s the main thing.”

Barnes doesn’t seem to be aware that he’s being stared at like he’s grown a second head, just arches his neck so that Brock’s fingers slide along his scalp, back rippling as the air-mattress turns it into a full-body motion. Brock recovers enough to keep from accidentally stroking the scent glands behind his ears, still speechless as he resolves to find a different station, one with less Billy Joel.

“…so anyway…”

And he tells him. Because the night is long and full of quiet, and without orders, quiet is a hard thing to find peace in, for either of them.

“Sometimes you follow someone around because they’re everything you want to be, y’know? And you can’t look away for how bright they shine, just try and catch some of it yourself. And Ricky, he was that guy. Don’t get me wrong, we were all trailer trash, but Ricky Miller, man, he had the grades, he had the moves, he had the letter jacket- he was goin’ places. Gorgeous fucker. Led the whole pack of alphas at school.”
“I didn’t have much to do with him, because, I mean- the hell did I have to compare? Never was real pretty,” he says, chuckling. Rumlows are handsome, not delicate- at least, them that work at it and don’t sink into the bottle. “And smart- oh, I was a smartass, but somehow you don’t get points for blowing spaghetti into the lunchroom rafters, or getting the scoreboard to say ‘Principal Schermerhorn Sucks.’”

Didn’t stop the alphas and the more obnoxious beta kids from going after his ass- that was just the way of it. You smelled a certain way, you were bait, no matter how little you had to offer- because what was on offer didn’t matter so much as what was there to be taken. Best thing to do was to get tough, so nobody thought you’d roll over for them, lunch money or legs apart.

Break enough noses and eventually they get it.

“Now I was trouble- always into fights, never had a thing I could call my own that I didn’t have to pull off someone else first. But I had a plan, because around where I grew up? Football was everything.”

He’d hated the jocks, hated the sport, hated the rubes who kept talking about it like it actually mattered- but damn if that kind of scholarship money couldn’t get you a chance to get out and go as far and as fast as you could. Training was one of the first times he’d found a use for gym- pain with a purpose, instead of being an object lesson in the social hierarchy. Building yourself up from nothing, with a goal to run toward rather than just a goad to run away from.

It got him some attention when he finally started to bulk up.

“Try-outs were happening one spring, and I slunk in there, and it turned out I could really make it work on the field. I could run, I could throw, and I was good with a team- once we had a common goal, and weren’t just jockeying to see who could get one over on each other.” He hadn’t felt that way again until he’d hit the military, and by then he’d become far more practiced in both getting even and getting ahead.

“So I’ve got an in- the coach wants to see what he can make of me, and I throw myself into it like my life depends on it, because at that point I was pretty sure it did. I had no prospects, no cash, no college fund- couple of run-ins with the cops… I was trash, and we all knew it. But I figured if I could just get in and pushed hard enough, I could grab the brass ring and keep on going.”

“Now Ricky was our star, but the coach had a policy, that everyone had to go through the same trials every time or risk getting replaced. So we’re all slogging through the mud, fighting to show our stuff- and this guy, he up and blazes past me, shouting ‘Keep up, newbie!’ Swats me on the ass, sends me tumbling, which is par for the course- only he stops and hauls me up after, points me in the right direction. The beginning of a beautiful friendship,” Brock drawls. Barnes is looking up at him with wide eyes and raised brows, head lifted from where it had rested on the crook of his arm.

“He caught me after, asked if he could show me some moves. I blew him off, of course- he couldn’t be serious. A guy like him, talking to a guy like me? Either someone was putting him up to it, or he was setting up for a hell of a joke. Like Carrie- you ever see-? Naw, of course not, who am I talking to?”

More likely to pull a Carrie than to have seen it- and frankly, Brock wonders why he hasn’t. He knows who he was- he knows what’s been taken from him. It’s hard to get news out here, but it’s easy to guess that out in the world, HYDRA is in chaos and easy pickings for someone with a righteous grudge, a gun, and no self-preservation. But if James Buchanan Barnes wants to live
peacefully in the woods, leaving all his cares and worries behind, and let the green silence soothe the raw places in him-

Well, it would be hypocritical to say much, wouldn’t it, he thinks, patting the curve of his stomach in thought as he continues. It’s a story he hasn’t told much, ever, really- but here in the quiet, away from everyone- he can revisit it, just look it over again one more time.

“But it kept up. He kept- just being nice to me, little things. Worked my ass off on the field, same as everyone else, but after- it was like I was a human being or something. Worth dating, even. Weird, I know.” Oh, he’d guessed the game- there was nothing else it could be, but an alpha with everything going for him keeping order by setting up an over-ambitious omega for a fall. But hanging out in the diner every few days, discussing strategy over a soda- some kids had drugs, some had booze, but Brock, for a brief few shining months, had had Ricky.

Big, beautiful, two-faced, dumbass Ricky.

Reel it in, soldier. You’ve got a story to tell.

“But all good things gotta come to an end. I was good, and with his help, I was even in line to take his spot- and that couldn’t happen. And lemme tell you, there were folks lining up to tell me that couldn’t happen. He deserves it, they said, he’ll carry us with him and do us proud- and he deserves better than you. I thought, fuck’em, I could beat the odds, have my cake and eat it too- but it was never gonna work out that way.”

It’s a long pause, one with a yawning darkness in it that he stares at for a long time, then steps back from.

“I got kicked off the team. Ricky didn’t really have time for me after that. Hard to hang out with your trashy little omega when you’ve got a team to lead and a state championship to win.”

It was no more than anyone had expected. A generation repeating itself too soon, losing fast and early to make sure they really got it through their heads where their place was.

Wha’d ya expect, son? Ring an’ a promise? Made to be broken, son. All dear ol’ Dad had to say while Brock cleaned frantically around him, trying to make the trailer a fit place for a man and his kid.

“After, everyone knew that the social order had been restored. No more complaints from the gals I’d cheated out of a stud. I had bills to pay, so I dropped out and worked my ass off- right back down at the bottom of the heap. All around me everyone’s smiling, celebrating, and I’m-“

His voice is getting louder, the snarl rising closer to the surface, and tears on the heel of it. Barnes has gone utterly still under his clenching fingers, and the baby twists in him, flippy kicks like-

Reel. It. In.

Brock breathes, smirks like he’s laughing at himself until he can speak again. Hormones. It’s just-hormones. It doesn’t matter.

This isn’t even the important part.

“A year after, he comes back to me and it’s like nothing ever happened. He’s the town hero, but he still wants to catch up for old times’ sake. And me, well- I’m not in a good way. And he wonders what’s wrong.
“Long story short- he took my future. So I took his. Broke his legs and walked away. And that’s where things really begin, because as it was, I had nothing but a temper and my fists, and now I couldn’t go home again. I needed money in order to get away, so I tried robbing a store- and that went about as well as you’d expect.” And it’s easier now, once he’s past the part about the stupid teenage drama that got so bloody so fast, the way they never talk about in movies. He wants to laugh and say, ‘that’s the joke,’ because to have ever believed it could have worked out well-

Well.

“Got sent to jail. Two-time offender, showing no repentance and no self-improvement- I belonged in a cage, they said. And then, just when I’m getting used to being in a real hell-hole- some old army guy comes around, telling me how I can make myself stronger, make the world a better place, for others but mostly for me. And me being a stupid, scared little fuck, I believed him.”

“Garrett, Agent John. Success rate of recruitment- exemplary.” He can’t read Barnes’ expression, it’s all Soldier-neutral tonight- but he still lets Brock pet him, pulls his hand in again if he stops, where before he only accepted what was done to him by necessity.

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“I broke his arm during beginner training.”

“Bet he was grateful. We all were, for whatever scrap of attention we could get.”

And that’s the heart of it, though not the full story. The rest comes in bits and pieces, over the next few hours- how he was guided through a stint in the army after surviving Garrett’s trial by fire in the backwoods, inserted into SHIELD as an agent and told who to look to and what code-words to listen for. Barnes listens as he always does, a silent pitcher with big ears.

He’d been young, angry at the world, and desperate to be strong- and HYDRA was guaranteed not to let you be weak. You’d die if you were. He’s grateful to those who break him, who bend him, who put him on his back to reinforce that to be vulnerable is to be dead.

What starts as a search for family and worth and vengeance at eighteen becomes diehard loyalty at twenty, then twenty five, because real discipline has hardened him and it feels so good to be part of something greater- and greater still, in secret. It’s a life that suits him, and as he becomes an experienced soldier, he’s initiated into being a worthy agent. It’s the headiest drug you can give to a young shit like him, and he dives in headfirst with enthusiasm- because the world needs fixing (the world needs to pay) and because he can, for once in his life, win.

And then he meets the Asset, and it’s the best and the worst motivation to stay. Look what we can make of you, the ultimate strong, stoic being- who feels no pain, has no doubts, and can inflict beautiful violence that lesser men can only dream of.

Look what we have done.

This could be you.

The thing about being an angry young shit is that eventually, if you’re lucky- you grow out of it. He’s an agent of SHIELD before thirty, STRIKE-tracked straight out of the army, and he does good work. Some of it’s even genuinely worthy, destroying human trafficking rings and rescuing hostages- but in the background, there’s always the other work, the greater wheels spinning that say some men must die to create the world where no one will need to. And not all of that is HYDRA-
there’s plenty of times when he has to check in his head just who which order came from, so he knows which to fulfill and which to botch and at what times.

It’s a hard path. It suits him to the bone, but there are always those who think his sex makes him weak, who question his worth and value to the mission. He puts them in their place when he can, endures when he can’t, and always, always fights his way up the ladder. He belongs, body and soul, and his devotion is tested and tried, but his superiors know he will always, gratefully, put himself on the line to fulfill their requests. There is no other path but to succeed, no matter what parts of himself he has to give up along the way. Unnecessary attachments are pruned ruthlessly, slide off his armor before they can take root, and he’s strong in amongst other such men, who laugh and drink and fight together and could still take each other out if that was what the mission warranted.

Lonely isn’t a word for people like them.

It’s blood in, blood out, and even death isn’t always an escape. He should know, he’s been ordered to deliver on HYDRA’s .38 millimeter retirement plan before. No prisoners, no second chances- best not to let doubtful thoughts reach the surface of your mind, much less your face.

But he needs the dream, and devotion is a habit as well as a commitment. So he stays, and does what he can. Because loyalty means something, you have to be loyal.

It’ll all be worth it, won’t it?

*It’ll all end in blood and fire, and isn’t that what you wanted? Pathetic.*

Brock stops talking when his eyes start to swim, and he realizes it’s probably one in the morning. Barnes is fast asleep, head resting against the bump, and he looks about as at peace as any time that Brock’s known him.

He likes being close to the baby, when Brock will let him. Soldier or no- for some omegas, no matter how high the testosterone runs, it’s just soothing. And lord knows, they could use some of that.

Rumlow sighs, pulls the blanket up around Barnes’ mismatched shoulders, and turns in himself. It’s probably best that they stopped before they reached the part about Rogers walking in and turning his world upside down.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys for your comments, they make my day^^
Before things get better, they have to get worse.

Brock has lived his life by this mantra, but if he ever finds out who implemented the policy in the first place, he’s going to punch their face out the back of their head.

He opens the door and it hits like a wave, enough to make even him take a step back with face flushed.

It’s musk with the pervasiveness of mildew and the filthy fug of a brothel, and he should have fucking well known it was coming. Barnes had been off the last few days, cagey and uncomfortable when he didn’t have a task filling his hands, but when wasn’t he squirrely? Under the surface he’s got a hell of a lot to process, and Brock’s just been happy enough with him not up and trying to kill him in his sleep. But he’s just as omega as Brock is, and he’s had no medical care, no one in charge of seeing to his maintenance since he’d went rogue- and it’s been at least long enough for a normal cycle since he’d thawed.

Brock should have noticed it coming on, remembering the faint flush of fever and discomfort, the long trips to the latrine. He pushes the door open again, dreading what he’ll find.

“Oh no,” he groans when he steps inside, dismay dropping his shoulders. Barnes is on the couch, his bed, curled in about the smallest corner of it he can take. Even from the door Brock can see he’s shivering, but it’s the dark dampness making his pants cling from crotch to knee that makes him cringe. That’s never going to come out, and he sleeps there-

“Jesus Christ, how long has it been since you’ve had one of these?”

“Two months- thought I was gonna die,” Bucky moans behind gritted teeth, curling tighter in on himself. His arms are curled around the cushion Brock uses for a pillow, face half-buried in it.

“Yeah, uh-huh- and before that?” Half the normal interval, but there’s been nothing normal about the Soldier’s biology in a long time. Brock steps over to the kitchen, grabs the pitcher with their clean water and a mug as he listens for Barnes’ response.

“…’Ssseventy-six?” Just about the time the new suppressants had rolled out into public use. It makes sense- he would have assumed that cryo, stress and lack of body-fat would have done plenty to keep them weak and irregular, but HYDRA always did like to try new things if it meant total control. Brock brings the mug over, drops carefully into a crouch by Barnes’ head and offers it.

“Drink this- you’re gonna need it, given how much you’ve got flowin’ out of you. Looks like you got it bad- man, I remember the first time I got the long-term shot, best moment of my life, but comin’ off it? Like being fifteen all over again, just fuckin’ awful…”

He chatters away as he raises the mug to Bucky’s lips, the low steady rhythm that keeps the mind together on missions, in those long stretches where it’s not quite go-time but you need to focus on something, anything but the wait. Barnes drinks, trying to guide the cup with his left hand and his fingers tink against the ceramic. He doesn’t let go of the cushion, just drops his head back into it and
buries his face while Brock dishes out another cupful.

Brock keeps pouring water into him, keeps talking. When the body cries out for things it can’t have, it can drag the person inside along on some seriously bad trips- and dehydration is definitely a danger when the cycle hits hard. In between sips, Bucky snuffles into his pillow like a kid seeking parent-scent, looking purely miserable.

“Hurts,” he says, and shakes himself after, hunting for the words within himself. “It- it hurts. I- don’t remember it hurting like this…”

“That’s ‘cause you had’em regular before-“ Oh fuck it. If Barnes hasn’t tried to kill him yet, he’s not going to now. “It’s always worse the first few times after a long dry spell. Body wants to make babies with a vengeance, and you’re not used to it anymore.”

Barnes grimaces, then looks Brock over, less glassy-eyed now that he’s had some fluids. A huff of laughter escapes him, only slightly unhinged.

“Don’t need to- you’re pregnant enough for both of us.”

“First of all, what ‘us’, I’m just a guy on the run, trying to have my super-soldier baby in secret while weirdoes keep showing up to eat my food,” Brock says, rolling his eyes. “Second- I can just walk over to the kitchen and sit down there, maybe have some coffee and a puzzle, while you ride this out yourself.”

“Don’t, wait-!” Barnes yelps, reaching out suddenly and Brock’s got a metal hand wrapped around his wrist, pulling him up short when he makes like he’s getting to his feet.

“Please- don’t go.”

And there’s a lot of terrible things Brock can do without batting an eyelash, but just because he can be cruel doesn’t mean he has to be. He can feel the tremble through Barnes’ metal fingers, same as he’s done when the Soldier was coming down off a mission and needed tending before the quacks could do their jobs.

“If you were anyone else, I would kick your ass for this,” Brock sighs, and stays crouched, looking the whole mess over with an eye to what can be improved for both their comfort (it’s going to be a long three days). Barnes looks up at him, waiting for the hammer to fall like it has so many times before in and out of memory.

Rumlow is a believer in pain and discomfort being a teacher. He’s not so hot on it when there’s no need to prove your endurance- and the Soldier’s proven it longer than anyone, and now everything that made him what he was is breaking down and leaving him vulnerable and wrecked.

*Hey buddy, welcome to the boat, hope you brought your life-jacket.*

“Shove over, I’m sure as hell not going to sit on the floor like this. Did you at least put down a towel-oh yes, thank God…”

A quick scrub-down and a fresh pair of pants does a lot to ameliorate things- but painkillers from the med-kit don’t do shit and Brock isn’t sure the amount Barnes would need would do anything but fuck up his liver. Meds for the Soldier came pre-measured in dosages that would kill most humans, and only with the most cursory of instructions from the scientists to make sure that one hand only knew so much of what the other was capable of.

So what they end up doing is sprawling on the couch with Brock rubbing Bucky’s back and
stomach, depending on what’s paining him the worst. Barnes slumps face-up or face-down in Brock’s lap, letting him stroke his cramping body while he presses his ear to his belly.

Brock has reclaimed his cushion, which is now stuffed firmly into the small of his back, where it supports their whole exhausted tangle. If this is what it’s like now, it’s going to be a long three days, and he’s gotta rest up.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your wonderful comments, they make my day^^
His thighs are held apart, and his cunt aches with wanting, hot and slick. He arches, flaunts, smirks- and feels the heat wash over him, a sudden flush of hesitation, as he glances up to his partner.

Rogers reaches out with the look of a drowning man, and what can he do, but give him his hand?

“You’re all I’ve got.”

It’s the locker-room after a mission, the deck of a ship, the bloody floor of a battlefield it’s the huge bed at his place, and Steve’s there, wrapped around him, face buried in the crook of his neck, pressing into him.

“I’ve got you, Rogers. Take what you need, I got you.”

And the condom rolls on slick and easy, and then they’re fucking like goddamn rabbits, only that’s nothing like the right words for it, getting plowed by a man holding on like it’s his last chance at breath, hands warm and huge and gentle until it’s just the right time to be rough. Brock gasps through fingers bruising around his hips, slick in his cleft, tweaking tender nipples and it feels good, too good, so good…

He collapses, moaning, and Steve’s got him in hand, strokes the length of him while he’s still buried between Brock’s thighs. He smells like strength and honor, fire and honey and he’s got Brock close, so close to the second edge-

“Can I-?” Ohh, the thickness of him, all he can take and getting thicker- and Brock knows, he’s asking if he can stay, can knot, instead of just wham-bam-thanks-man, pulling out before they can be stuck together beyond the first fucking. Like they’re a real couple, with nowhere to go and nothing to do but be together for the night.

And no one’s whispering in his ear, no cold voice Piercing and he says yes, all his own, feeling that full, sweet ache fill him. Steve’s hand is on his cock, his lips on his jaw his teeth on his ear, and-

He wakes up gasping.

The night air clings to him full of sweat and the stink of heat and dead weight along his side, dead weight that shifts and grunts and mutters “Stevie-“

Brock sits up sudden and hard, shaking. He feels aching and hollow almost as bad as if he was the one in heat, and Barnes’ hand is cool on his breast, legs tangled with his while his head had thumped off Brock’s shoulder when he woke.

The metal arm- shifts, contracts like muscle to pull him back down next to Barnes, who is just as hard and as wet as Brock is against his thigh. Brock is suddenly looking into sleepy ice-blue eyes, a thin ring around wide-blown pupils, and lips stained red with heat-flush say mournfully, “You’re the last person I smelled him on.”
Brock is suddenly very interested in not being embraced right now, only Barnes has got a higher class of serum and a whole lot of cybernetics on him, and seems like he’s practically trying to crawl into Brock’s skin. He pushes, and the assassin pulls, and it’s not until he properly clocks him that Barnes even seems to really wake up, to see Brock snarling at him and to scramble away, falling off the crowded couch and into the half-inflated mattress.

They’re stuck panting that way for a minute after the aborted half-attempts to go for weapons, a tic neither of them can really lose after their mutual careers. Brock clutches at his stomach, a fluster of sudden movement inside breaking his terrified staredown with Barnes, and the other man’s gaze snaps toward his belly like a shot, dismay painting him.

“My eyes are up here, Barnes,” Brock growls, and pushes himself to sit upright before grabbing the abandoned blanket and tucking it around himself. The Soldier flushes, then goes pale again, and reaches out toward him-

“Words, Barnes, use your words!”

“Did I- are you- is the baby-?” Monosyllabic would be a blessing right now, Barnes is choked on his own fumbling grasps at reassurance, and Brock is in no damned mood to be nice.

“Fine, all fine, don’t fucking touch me right now, got it?”

Barnes is halfway through crawling out of the half-deflated airbed, and the way he shrinks in on himself is like the Soldier after mission-drop. He stands up, sweat-streaked and pale in the patchy moonlight, and Brock has no tolerance left for pretty broken boys, could not stop if he tried. At least there’s no bottles to throw, and he grips the disintegrating upholstery to keep his hands from balling into fists.

“And what damn business is it of yours anyway, huh? I didn’t ask for you to come out and play nurse-maid, or bodyguard, or whatever the hell you’re doing out here! You’re a goddamned brain-scrambled assassin freak, what the hell is so interesting to you about my baby?!”

“Because it shoulda been mine.”

Buck’s got his arms wrapped around himself, distant despair all over his fevered face, and Brock can see his shoulders shaking. Grief-dimmed lust comes off him in waves, an assault to a nose made hyper-sensitive in pregnancy, and Brock swallows hard, trying to settle his- everything.

“We were gonna- soon as the war was done. Soon as…”

The shiver is working its way down the body, hitting his knees and leaving him sinking to the scuffed floorboards. It’s not a seizure, Brock’s seen those- it’s just everything hitting all at once, and there’s no way in hell he’s putting himself between Barnes and a rising tide of memories. All about Steve.

“-all I got left I can’t see him I can’t hurt him I hurt him-“

He’d seen it on the news, when he’d first gone on the run- Captain America had disappeared, had reappeared, had been released from the hospital after recovering from injuries sustained… And Brock is willing to bet some of those injuries had been bullet wounds, and the imprints of metal knuckles on bone. They were both the most important assets of their organizations- they would’ve been set on the same mission, at the end.

The anger breaks and drains away, leaving him with face flaming and a hot coal where his chest meets his gut, and he’s got to do something. You break a man to teach him, to make him useful, to
make it clear that life ain’t fair- but there’s no lesson here. Barnes already knows the world isn’t fair. Hell, he’s the one who took up banging his mate, selfishly feeding on the devastation seventy years in HYDRA’s wake.

“Come here.”

Brock shifts, adjusts himself so he’s settled more comfortably in the crook of the couch’s armrest to wait for Barnes to move, and then sighs. Not gonna happen. So he stands up, setting his hand at the small of his aching back, and steps around the airbed to go get his Soldier.

They’ll tell you in Sex Ed, that nobody dies from lack of sex in a heat-cycle. And for the most part, they’re right- you might feel like you’re gonna die if you don’t come, like the whole world’s abandoned you and you’re all alone in your skin, desperate for touch and greedy for any sensation to come your way. You might even want to, to just get away from the unrelenting burn.

But unless you let yourself dry out, get really sick or have a heart attack- you’re not gonna.

Popular opinion is divided on whether it’s nastier to take advantage, or to leave someone in that state unheeded. Brock knows where he stands, which is why he rearranges the bedding so that they can lie side by side while still having a barrier in place. He picks the Soldier off the ground, feeling him shiver, pushes his too-long hair away from his neck.

“Just gonna lay down, now- you too, you’ve had way too much excitement for one day, and we all gotta get our sleep…”

Barnes’s metal arm is a heavy yoke around his shoulders, his flesh hand pressed to Brock’s stomach like it’s some kind of holy relic.

“I gotta protect what’s left, you know?”

“I know, I get it, bud-“

“I need him, but he’s not here- I can’t have him.”

Better you than me, kid.

It’s like he’s drunk, just let him talk, lay down, go to sleep. He’ll be better off in the morning, and the day after it’ll all be over with, just minor humiliation and a lot of laundry to deal with.

“You need him, too.”

“The hell I do.”

The baby has decided that it’s going to get in on the argument, and Brock sighs like a very cranky hurricane while he lays down first, trying hard to think calming thoughts at the little wriggle-worm who’s currently taking it out on his kidneys. Barnes is finally down and settled, but he’s cuddling against him, handsy as a love-drunk octopus.

“He’s not here for you- I am. You want-?”

“No, I do not want,” Brock grumbles, though he’s shifting uncomfortably. The scent Barnes is giving off would get a nun to strip down and dance, and he’s over-sensitive to everything right now. The dream he woke from left him half-hard and damp-thighed, and now that Barnes is nuzzling up to him again, seeking touch like it’s the holy grail, it’s like he’s still just-awake and shaking from it.
“Never did. Always kept’em off me, that was real nice.”

And he’s remembering, more and more. Brock is still mystified that said remembering makes him more affectionate, and not murderous.

“How are you even-?”

“Need you,” Bucky says. It’s only slurred because it’s being said pressed against Brock’s bicep, and he turns his head sharply to glare with suspicion. The rest is said just as clear, with Buck’s blue eyes pinning him where he is.

“I need you. And you need me. And we both need Rogers, but he’s not here. So where’s that leave us, huh?”

Brock swallows, and tries to look away, and can’t.

“Tryin’ real hard not to do worse than I already did.”

But it’s hot out and he’s tired and horny and Barnes makes a real compelling case, with his hand on Brock’s hip and his breath snorting soft and warm in his face, and God, if he’s going to be this sticky and uncomfortable he could at least get the benefits of getting that way in a fun manner. But he’s gotta try, one more time.

“You got a good man waiting for you, and I ain’t him.”

“M’not fit for a good man- and what I need right now now,” Barnes pants, near to growling as he stares up at Brock. “Is the worst kind.”

Chapter End Notes

You guys are fantastic. Thank you so much for commenting, and kudos’ing, and generally being around and enjoying.
He lets go.

Breathes in deep.

And hauls Barnes in for about the deepest kiss he’s ever had. Mouths suckle, lips sliding and stubble scraping like sandpaper. Brock buries his fingers in Buck’s hair, fine and dark and the perfect tight-fisted handhold, steering him like a half-broken horse and feeling his hips buck against his own.

Barnes moans into his mouth, and shifts until he’s carefully straddling Brock, pressing their groins together for just the right kind of friction while keeping pressure off his rounded stomach. A gentle thumb-stroke behind his ear makes him suddenly shake, eyes rolling back in his head, and it’s a dirty, dirty trick from Rogers that Brock does not regret for an instant.

“Like that? You want more, Barnes?” he says, sliding his hand down the other omega’s back, heading for his rear. When he’s got it firm in his grip, James makes a keen, strangled sound and bows his head for a moment, panting. Brock pauses, canting his head to look at him suspiciously.

“Still with me?” His shoulders tighten, the metal arm singing counterpoint as he just breathes slowly, and that’s not the answer Brock’s looking for.

“Say it, Barnes, or I’m going to dump you off this couch and go back to bed.” And that rewards him with blue, blue eyes, like something out of a nature special on wolves when they stare you down. James Buchanan, Bucky Barnes is awake, with it, and hungry beyond telling.

“You got what I need,” he murmurs, and licks his bowed lips before leaning down to kiss and nip at Brock’s throat and collarbones. Greedy, needy little sounds like a puppy follows, and Brock just strokes his back through it, sliding his damp-again sweats down off the curve of his ass.

Barnes responds by taking it down a notch, slipping his mouth and tongue over a tender, flushed-dark nipple and Brock sees goddamn stars.

Ohgod. He hadn’t figured on that. James’ body wants to make babies- his is already in the process of it, and goddamn damn damn it makes him easy, just as vulnerable to Barnes’ touch as Barnes is to him. Oh, oh, no fucking wonder omega-on-omega porn makes up so much of the stuff he’s tripped over in the locker-rooms.

Barnes keeps at it, and when Brock looks down at him he swears he can see the assassin smirking at his breast, suckling gently and he can feel it tug deep inside of him, something raw and terrible. He scowls, swatting sharply at his ass, and when Barnes draws up with a yelp he pulls their mutual pants down around their thighs. He’s doing this to help Barnes, not the other way around, and he is not interested in being laid-out and vulnerable, any more than he has to be.

Rogers isn’t here and he’s about the only one Brock has ever willingly rolled over for since he hit eighteen.

“Come on, Barnes, no need to get miss-ish on me. We got work to do.”
He palms their cocks together, and teases his fingers along the outer edge of James’ opening, trailing in the slick that’s gliding down the inside of his thick, hard-muscled thighs. His belly is in the way enough that he can’t really see what he’s doing, having to go by feel- but Barnes is acrobatic enough to make up for it, and is clearly enjoying the ride. Buck may be the one sitting up as he straddles him, but Brock is back in the driver’s seat, and he likes it that way.

He’s had more words out of Barnes in the last twelve hours than in the whole month prior- maybe it means he’s feeling safer, or maybe he’s just hormone-drunk and babbling. Either way, it feels like Brock’s holding some kind of a human being and not a shadow- and hot damn, but James/Barnes/The Soldier has a dirty little mouth on him. Breathy moans and wordless keening is all fine and good, but hearing fuck me, fuck me, FUCK ME when he’s stretched around blunt, calloused fingers is about the most satisfying thing in the world.

But when he’s got him off a second time, and nearing a third, the words seem to run out, and James keeps looking at him, like he’s trying to find something in Brock’s face, or bore into his soul through his eyes.

It’s not the Soldier’s thousand-yard stare. It’s not Barnes’ quiet confusion. It’s something new and frightening for all it doesn’t promise brutality, and Brock looks away, down to where his hands are working and their hips are rocking rather than get caught up in it.

And that’s when James hones in for another kiss, stroking the fingers of his flesh hand down Brock’s side, and sliding his cheek past Brock’s to kiss behind his ear, inhaling deeply before setting to work on the sensitive skin and scent-glands there.

Brock grips the back of James’ enhanced shoulder, hissing as he digs his fingers into warm skin over artificial muscle.

“The hell are you-“

“Let me.” And it seems he’s not the only one Rogers has taught this trick to, because Brock can feel his eyes about roll up in the back of his head as James traces his tongue over just the right spots, making him shake like he’s been electrocuted.

“Please.”

And he’s tired, and it feels really, really good. When James slips his fingers past Brock’s cock and down into the heat of his own cleft, Brock shifts his thigh, lets him do it. Barnes ends up straddling the one leg while leaning over him, stroking carefully, going deep but not too deep as he gently, gently pushes Brock toward the edge. When he lowers his head, suckles on his milk-tender nipples, Brock doesn’t stop him either, just gasps in time to a slow, broken rhythm and holds on tight.

He’s doing this to help Barnes, who’s going through heat and has a perfectly good excuse.

But when he finally lets go, just- lets himself enjoy, and make his own pathetic whimpering noises at how good it feels to be touched- it’s like some hard, secret knot of sickness melts and eases in his throat. He rides Bucky’s fingers to completion, cries out clenching around him, and trembles as mismatched arms slip around his body, holding him in place like he belongs there. Fingers smooth over the curve of his belly, cradling him and his baby in a way that makes him shudder, then go still, finally at ease.

And if there’s the ghost of a man between them, the shape of someone they both should be thinking
of, instead- well, that’s just how they fit together.

Chapter End Notes

Annd the smut. Hope you all enjoy, thank you so much for your comments and kudos^^
Chapter 12

Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“He wanted you, you know.”

The wee hours have found Brock waking up to Barnes’ head against his abdomen again, face bathed in lonely regret. Not sweat- it looks like his fever’s broke, even though his cheek is still warm against the surface of his stomach.

Barnes’ eyes flick up, slate-blue through his ragged bangs.

“You knew it was Rogers’ baby.”

A pause, the rustle and whir of that metal arm as he shifts.

Gives a small nod.

“And yeah- that means I was fucking him. He was-“ Alone. Putting up a good front, but he’d never seen an alpha so desperately lonely. Brock wants to say it was all a sham, all a sick game to put him further under HYDRA’s control- but the truth is, no matter how much his bosses might have wordlessly expected it, the loneliness in Steve had called out to the loneliness in him, too.

Selfish. Greedy. But real enough to cut, the only kind of real there is.

“All the time I was with him, he was thinkin’ of you. I was just an easy place-holder, he wished he could have you back and thought you were long gone. If you went back to him right now, he’d fall down on his knees and beg you to forgive him.”

Barnes stirs, lifts his head from where he’s resting it on Rumlow’s belly. The baby kicks as the pressure’s lifted, ungrateful little brat, and Brock puts his hand over the spot, trying to rub it back to sleep.

“And you?” His voice is hoarse from so much use after so little, from crying out in heat.

“You don’t have to worry. He’d washed his hands of me long before you showed up again- and I know better than to try, after what I did to him. I don’t need him, and I sure as hell won’t be suing for child support.”

Barnes is frowning, sitting up on that poor, abused airbed.

“What about-“

“Hey, like I said- we’ll be just fine. He don’t want me, and I can’t blame him. The point is, you got a life waiting for you, if you want to go back and take it.”

Barnes snorts softly, takes a good, long, look down at himself, at Brock, then down the length of his metal arm. He ends up staring at his hands- his eyes rest there a long moment, start to go blank and dark before he shakes his head.

“Don’t think he could want me, as I am.”
Brock presses his fingertips into his own forehead, praying that the Eternal Barnes Headache is not about to start up again. He shifts on the couch, tries to stretch some of the kinks out of his back, the lead out of his legs.

“Is this really the part where I try to build up your confidence?” he says. “Look- you may be chewed up, but he’s gonna be so damn grateful to have anything back- you were his bondmate, for Christ’s sake. Old-school, ‘what God hath brought together let no man tear asunder’ handfasting, with a wedding to follow just as soon as the war was done.”

It had been a cute ceremony. (There were news-reels.)

“I remember, okay?” Barnes growls, and only stops when he notices how Brock has tensed, ready to fight back instead of flinch. He’s instantly contrite, ducking his head in a way Brock has always tried to avoid, the cutesy little-omega move to try and deflect anger. It never worked for him, so he got aggressive instead.

Barnes makes it work. When he speaks up again, Brock is listening, no longer poised to strike first.

“I remember- enough to know there’s a lot I don’t want to remember. My dreams- are red clear through,” he says, trembling. Now his throat bobs when he swallows, and his metal hand gleams when he shoves his fingers through his hair.

“I remember chasing this dream in my head for years- and now I’m finally awake, and all I got is traces to follow. Blood on my hands, scent on another omega. I can’t- I can’t have him. I hurt him. Damn near killed him. But part of him’s here now, with you, and I can’t let that go unprotected.”

“…And if I say I don’t need your help?”

It is absolutely criminal how sarcastic one look from someone with that much trauma can be. Barnes sweeps his gaze around the boarded windows, the dusty floor, only softening when he hovers his palm over Brock’s stomach once again.

“I’d say I got two idiots who don’t know how to back down from a fight to look after. And since one of ‘em’s not where he should be, I guess I gotta stick with the other.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all again^^ You all are just making my day, and I love hearing from you.
A couple days later, the heat’s finally done.

Once Brock is sure Barnes isn’t going to fall over if he lets him out of his sight, the former assassin is out on patrol again, picking up the slack of making sure their perimeter is clear of surveillance or intruders. Disgruntled wildlife, too- a few weeks back there was hint of a bear, but not near enough to be cause for alarm, and they’re already careful about their garbage. Brock’s willing to let him do it by his lonesome these days- he’s getting heavy for tromping around in the woods in combat boots, and after their little talk in the middle of the night- well, he’s willing to trust Barnes’ capacity and his intentions, just this far.

Instead, he concentrates on cleaning up after the cycle. He’s got the sheets on the boil to try and keep the place from smelling like a whorehouse (it probably wouldn’t be so bad, but his nose, ugh- he can smell every little thing and thank God the morning sickness seemed to pass once he settled in this place. Two months of yakking every time he smelled meat or diesel, while on the road passing through truck-stops and cheap diners- yeah. That had been fun.)

Brock is hoping for a nice, long stretch of boring. Boring is good, because it means no surprises and no bullets and no freaking jumps in his blood-pressure that he can’t do any damn thing about. Boring means safe.

He rubs the firm swell of his middle, leaving the kitchen to let the laundry stew, and picks up the book from the porch’s table where it was left from before the last town trip. The munitions are stowed in the cabin, out of the way but in easy reach, and the various fake IDs he’s been looking at to see if there’s anything useful to be salvaged from them- the bag is mostly empty, and Barnes takes it with him in case of finding anything interesting.

The apples he brings back are getting closer to ripe every day, but they’re still not there yet (the abandoned farmstead where James is finding them has got to be at least a hundred years old, and the tree is huge enough to dwarf the dark-haired man as he climbs it, making him look like a boy at play.) Instead, Brock opens a can of halved pears and sits down behind the porch screen to enjoy the midsummer air, with a fork and the pregnancy manual for company.

The book tips open and he flips back through the pages, having already checked it for hidden compartments or other such surprises. It looks like they brought it for its actual use, and if he’s still discomfited at the implications, it doesn’t mean he’s going to throw away important intel based on the source.

He’s been flying blind about this for far too long, and now that the current insanity has settled- he’s going to do right by himself and his kid.

Barnes comes back to the house late in the day. The stove is dark, and Brock is- sitting, not hiding, thank you very fucking much- at the far end of the cabin, as far away from that book as he physically can be, and still be in the building.
“What’s wrong,” he says, dropping everything as he comes in the door. There’s a squelch and the smell of strawberries, and Brock just drops his head in his hands, biting his tongue.

“I’m fine, I just- had to take a break from reading.” Nothing is ever going to be okay again.

Barnes is across the cabin in what seems like two steps, both silent.

“Off,” Brock growls preemptively, moving to haul himself to his feet before Bucky can offer his arm or set his hands on him. Barnes halts a precise foot away, face falling neutral but for his brows crashing together like a stormcloud.

“You smell-“

“I’m not happy,” Brock cuts him off. He’s got one hand clinging to the cabin wall, the other shaking and hesitant on his own stomach. “I’m done, I want off the ride, I can’t do this. I never could. I messed up, screwed up, I have f*cked up everything there is to f*ck.”

“-scared.”

“Yeah, well you would be too!” he snaps. There’s no way to fight, nothing he can put a bullet in or direct a team to take out that will make this better. He’s alone in the woods with a baby he can’t protect, even inside his body, and no help he can call on. Even if there was a doctor or a midwife in town he could convince to take him on, that’s a trail and a witness he can’t afford, and he’s done so many things wrong.

It’s not like he could help the Hellicarrier crash into the building, simply *surviving* the disaster and the medical care afterwards. Low-dose serum injections he’d had nothing to do with, had only volunteered in the sense that he was there and he was good, worth enhancing just that extra little bit. And that’s got nothing to do with his history, his workload, the fact that he hasn’t had even the most baseline of medical checks since breaking out of the burn-ward- the *drugs* they’d had him on…

He hasn’t even quit drinking *coffee*.

And the baby is still in him, still kicking in time to his rapid pulse, but how does he *know*? Anything could be wrong, and he’d never know until it was too late, all over again…

Brock must be really out of it, because suddenly he’s sitting down at the kitchen table and Barnes is hovering nearby, looking like the world’s scruffiest, most post-apocalyptic mother hen. He would have sworn that a moment ago, he was ready to belt anyone who laid a hand on him, even to help him up.

There’s a cup of water in his hand, and Barnes has two fingers resting just under his jaw, along his throat.

“You went grey,” he says.

Brock deflates, a sigh going out of him that sounds like it could take his last breath with it.

“This is just not my week.”

Chapter End Notes
A certain ward against procrastination- if I'm making good progress on writing the next few parts, I get to post the next chapter sooner. Once again- you all are wonderful and I appreciate your comments, kudos, and hits^^
Chapter 14

Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Barnes wants to help. Brock wants not to be fussed over. They neither of them get what they want.

The book is carefully retrieved, and promptly shoved under a wobbly chair-leg where it can be of some use. Rumlow is certain it can be useful for its original intent, in time. In very small chunks.

It’s August before he picks it up again.

Meanwhile he covers, sticks to the routine of perimeter checks and evening radio and making a survivalist’s kitchen turn out decent food for two furnace-level metabolisms. Barnes makes himself useful, coming up with fresh game and whatever berries he can find (always neatly separated from each other with a branch of the plant itself for identification purposes, because despite what Brock has taught him, his city-boy upbringing will shine through at the most inconvenient times. Nightshade tarts would not have gone over well.)

If he’s still nervous, well- he’s still got damn good reason to be.

It takes a bit to re-find their balance, after the heat. Barnes tries to touch, to nuzzle close and rest hands on his belly- and Brock neatly evades him, keeping his boundaries clear and sharp.

Had to collect the set, didn’t you? Well now you got it, cross it off the list and move on.

You know better than to want more.

He’s tried to stay away from touching Barnes completely, but the nightmares get worse, and one incident of the Soldier screaming and going for a weapon in the twilight is enough to make them both very consistent in their sticking together after hours, even if it’s back to back. Barnes looks sick when he realizes he could have hurt them, and Brock-

Brock is practical about these things.

His nightmares are neither here nor there.

They still haven’t really talked about what was said in the heat of the night. Barnes is speaking more, but not yet about Rogers or his memories or what he plans to do. Brock isn’t certain he wants to know, but at the same time it burns him up not knowing- what is Barnes actually getting out of this?

Time. Peace, relative to knowing only sleep and murder. He supposes that he’s not making too many demands on Barnes, and that’s gotta be something of a relief- he has to be neither mindless assassin nor estranged mate nor national hero, just chip in to the supper-pot and occasionally do the dishes. When he needs to stare into space, there’s a hundred miles of forest for any direction to get lost in, and a stable place to come home to when reality sets back in.

What he remembers or not on his own time is his business.

In the dog-days of summer, they make another couple of trips into town- both because they need
supplies, and because Barnes is getting better about asking for what he wants.

“I need more news,” he says to Brock, holding up the battered smart-phone he’d used when he first arrived. It’s long-since out of charge, and the only place to find a working outlet is in civilization. And while the radio has news stations, it’s faster and easier to be able to do a search, so he goes with it. More intel can’t hurt, and it’s a change of pace from being followed around by sad eyes whenever he’s up and about.

Brock stays in the truck with the feeble AC and his now undisguisably pregnant belly, letting Barnes take the list. He comes back with everything thereon, and a few small additions, a notebook, some candy. There’s a bottle of truly horrendous vodka on the shelf, now, one of a pair bought on a whim, but since Brock is abstaining and Buck would have to drink it like water to get anywhere (as he’d found the first time he tried it) they mostly use it for cuts and scrapes, same as the beer is used for stewing. Instead, they drink cool water in the evenings, and sometimes- sometimes they talk.

“Tell me about the Steve Rogers you knew,” Brock finally asks one night, when it’s all quietly weighing down with the oppressive weight of humidity. They’re both down to their drawers and nothing sexy about it, it’s just that miserable out, especially for a pregnant omega. It’s going to be a hell of a storm when it breaks, but until then it’s just brewing like hell’s armpit.

And that’s how it starts.

Little by little, Barnes opens up. There’s nothing about Rumlow stealing in like a thief and taking what wasn’t his- just a little guy two times too big on the inside, who took all the shit that the world threw at him and kept on coming. Brock listens, and gradually the pieces become larger, more consistent, and they’re strung together with confidence as Bucky tells him tales of another life, before the train- before the fall.

-he’s getting better. For a given definition of better.

Bucky asks him about the Steve he knew. And that’s when Brock starts letting him get close again, at least enough to share the couch, because these aren’t the sort of stories you share from ten feet away, standing with chins held firm and stoic. They’re alone, and missing hard, and it’s too much to be alone together.

“And then, and THEN- he takes off his helmet, pops the shield on his back and he says ‘shall we see?’ One hell of a dance he put on there- I saw the footage after, thought I was either gonna wet myself or cream my pants.”

Bucky shakes his head, smothering his snort of horrified laughter in his hand. It’s late and they’re punchy, the sort of easy camaraderie that usually takes beer but can be had for a bond, if need be. Stove-made popcorn covers the gap left by libations, and Barnes crunches it up before volunteering his own contributions. The grenade story is practically mythical at this point, but Brock had never heard the part about after, when Buck had first got word and chased down Steve to give him a very public (volume-wise) private dressing-down. The rest of the Commandos had been giggling about it for days.

It turns out ‘Steve Rogers Giving People Heart Attacks’ is not something they’ve had to suffer alone.
You are all wonderful. Thank you.
Chapter 15
Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There are still gaps. Brock finds Barnes scribbling through pages and pages of that notebook he got, tearing them out and putting them back into place. They’re wrinkled and smudgy, terrible chicken-scratch interspersed with militarily-neat coded handwriting and occasional crude sketches—things like a man’s lapels or an old car, or a brick of a phone. The pages can fill the kitchen and porch tables when all laid out together, and several times Brock’s had to yell at Bucky to pick up his goddamn craft project so he can work on their meals. The pages are all swiftly gathered up again, put in a precise but subtly-changing order in their folder.

It’s a timeline, Brock realizes. And when he reads what’s written there, at least what he can understand without having to sit down and actually try to break James’ codes, it’s about the Soldier’s years—hundreds of little pieces of death and confusion, endless repetitions of ‘this is what you are’ and comparisons of how it changed. Names, faces—gaps marked with ‘ice?’ or ‘was not sleeping, fill in later.’

Pierce’s name is always written with such pressure, it looks like the paper ought to bleed. The notes that surround it are tightly coded and in so small a print it looks almost like the writing on dollar bills.

Barnes is—intense when he’s working on it. It switches languages sometimes mid-sentence, from English to German to Russian, and a couple more Brock only knows well enough to threaten people in, and he snarls under his breath if he’s interrupted. When he gets like that, unless Brock has to shove things aside to actually use a table, he leaves him be and concentrates on his own troubles.

Like what the hell he’s going to do once the baby’s born, if they make it that far.

Stress is bad, he repeats to himself, trying to lose himself in stripping and cleaning one weapon after the other.

See, it’s not like he wasn’t aware of just how risky this all was. How fragile the life inside him is, how easily the support network of his body can be disrupted. It’s just that up until now, he had a whole lot of really immediate concerns, like surviving his injuries and not getting captured by the myriad people who would want him in a cage. It’s not even his first go-round, but it’s the first time he’s had a training manual to tell him all the things that could go wrong, and when, and how, that he doesn’t already know from experience. All with the hearty implication that this is only the tip of the iceberg, for further terrorization consult an obstetrician.

So he gets dizzy once in a while. He’s taking it slow, as slow as he can afford to, and drinking and eating regularly. It’s not even half-bad stuff, for all he’s gotta braise it to oblivion to make sure there are no parasites, unless it’s pre-packaged from town. No spotting. No swelling hands or face, just a little puffy from weight gain. He’s just gotta hang on a little longer, couple more months, and—

He’ll have a baby. A living, breathing baby to protect from all the rest of the world.

And Rogers doesn’t fucking know.
The seven-month mark hits, and he runs the numbers in his head again.

Valentine’s Day, of all things. And he has to laugh, because sick jokes are better than none at all.

One minute Brock is standing up when it feels like the entire world is draining away around him. The next thing he knows, he’s waking up on the couch and it feels like every cushion in the cabin is stuffed under him, or they would be if there were more than two pillows and a moldy settee about.

Barnes is there again, looking him over with worried eyes.

“You keep doing that.”

“Yeah, well- I’m pregnant, it’s been known to happen.” Not this often. Not out here, where he can’t get help.

(“Your mate-he should be-“ “Your mate. I haven’t got one.” And it’s cruel, to throw that in Barnes’ face when he’s just barely got a handle on who he is.)

“You shouldn’t be-“

“What?” Brock growls, swinging his legs over the side and taking a deep breath to power himself upright. “Standing up, moving around? Hate to break it to you- I got no other choice. Nobody in the world gonna take care of me but me, unless it’s to take my baby and make it like-”

...You.

He stops, words bitter and shameful in his mouth, while Barnes grips his arms around himself again. Brock’s swatted him away almost every time he’s tried to touch since the heat, and it’s starting to be where he doesn’t try.

It was comfortable, it was nice- it can’t happen again.

“The thing you did,” Brock finally asks, acid in his throat, breaking the silence and Barnes’ averted eyes. “The first time, when you had me on the ground. What were you doing?”

“Listening for the heartbeat. The range for an un-distressed fetus is-“

Brock looks up sharply, hand resting on his stomach. “You can hear that? For real?”

“Up close, yes.”

“And you can get an accurate count?”

Bucky gives him such a look.


(There is nothing but order with HYDRA, and the only reassurance needed is that success is silent and failure is punished-)

“Could you do it again?” I need to know. I have to know it’s all right.

Bucky doesn’t say a word, just crouches down by the side of the couch and pushes Brock’s shirt up
again. He closes his eyes and leans his head against the taut swell of his belly, bristly jaw scratching along the growing curve.

Brock watches his eyes move under the lids, and tries not to breathe too loudly when his lips twitch in the same silent counting as before. The edge of his shirt is crumpled in his fist.

Finally Barnes lifts his head up again, and gifts him with a hint of a crooked-toothed smile.

“Just fine.”

The baby kicks at the sound of his voice, and they both move to touch the spot, fingers brushing.

“I think… I think I need to slow down a little,” Brock finally admits. Bucky keeps looking at him, that half-lidded stare that’s expectant without going so far as to roll his eyes.

“What?”

Barnes’ fingers are suddenly threaded in his hair, metal palm gentle on his abdomen. He nuzzles against the side of Brock’s head, hitting the right spots in just the right ways for a completely non-sexual shudder to go all through him, leaving a lazy, dreamy-eyed lassitude in its wake.

“You need more of this, too.”

Oh fuck.

“And we’re done. Get off, I’m getting up, I got shit to do,” Brock says, and tries to push Barnes away, bracing his shoulder against the other soldier’s strength in hopes that he’ll give way and let him off the couch.

And do pigs fly? Of course not- because even when he’s not pregnant and feeling like shit and fainting like an old woman, the Soldier’s serum outmatches him by about twenty times, and Barnes has this look he gets that means Brock has about two options- lead, follow, or get out of the way.

“You need this,” he says again, gentle and insistent all at once, and Brock feels like he’s going to melt, or possibly punch someone and cry as the simplest contact undoes every wall he’s tried to put up since he jabbed Rogers with the stun-sticks.

“You’re hurting all the time, I can smell it. Shaking inside. And that’s bad for- everything,” Barnes says, temple still pressed against Brock’s. He takes a couple slow breaths, only shaking a little on the edge, like he’s gearing up for something big- and when he speaks, it’s like someone else is speaking through him, clear and unhesitating and so New York it’s like out of an old cartoon.

“They useta say us omegas had to have companionship because we were delicate souls. Now it’s all ‘oxytocin’ and ‘serotonin’ and ‘touch starvation’- and near as I can figure, it makes sense. Gets lonely in your own skin. Lotta hard work to do without anyone there. Gotta know someone’s got your back.

“Lemme help?”

“The hell did you do, swallow a dictionary? Is today ‘smart off with wiki quotes’ day?” Brock grumbles, trying real, real hard not to shake. It’s not working so good.

It’s not like a snake-bite or a bullet wound, or any other sort of reasonable excuse. Hell, it’s hardly even a split lip. It just isn’t right that he can be undone by the same damn isolation that’s been needful, vital to his survival and his career.
Barnes has used up all his words for the day in that one big rush. He just stays right there, cuddling up against Brock’s side and stroking his skin, occasionally rubbing his head against him.

“Fuck my life,” Brock- growls(sobs).

Chapter End Notes

*rolls around in fluffy comments* Again, you all are wonderful and amazing. Thank you for reading and enjoying. And again- if it weren't for the awesome Bofurrific, this wouldn't have got this far.
Chapter 16

Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Barnes is right, of course.

The baby is still healthy inside him, as best he can tell, but Brock’s been knotting himself up over-everything. Can you blame him, he’s got an awful lot going on too- his only companionship is a guy who by rights should want him dead twice over, he’s out almost thirty years of his life to an organization that would just as soon see him on a slab as reward his bought-at-cost loyalty, and he’s still fucking dreaming about Rogers on a good night, and dead friends and empty cradles on bad ones.

Letting Barnes cuddle him again- helps. It pisses him off to be living out the stereotype, but he can’t fucking keep going without some kind of contact, without trusting someone. He is not going through bond-withdrawal sickness, because there is no bond- but he’s tired and swollen and needy, and with his pride being the only thing that’s gotten him through so many times, it’s hard to abandon.

He still wonders when Barnes is going to get it, and walk. He hasn’t snapped, seems to be less inclined to violence without anyone telling him or immediate threat, but-

“When you’re thinkin’ that loud, even I can hear it.”

Barnes is looking up from his work at the table, pencil held carefully above a stack of pages.

“Worse, I can smell the smoke.”

Brock snorts, turning from the stove with a hand on his hip. “Fuck you.”

“Tried that, remember? What was it- ‘I’m old enough to be your mother, and I’m too tired to be your daddy’?”

With the touching has come the talking, again. The Soldier, given what he was deprived of for so long, keeps edging into not just Barnes but some smart-mouthed asshole named Bucky, who gives as good as he gets on good days and is almost like having a friend once more.

There are still bad days. But at the end of them, there’s a warm body and a familiar scent that means safe and comfort.

“Hey, you try haulin’ this much gut around, and see how excitable you feel.”

And because he allows it these days, because it makes the damn Soldier happy- Barnes rises from his seat and puts his arms around what’s left of Brock’s waist. Rumlow is holding a spatula at the ready for the moment he’s had enough, but until then, mismatched arms encircle his- circumference, and the warmer flesh hand rubs the low, full curve inquisitively.

“You sure you only got one in there?”

Brock wheezes.

“Don’t even fucking joke about that.”
In the next ten minutes or so, there is way more canoodling than is strictly kosher, a firm smack with a spatula, some swearing as the onions on the stove start to scorch, and one very cranky and unhelpfully aroused ex-special-forces trying to pretend that he is not falling prey to yet another side effect of his rocketing hormones.

Barnes backs off, because he has the patience of a hunter when he’s not in heat, and they’re going to be sharing the same bed-space eventually.

“Why the hell you do that, I have no fucking clue,” Brock grumbles, rescuing what he can of the onions before tossing in the cubed potatoes, blood rising high in his cheeks. “And don’t say it’s because I’m glowing, I will kick your ass from one end of this wood to the other.”

That’s what it takes to make the infamous Winter Soldier laugh.

Later, there’s no laughing- just Barnes’ head resting on his chest while he curls around Brock like a limpet on a rock. His face is leaning into Brock’s neck, cheek rubbing against the scarred flesh there. The sensation is coming back, slowly, and Brock tries not to think about what that means because he has room for only so many freak-outs in his busy schedule.

Today was a good day, and so far, tonight is a good night. But this time it’s Brock who can’t sleep, who stares up at the ceiling with his hand on the back of Barnes’ neck, the other resting on the heavy curve of his abdomen.

The kid’s settled for once, just occasionally giving him a sleepy nudge in the kidney- it likes Buck’s voice, sometimes won’t calm down enough for him to sleep without it. Brock is trying to appreciate it, make good use of the peace while it lasts, but sleep is just not coming.

He wonders who it’ll be tonight- Jack or Steve or Pierce, the Soldier or the soldiers or his dad. He wonders where it’ll be, the old home-place or any one of a half-dozen battlefields, an op gone wrong or a hospital room.

It’s never here, though. Here, against all odds- it feels safe.

He can tell when Barnes wakes because of the sudden stillness, and murmurs the soft nonsense passcode that means there’s no danger. Barnes melts against him again, nudges his cheek into Brock’s shoulder and his hand over the senior omega’s stomach, wrinkling the flannel.

“Can’t sleep?”

“No.”

And Brock would just leave it at that, but Barnes is gently petting his belly, silent in that way that means he’s getting ready to say something.

“Was playing earlier. Woulda heard it if there were two.”

“That’s… good to know, kid.”

And that’s the freaky thing. That he can even think to play at all speaks volumes for what the serum’s putting right in his brain- that he’s willing to play with his former handler means that somewhere inside his head, he’s still hooked.
The night’s silence stretches on, the spring peepers and crickets having canceled their debuts now that the summer heat has damped down. Rumlow still eyes the ceiling, and finally the words won’t stay back anymore.

“I just don’t get it.”

“Mmhuh?”

The hand that’s killed a hundred men is still curled on top of his stomach, skin-warm from prolonged contact even through his shirt.

“The work we did together—” escort, blood and brains on the snow/sand/concrete, cool-down, cryo-prep—“The time you lost— the shit that went down every time you woke up—“ the stink of burning hair and ozone crackling—

“Why am I not on your hit-list?”

The vocabulary of stillness and silence is a wide and varied one, no matter what the linguists would have you believe. There’s a moment of tense fear, then anger—something that blazes hot like a blast-furnace before the door swings shut on it, keeping it restrained.

“Maybe,” Barnes murmurs against his neck, a hint of teeth behind soft lips, before pushing himself up on his right arm. “I don’t wanna have a hit list. Maybe,” he says, “I wanna believe that if you can get out, so can I.”

Brock tenses staring up at James in the dark, the vague outline of his too-young too-old face painted in the shadows, his eyes downcast.

“You’re not just a scared feral lookin’ for mama anymore. Why the fuck would you trust me?”

“Maybe I remember a list of trigger words I didn’t hear cross your lips for eight years.”

Kneel. And collapse. And others he’d only heard rumors about, ones he wasn’t high enough on the chain to know the keys to, like self-terminate. He’d seen the first two in use more than a few times when he’d been coming up the ranks, as the Soldier’s previous handlers had demonstrated their control—before the mission where the old guard had got themselves shot and he’d been the only one to be able to get a handle on the asset.

(Looking into Alexander Pierce’s eyes during that debriefing had been, no shit, the coldest moment of his life.)

Brock swallows. The Soldier’s hand is still on him, and he knows he can hear his heart beating faster.

“Maybe when I was with you, it was the only time I wasn’t hurting, or scared. It- felt like safe.”

“I didn’t fucking keep you safe- I just did my job so they could do theirs—“

“And you smelled like fear all through. Got a real distinct smell, when your bond is unhappy,” Barnes says, tilting his face up, eyes brighter than they should be in the night. “Maybe I figured you wanted to be there about as much as I did.”

And there’s not a lot Brock can say to that. Because Barnes is—up to a point—right.

“And as for this,” he says, and gives Rumlow’s belly an extra rub, before biting his lip. “I was just—God, I was glad he wasn’t still stuck on a dead man, a ghost. Was living.”
Brock looks at him another heartbeat longer, remembering what it is to breathe, and then glowers.

“Kid- we have gotta work on raising your standards.”

Barnes slumps against him, thumping his head firmly onto his shoulder.

“’D’rather work on sleeping. ‘S nice to sleep in the warm,” he mutters, and that is that.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your comments, kudos, and hits^^
Chapter 17

Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The summer’s passing. Brock is growing heavier, and it surprises him every day- he has never in his life been this pregnant, and while the panic fades, it’s replaced by endless consternation at the changes his body is going through. His hips have creaked their way outward, and his navel’s on the verge of popping out. His arms and shoulders are still strong, his legs when they aren’t swollen- he can still hit a blackbird’s eye in the dark if he tries, it’s not like he’s wasted away to nothing but a uterus. But he looks down at himself, at the scars and the stretching and the heavy, waddling gait, and he wonders what (Steve), what anyone he knew would think of Brock Rumlow, roughest toughest butch-omega on the team now.

If they thought anything aside from ‘traitor’.

When Barnes is out and about, when he’s alone in the cabin- he cradles his belly and whispers promises, echoes of what was said long ago.

*I will not be drunk when you need me. You will never be more afraid of your home than the outside.*

*And if you fuck up beyond telling, the world is against you and you have nowhere else to go- I’ll look you in the eye and tell you it’s us against them all.*

The scent neutralizer runs out, and he doesn’t bother sending Barnes to town for more- who’s he trying to smell normal for, out here? It’s not worth a trip in the old junker- there’s getting to be too much belly between him and the steering wheel for comfort, and James may be capable of driving, but he is not capable of driving well.

He did not anticipate just how strong his scent has gotten in the interim.

So it’s a couple days and he hasn’t had their weekly bath set up because it’s fucking chilly out, okay? And it’s a lot of effort to get everything where it needs to be and he’s still trying to take it easy after the last fainting spell, so it waits a day or two.

When Brock gets up, pulls on his favorite of the oversized shirts, it’s a little un-fresh. A longtime connoisseur of differing levels of locker-room funk, Brock doesn’t think it’s too bad, neither sour nor foul with any particular emotion. Any thing, any place that’s lived in for a long time and isn’t regularly cleaned from corner to corner is going to smell like its occupants eventually. It just means that it’s home, and without a bunch of alphas to attract or betas to offend, it’s comfortable.

The thing is, when they ask ‘which one of you’s the alpha?’ when a couple of same-sexers goes by- it’s not just trying to figure out who tops. People have gone it alone since the beginning of time, but when they group together for a birth, there’s certain patterns that tend to play out, and someone usually falls into the role.

Barnes comes up behind him, takes the elbow in the sternum like a champ, and buries his nose at the back of Brock’s neck, practically parting his hair.
“You’re gonna be a mama,” he whispers, and Brock twitches, a shiver going through him all unasked-for.

“What was your first clue?”

Barnes doesn’t answer, just makes a soft sound and breathes behind him, his good arm coming up to loop around Brock’s front.

“I mean, I know my weather-balloon impersonation is good, but-“

Barnes hums in his ear, and it hits notes that it really, really shouldn’t but it really, really does. It slides down the scale to almost a growl, and Brock is suddenly swallowing hard, heart in his throat and heat in his nethers.

“Barnes,” he says quietly. The hum turns inquisitive, and the breath teasing the skin of his neck is-enticing. “If you’re gonna say it like that, you better be ready to back it up. ‘Cause I got no patience right now, and- mph!”

See- when an omega or even a beta is in the family way, at a certain point the body just goes out of its way to announce to all and sundry that ‘yes I would like a bodyguard, please come snuggle me.’ In a bonded pair, it invokes protective and sometimes possessive behavior. When an omega has no alpha present, it also tends to be paired with a beckoning ‘helloooo, sailor.’

Seems Barnes is okay with his own kind even outside of the desperation of a heat, because he’s stepping in where Rogers should be as easy as-

James sucks a bruise into his neck, and Brock tilts his head back, leans to the side to let him do it.

“You smell- really, really good.”

“We gotta have the ‘scent is not consent’ talk, Barnes? ‘Cause- oh God,” he groans, biting down on even more obscene sounds as the metal hand passes over his chest. The cold almost makes up for how tender it is, and Barnes is flush against his back, plainly interested in going back to bed even though he must have been up for hours.

Brock Rumlow has fucked and been fucked.

He’s had teenaged fumblings, and paid professionals. He’s played the honey-trap on missions, blown off steam in the locker-room, and had two painfully awkward attempts at dating within SHIELD (never within the STRIKE Unit itself- you don’t bed your brothers or your sisters). He has, very briefly, been made love to by a lonely national icon, desperate to connect and willing to trade the memory of his own lost mate for another smartassed brunette who was conveniently there.

He has never before been worshipped.

“Jesus!”

“I hurt you?” His hands go still, and Brock is panting, desperate for the next pass.

“Keep going- harder!” The Soldier’s tongue passes over his lips, pink and pale and worried, and he whispers again, right by his ear.
“You sure?” His body is warm against Brock’s back.

“YES, damnit!”

He digs his knuckles in deeper, stretches flesh and muscle with gentle, circular motions until something gives- and Brock goes limp with a moan.

“Better?”

He takes a moment, gathers his wits and his breath. It’s been so long, it’s overwhelming.

“Yeah…” Brock sighs.

He’s sitting with his forehead resting on his folded arms, ass-backwards on the kitchen chair. Bucky’s hands rest warm on his bowed back, waiting for the word to move on, up or down or to the sides. This is a new skill, or newly recovered, for him; Brock has no objections whatsoever, and it makes Barnes happy every time he finds something useful he can do aside from kill.

The backrub is the natural aftermath of a few bouts of lazy coupling, replete with scent-gland nuzzling and belly-kisses he can still feel the tingle of on his skin. Turns out Barnes isn’t drugged or out of what’s left of his mind- he just really likes the new, undiluted scent. It’s Brock’s body trying to attract and retain an alpha that isn’t there- and Barnes, who has an interest in the whole mess because it’s his alpha who started it, is taking the brunt of it. The care-taking, the comforting, the protecting, the providing…

“You’re too damn good for me, you know that?”

Barnes presses a kiss to the back of his neck, and Brock heaves a shuddery sigh.

“We’re old broken soldiers. We take what we can get.”

At this stage of his life, when someone is willing to rub his back and his belly, will sing the baby inside him to sleep, Brock doesn’t really have the energy to object anymore. If someday Barnes wakes up again, realizes he’s been wasting his time on a liar and a killer and a homewrecker, well… that day is not today.

This is a pretty good day.

And when the night comes, and his dreams are only bloody enough to know that they’re his, and his team is alive and laughing, whooping it up that they’re gonna be godfathers-

It’s a good night.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for your kind words and your enjoyment.
Interlude- The Lost Scene

Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A moment back in time.

James pulls, just a little. Brock follows, because why not, and ends up on top of him on the couch, settled back-to-front in his mismatched arms. For all his metal parts and the dense thickness of his muscle even after months out of ‘conditioning’, Barnes makes a comfy mattress, and his lips are soft against Brock’s neck, his hands slow and gentle over the expanse of his abdomen. Brock makes a satisfied noise, wiggles a little to settle in, and enjoys the effect it has.

Barnes is a pretty, pretty man. Even sick as a dog and strung out from what HYDRA did to him, he looked like something you wanted to eat up, and Lord knows, there had been truly Darwinian-level idiots who’d tried.

(That a couple of mid-level STRIKE who didn’t know their asses from a hole in the ground thought they could mess around with a high-level asset trained to perfect obedience under the personal command of the boss of the whole operation- that was not just dumb, it was disrespectful of the entire hierarchy.

That they thought they’d pull that shit under the nose of their omega commander- that, that was where they got truly suicidal. One had resigned for ‘personal reasons.’ The other had been on the wrong side of a firefight when his gun jammed. So sad.)

But James is something better than pretty now. He’s- sweet. When he’s not on-point like an alert hound, he’s gotta be the gentlest thing on the planet. Cautious with his touch, eager for affection, with eyes that light up to devastating effect when he feels- happy, sad, you know it.

He wants, and you want to give it to him.

He’s got the first of Brock’s shirt-buttons at his fingertips, slowly rolling it between them until it comes undone. Finally the top one works its way through, and Buck sweeps the neckline open, before dropping his fingers to the next one with a look of intense concentration on his face. Brock halfway expects to see his tongue peek out of the corner of his mouth.

“You pop those, you’re sewing ‘em back on.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he mutters, and the second button finally comes undone. Warm fingertips trace little circles on Brock’s skin as he opens his shirt further, and he talks soft and low while he’s at it, in the mode Brock calls practicing his Bucky voice, like he’s trying to get better at being himself.

“You’re beautiful, you know that?”

“I’m fat as a goddamn house, Barnes.”
“Mmm…” Handsy is not the word. Worshipful isn’t quite either, because that implies a certain amount of, oh- respectful restraint. What Brock is experiencing is somewhere on the edge of obscene groping, because he can see James’ palms swirling over the swollen curve of his belly, and feel his cock go hard and thighs go damp against his ass, all the while with the other omega thrumming happily in his ear.

“You- really like the belly, huh, Barnes?”

“Mmm. I know what you’ve been up to- know where Steve’s been.” And that still makes him twitch, makes his pulse suddenly jump in his throat despite everything and Buck quickly rests his metal hand over Brock’s heart, pressing a kiss to the side of his face.

“Shh, shhh… ‘s good taste. You got a liking for him, don’t you, Rummy?” he murmurs, fingers walking a little trail down the front of him, tapping on the taut skin. Brock leans back into him with a sigh as the baby wakes up and starts to tap back, gets kissed on a stubbly scarred cheek for his trouble.

“Like that big, pretty cock of his. Fills a guy up. You shoulda seen him when he was smaller, though- just as much fight, and he worked harder for it than any other guy.”

That thought- Steve Rogers as a scrappy young alpha, skinny as a rail and sweating in exertion as he makes love to a younger, lighter-in-spirit Bucky- fuses something somewhere in Brock’s brain, and what blood isn’t blooming in his face is headed south, at speed.

“Yeah, I like the belly, Rumlow. ‘Cause maybe I like knowing I chose good- I can see you fill up, know that’s my alpha doin’ his good work,” he says, and he brings his knee up between Brock’s legs, rubbing his belly possessively while giving him something to press against, and oh does he need it.

“I can smell how good you got it, just- flush. Warm. Like nothing I’ve smelled in seventy years,” he finishes in a whisper, and his hands go still.

Brock reaches his arm back behind their heads to stroke his fingers over James’ hair. The younger omega responds by burying his face in Brock’s neck, breathing through the choking moment. It’s disgustingly sentimental, but fuck it. He’s more than seven months pregnant, he’s got a good excuse.

I took this from you. Least I can do is let you stay close.

The sob that escapes Barnes is small and strangled, but Brock is cuddled right next to him, can feel it resonate in his chest as he leans back against him. James’ arms grow tighter around him, and Brock once again resigns himself to being the Soldier’s teddy-bear for a bit, still stroking his hair while he tries to get ahold of himself in the middle of their makeout session.

“I tell you something, it stays here, okay?” James’ nod is more felt than seen, and Brock threads his fingers into the other man’s scalp, wincing as he feels dampness seep into his shoulder.

“And I mean dead-men-tell-no-tales, I would order you to forget this if I could, it stays here.” Now he’s got his attention, and Barnes lifts up his face with a sniff.

You’re a goddamned fool, Rumlow.
He tilts his face away, shrugs his shoulder, and tries to keep his voice low and steady and completely nonchalant.

“I miss him too.”

A beat passes. Then Barnes gives a soft, muffled hint of laughter that’s still more than a little bit sob, and turns things so that he’s atop Rumlow, pressing his lips to his. Brock shuffles back against the arm of the couch and pulls him in on top of him, running rough, greedy hands over James’ back.

“Well that was more than a little bit sob, wasn’t it?"

“Should’ve- should have been-”

“Shoulda been yours, yes, I know,” Brock says, pulling his half-open shirt all the way off. Bucky whimpers, and folds his arms around him, careful not to pinch with the sliding plates of the metal one.

“For today- for right now- yours. All yours, buddy. Just be careful-“

He needn’t have worried. Buck is cautious of where he’s tender, gentle where he’s swollen. Beautiful when he cries, and Brock is torn between wanting to be triumphant over having stolen this gorgeous thing for himself, and wanting to have a short, sharp word with Rogers about leaving him to clean up his messes.

He settles for being made sleepy with pleasure.

“So if you- remember him, want him, think you could be non-violent around him,” Brock asks, arm behind his head and lazy in the afternoon sunlight. “-why are you here?”

“I remember him,” Barnes says, carefully. “But I also remember you.” He leans in again, pressing his head to Brock’s shoulder, hands nestled against his big belly where the baby is kicking.

“And- I’m keeping you safe for both of us.”

“I get the feeling you’re the only one who’ll appreciate that,” Brock replies, dry as summer grass. He still sets his hand atop Bucky’s, giving the kid a nice big target for practice-pads. It’s a little fighter, and he’s relaxed enough to the point where he can almost let himself imagine, hope- for a hell-raising girl, or a sweet soft blue-eyed boy.

Barnes doesn’t say a thing. He doesn’t have to. When Steve Rogers loves, he loves deep. Full-throttled and reckless, with no brakes and no background checks and no damn care for himself. If you catch on tight, you’ll be in for a hell of a ride- and if you spike the wheels, you’ll both be destroyed.

There’s no coming back from that. But here, now, with what he’s got? Brock’s content.
Thank you all for your comments, kudos and hits. Please take this porn as a holiday treat.
Tonight is not a good night.

Who knows what brings it on- phase of the moon, change in the weather, something one of them said. Even with Brock near Barnes is tossing and twitching, muttering fearful things. Most nights he’ll be curled in what space there is to be had on the couch to save that oft-patched airbed, but Brock’s been elbowed three times, and with the metal prosthetic and the baby in his belly, that’s nothing to joke about.

Before he would have just kicked Barnes off the couch, listened for the yelp as confirmation. Now he does it with a gentle waking and a trailing hand on his shoulder, the nearest he gets to apologizing- but the hangdog expression Buck throws at him as he’s banished to the mattress is the same.

Sleep is a long time coming.

“Oh, you wanna be a daddy? Tough shit, old friend,” Jack is sneering, and that can’t be right, because Jack’s dead, dead or someone else by now. His flesh is grey and slippery in the twilight, coming off his broken bones.

“Maybe I wanted to be a daddy, ever think of that?” And no, Rollins was never about the family man thing- but who knows? “Never gonna get the chance, am I?”

-and he’s standing among rows and rows of them, coffins, cradles draped in the red flag of HYDRA. His friends dead on foreign sand, the bloody harvest of the Insight carriers. And Steve’s standing among them all, the bundle in his arms draped in the same, and it’s the cold blue light of hell in his eyes when he opens his mouth.

“Did you really believe that this war would end wars?”

He wakes up in a hollow gasp for air, sick and shaking. It’s dawn, he’s alone- Barnes is out on perimeter check again, the way he gets when it’s a bad day.

It’s a bad day. That’s all.

He can get up and go on knowing that’s just how it’s going to go.

Brock pulls himself from the couch, groaning and stretching and scratching as he does. There’s so much more to put to rights, pregnancy and age adding up the aches and creaks and things that need to go pop before he can function.

You’ve let yourself go, soldier. Time was you could roll out of your sleeping bag, fire a dozen headshots, and be back in time for breakfast without making a sound.
Time was. Time’s not anymore.

*Time is not on my side,* he grunts, and waddles his way out to the latrine. On the way he has to stop for a cramp that seizes him, sucking in chill morning air through his teeth. One thing the book has been good for- he knows that they’re practice-pains, his womb exercising for the big event in a couple months.

*Just don’t do that again until*- And he makes it, empties himself out without having to change clothes or feel the fall chill seep in. One challenge down, another half dozen to go. The kid’s taken up a classically abusive relationship with his bladder, alternately hugging and punching it, and that’s just a fantastic addition to already feeling like he’s going to pop if he breathes wrong.

*Fuck everything,* he growls to himself, and makes his way back into the kitchen. He’s greeted with a double row of apples on the table, shining red and green and smelling sweet, finally ripe after weeks of city-boy Barnes confusedly trying to foist off green fruit on his companion.

Brock pauses for a moment, one hand supporting the small of his back while the other rubs thoughtful circles on the front of his belly.

So maybe parental abandonment and how to drink your life away weren’t the only things he learned from dear old Dad. Brock’s content to say that unlike his resentment, the old family recipe hasn’t gone sour over the years, and it doesn’t take more than what he’s got on hand from the last trip out to make either.

Flour, fat, sugar- nice open space on the table once he sweeps Barnes’ sheets of paper to the side. (So that’s what set him off- nothing like a good old reminisce about the bad old days to leave one in need of a walk in the deep woods.)

September’s swept in with a chill and the promise of a swift winter after the long, lazy summer. Brock figures now that the apples are worth eating, better to get creative while the getting’s good, because even he can get sick of fresh. He takes breaks between steps, sits down in the kitchen chair to rest, because this week Braxton-Hicks is in the house, and baby isn’t happy about its home being disturbed for this nonsense.

“Kid, you had better appreciate the shit I go through for you,” Brock mutters, dusting flour off his hands. And front. If he’s making dough and stoking the oven, he may as well go for some kind of meat tart as well as the apple pie, but only if he’s got the energy for it after.

“But I got something I’ll bet you’ll like. Your old man’s no chef, but Great-Grandpa Benjamin’s pie is about the highest sacrament you can give to an apple, short of making booze out of it. And you’ll have to wait a few years before I let you try that recipe.”

There’d been no deliberate seduction when he’d hauled Rogers’ ass into bed, but if there had been this probably would have figured into it- and hopefully Barnes will like it too, if he ever gets himself in from the woods. Rumlow is insistent on his skills as a soldier taking precedence, but being able to sew up tears and feed yourself without poisoning anybody is important regardless of sex, and his allergy to ‘traditional’ omega roles has these few things as an exception- he is damn proud of it.

He swears and almost cuts his thumb as a new cramp hits, harder than the last-

That freezes him in place.

The book had said that more than one an hour was a cause for concern- that hadn’t been but thirty
minutes.

Fuck me, he thinks, with both hands braced on the table’s edge.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for your comments and kudos.
Maybe two in a row isn’t worth worrying about, if the hour-long interval holds before and after.

Three- well, he’s stressed, and his muscles are protesting, and oh God this can’t be happening. The pies go into the oven, but he broods over their baking, trying to soothe his troubled mind and body with sipped water and slow breathing.

The fourth hits like a wave, and it’s too soon, it’s much too soon. But it’s just. Practice.

Right?

The fifth feels like a knife in his spine, and he shouts out loud, howling Barnes’ name and praying that he’s close enough by to hear it.

No dice. Brock tries to breathe through it, paces slowly, trying to let it ease and let his body relax because there’s still time damnit. He lays down, tries to nap.

He wakes up cramping, and the pies are overdone.

“-arnes!”

He’s on his way back from patrol, ghosting through the woods with an empty head and an empty heart, because sometimes that’s the only way to be and not be broken shards inside. His face is a mask sometimes, and he needs to escape it, and the green woods with no mission beyond ‘guard’ is as good a place as any to find a fragile sort of peace. The words were- hard, today, and harder still to look someone else in the eyes. He- he, not it- had needed to be alone.

But his head shoots up at that.

“Barnes!”

Stealth is abandoned for speedidiot if someone has him you’re walkingrunning right into it
Rumlow’s voice is seared with desperation, hoarse with fear and repetition, and when the wind switches he smells distress

“JAMES!”

No blood, no water. No blood, no water. Brock’s fists are clenched and he’s done shouting when it won’t do him any good, and now he’s just trying to figure out if he can make it back to the couch before the knife in his spine twists again. He’s partway through nerving himself up to let go of the doorway when he hears running footsteps, crashing louder than they ought to (the Soldier is half-
again the mass of an unenhanced human of similar build, not merely because of his reinforced
James is there, bulling through the underbrush like the hounds of hell are at his heels, and he sprints across the clearing in a blur, coming to a three-point stop at the edge of the porch, just short of crashing into it. He’s seen that look before, on missions, determination and stress and fear the asset is not supposed to feel, and-

The metal arm scoops him up, Barnes has him in an easy carry despite their similar size, and bears him over to the couch in an instant. Brock lets out a whimper as he’s set down, hates the weak squeal of his voice, but the cramp hits again and it hurts-

Barnes is holding his hands, sniffing at his neck, trying to find out what’s wrong. Brock flinches, waves him off, but grabs his hand again to keep him from going too far.

“It’s early,” he groans, and buries his head in his free palm. “Too early, too soon, if it’s born out here now it’s fucked…”

“What can I-?” Barnes is looking at him, his blue eyes little-boy-lost.

Do. What can he do, what can either of them do…

Brock is a fucking commander of a STRIKE unit. He’s nursed good men and bad through worse than this on the battlefield, had to do it when he himself was hit and bleeding.

He is not going to wring his hands helplessly, even if he’s scared shitless.

His water’s not broken, he hasn’t felt blood or the mucus plug yet- and his baby was alive as of this morning, kicking him happily. It’s the cramps that are riding over him, his muscles fighting him as near as he can tell…

“Muscle relaxant- I need something to-“ And his eye falls on the shelf, and unless Bucky’s got a miracle hidden away in that duffle bag, it’s about the best chance he’s going to get, the least worst of a series of horrible choices.

“Get me that bottle. I’m about to do something really fucking stupid, but I’ve got no other choice,” Brock grunts, and breathes through his teeth as Barnes rushes to do as he’s bid.

His eyes burn as he hunches in on himself, waiting until smooth glass is pressed into his hand. It’s the only thing in the cabin that has even the slightest chance of helping, in more ways than one.

Barnes is still waiting, still- Soldierly in his confusion, and Brock can’t fucking stand it, not now.

“I need your help.”

Barnes drops to his knees, leans his head so careful against the other omega’s drum-tight abdomen. Brock leans back, trying to catch his breath, trying to keep his panic contained.

“What do you want me to do? I- I’m no medic, I know how to take people apart, I can tell when things are going wrong, I can’t fix ’em-”

“I need you to- talk to me. Anything, just- just keep talking, okay?” He nods mutely from the floor, still staring up tongue-tied. Brock looks at the bottle in his hand, dread running through him in sick little sparks.

You got attached. You stupid fuck, you went and lost your heart already, and now you’re gonna pay
for it.

Barnes is staring at the bottle himself, and Brock can see the gears spinning. An encyclopedic knowledge of *how to make people die* includes a lot of oddly-relevant trivia when you’re trying to avoid the same thing.

“If you drink this, you’ll bleed easier,” he says, not moving to take it but looking like he wants to. Brock looks up at him, and the despair in his throat is a livid thing.

“I can’t- I can’t do this sober. If I lose this one-“

That brings Bucky up short.

“This one?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your comments, they make my day. Going to try and slow down a little, rebuild the pad a bit. That being said-

*hides*
Chapter 21
Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Brock’s got the cork in his teeth, something that could be sweat or tears gathering in the lines around his eyes, ready to drip down his face. He pulls it with a squeaking pop, and pauses for a short, steadying breath before downing a neat swallow.

“Remember how I got kicked off the team, and Ricky took my shot?” Barnes nods slowly, watching him like a train-wreck with hands around his shoulders.

“He did it by getting me fucking knocked up. Caught me on the last day of my cycle, threw pebbles at my window until I came out, took me down by the creek-bed. Stars overhead, picnic blanket, real romantic folderol. Fuckin’ asshole, to this day I don’t know if he did it because he wanted me out of the way, or he thought he liked me and was just fuckin’ careless.”

He wraps his lips around the bottle’s mouth and tilts his head back. The next swallow burns hollowly on its way down, and the third barely stings- Bucky manages to set a hand on the bottle and holds it steady, forcing him to slow down.

“Easy- easy…” he whispers, and Brock can barely look at him for the burning in his eyes.

“I was a fucking kid, what the hell did I know? Dad wasn’t interested, long as I took the trash out and didn’t get between him and the bottle. No one else fucking noticed. I was seven months when it ended, tried to get them not to take me to the hospital because I couldn’t afford it.” He’d been on his knees on the cracked tile of the kitchen in that greasy little fast-food joint, the cramps tearing across his stomach, begging his boss not to finish calling the ambulance-

Just let me go home. Just let me get home, I can handle it, I’m fine-

He’s not fine.

Past a certain point, labor can’t be stopped, and in any case, the fight was over long before it started. Tangled cord, bad nutrition, bad genes, not enough rest, too many falls- who could ever know? If it had lived, it would have gone straight into fosterage while he tried to pull his life out of the shitcan. If it had ever breathed-

Instead it got a medical-waste funeral, and he spent the next six months trying to find a way to pay off the bills and to not. Think. About it.

The next time he’d seen Ricky, he’d smiled, and invited him down by the river, and broke his goddamn knees. Pain for pain- and his jaw, well, that was pain for pleasure.

Garret had smiled when he’d explained it like that.

He’s seventeen again, his body turned against him and he’s useless and skinny and scared, scared, scared- only there’s Bucky whispering to him, stay with me, Brock and the vodka is just starting to hit. A hiccup escapes him instead of a sob, and metal cradles the back of his head, lips murmuring sip it, sugar in his ear, thick with Brooklyn.
At some point the bottle in his hand is replaced by a cup with water, powdered sports-drink and just enough vodka in it to keep him slow and relaxed. He’s allowed to sit up enough to sip it, but Barnes makes him keep his legs up, pressure off. And instead of Brock chattering away to keep him calm, it’s **him** making the idle conversation, talking about *did you hear this crazy sh!t about the Dodgers, man, now that’s treason, and hey, maybe we’ll go see a game when the kid can appreciate it, because who doesn’t like baseball, huh?*

Slowly, the cramps- and everything else- fade away.

When he wakes, it’s to the sound of faint snips from over by the mirror. Brock shifts, groans softly- his mouth is a little furry, but the full-body headache he should be having isn’t there, and-

He rests his hands on the mound of his stomach with a gasp, feeling the reassuring weight and mass that means his baby is still inside of him. He aches, but he’s not *in pain-* and there’s even a feeble kick right in her favorite spot to let him know she’s okay.

Booted feet make their way across the floor to him, slow and deliberate- Barnes is out of stealth-mode as he comes up to Brock’s side, gentle when he presses hands to Brock’s shoulders.

“Hey,” he says softly, and it’s *Bucky* who’s speaking to him, Steve’s Bucky with no hesitance and no cares about how he’s using those blue, blue eyes. “We gotta talk.”

“About-” Brock coughs, and swallows against the dry coating of his throat. Barnes offers him water, strokes his shoulder while he drinks. His hair’s been cut- it’s not an exact replica of the old style, but it’s enough that Brock feels disoriented looking at him.

“About what we’re gonna do once we get outta here. But first, you’re gonna lay back down and rest- you had a long night.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, for real this time, slowing down. Just a couple days until I can get part 29 written and 30 at least conceptualized.

Thank you all again so much. I’m so glad you’re enjoying. Again- Bofurrific the wonderful is entirely to blame, otherwise this would be so much key-mashing.
Chapter 22

Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s two days lying on the couch and none of it restful, for all they’re both exhausted.

Brock is hunched in on himself, stinking with old and new regrets. Bucky keeps pressing water on him, little bits of food- checks him over, his pulse, the baby’s. The cramps don’t come back, at least, no more than an uncomfortable twinge every now and then.

They’ve made it past the hurdle. Now it’s down to making sure that it doesn’t happen again.

“We need help.”

“You think I don’t know that?” He bites and barks, fear and near-missed grief weighing on him. He’d gambled for the safety of his child, and it doesn’t seem to matter what he chooses, the house will always win. Mission in danger- situation fucked up beyond all recognition.

World domination, true security and a position at the top of the heap- he’d given up on those in the crushing dark of the Triskellion’s debris, with the hot concrete pressing into his skin like a flatiron. These days, all Brock wants is his baby safe, and it seems he can’t even have that.

“You need an omega-doctor,” Bucky’s saying, still trying to look in his eyes. He turns away, pulling his chin from Barnes’ gentle fingers. He’s talking to a ghost on celluloid, and it does nothing to help the feeling of unreality that keeps creeping up on him.

They’d actually discussed this, before. Brock had run the calculations, weighing the risks of getting seen by whatever passed for the town’s midwife, then cleaning up the loose end before the rumor can slip out. It’s a shit thing to do, but the people who would want this kid, his people-

He’d kill a whole lot more to make sure they never got their hands on his baby.

The practicalities of it are where it falls apart. It’s a small town, if someone that important went missing there’d be a search, which defeats the whole point of staying so far under the radar their own shadows can’t find them, and he himself is in no condition for anything involving hiding bodies or making a fast exit. Barnes could help, but-

“‘People are gonna die, Buck,’” he’d said at the suggestion, voice flat. “‘I can’t let that happen.’”

(He disappears for an entire day after, and doesn’t speak for another two.

Brock doesn’t bring up that idea again.)

Barnes is trying to talk to him, and it’s just- not what he wants to hear right now. The blankets get tightened around his shoulders, the cup nearest his reach is freshened, and finally Barnes- Bucky walks away with an alien growl of frustration.

When he comes back, he has the phone- older model Starkphone, at least a year out of style by now, in his hand, metal shining on metal. Concern has his mouth set in a flat line, his eyes equally afraid and annoyed.
“I could end this, right now. We’d both have to face- everything. But I could get us help.”

Brock shakes his head, looks up from the nest of blankets he’s been- fuck, that he’s been hiding in.

“I could make a call to get us help. It would end up with me on a table while whoever’s left in charge hovered over me, talking about what a gift I’d brought them. Sure, maybe I’d live, but loyalty kind of begins and ends with what you can give to HYDRA. So who the fuck are you thinking of?”

Buck flinches a little at the image, but keeps staring determinedly at him.

“Steve.”

No.

It takes Brock a moment to realize he hadn’t actually said that out loud yet, and that he really needs to.

“Not just no, but fuck no.”

Barnes takes it stoically, still glaring down at him with his jaw set.

“Then help me figure out what we can do to keep our baby safe. Call the shots, mister handler. You’ve had two days to pull it together, and that’s a lot longer than I can recall ever getting before someone else made an executive decision. Talk to me,” he finally pleads. He drops down to his knees at the couch’s edge, fist tangling in the outermost quilt.

“First of all-“ Brock starts with a croak “First. This is my baby. Not Steve’s. Not yours. Not HYDRA’s or SHIELD’s. This is nobody’s baby but mine,” he grinds out, trying to find the words for the fears he’s been shoving aside for want of someone, anyone to be not alone with.

He’d heard stories, urban legends- one omega befriends another, pregnant omega. Cuts them open, takes their baby. He’d worried about that- but Barnes had never made an aggressive move, had steadily improved his communication and his cogitation. And it’s not like he could have fought off the Soldier anyway, unless he got real, real lucky.

“Second- fuck you, I just had about a decade scared off my life, and I didn’t have that much left to begin with. If I wanna fall apart for a little bit, that- that’s something I can do. At least nobody’s shooting at me.” And they were? If there was an attack out here, what would he do then, hiding under the covers?

Barnes is looking at him, fingers worrying the cloth of his blanket-nest.

“Third- third is if I had an answer I’d give it to you. Maybe you weren’t allowed to know, but I got a pretty good idea of how far the rot goes, and worse, how far it can spread feelers for something it’s interested in. Cops? Hospital security? You better believe there’s gonna be someone at least listening in for a description like mine, in any major city- and the minor ones, we’d stick out like sore thumbs in the ‘burbs. I can’t move that fast- if someone shows up there’s not a goddamn thing I can do so I gotta make sure no one fucking shows up.”

“Then why not go to Steve?”
“Because he might not want you dead, but I’m not about to wager on my own chances with him, or his ability to keep the rest of his buddies off us. SHIELD, HYDRA - neither of them’s really gone until every last one of ’em’s burnt out, root and branch. And that doesn’t cover the feds, the army, hell, the local police. He’s a sweet kid, but I don’t- I can’t rely on him for protection. And besides,” he grunts, shifting to try and gain a little more time before the call of nature becomes too much.

“You may have forgiven me, God alone knows why- but I tried to kill him, Bucky. No mitigating factors, I got the order, I smiled in his face, I filled him full of lightning. He was gonna be dead within the day, and I went right along helping every step of the way.”

“So did I.”

“It’s not nearly the same. You were his fiancé. You got broke to do what you did.”

There isn’t anything Buck can say to that, so he glances down and away- but slowly turns back, and silently worms a hand under the blankets. Brock watches him, hunched around the bulge of his abdomen beneath the covers. She’s moving now because he’s upset, and while he’s glad to feel it, it also means he’s in for a good solid kicking session. (He didn’t know it was possible to be kicked in the junk by your own fetus. That had not been a pleasant discovery.)

Bucky smooths his hand over Brock’s belly, glancing up. The look he gives clearly states what about this?

“That doesn’t help anything. All it means is I got something to take away when they throw me down a hole.” There’s no way Rogers would let him keep it (her, him, he’s trying out words in his head) if he knew. And if he’s in prison- he can’t protect anyone. Not from SHIELD, not from labs, not from anything.

“I won’t let that happen.”

“Yeah, good luck with that,” Brock snorts, then winces as the kicking-storm starts up in earnest. Buck frowns, then starts as he feels it too.

“Somebody’s awake.”

Brock just groans softly, readying himself to heave upright.

“Wait. Let me?” Bucky whispers, and Brock collapses again, ready to growl. He’s terrified of the risk of losing his baby, but he also feels like a beached whale. Buck ignores his grumbling, just leans his head against the bulge where he’s often rested before, and starts to hum.

Baby perks up at that, and for a moment the renewed flurry has Brock sucking in a breath and crossing his legs tightly. Then Bucky opens his mouth, cheek smushed against Brock’s skin, and his smooth voice tumbles out.

“Hush, li’l baby, don’t you cry- daddy’s gonna sing you a lullaby…”

It goes on for a long time. The baby settles, calm but for the occasional nudge- and if there’s tears flowing down Brock’s face, neither of them is saying a damn thing.
I am overwhelmed and in awe. You guys are awesome, and I’m so glad you’re enjoying.
So they eventually do talk about plans for the future. It takes another day and a pint of ice cream, retrieved specially from town and for which Brock will grumble and huff about wasting gas, but still devours inside of an hour.

After, he commandeers the last few untouched pages in James’ notebook and sits down to work out their options. Barnes is right- he’s been moping inexcusably, bad fright or no, and it’s going to take more than that to get him, his baby, and his accidental partner out of this situation. Maybe they’ve been doing okay so far, but they can do better- they need a plan, a mission with set goals to get them from on the lam to secure, needs filled and in a safe place to raise a kid.

Trust in luck and the kindness of others? Please- Brock is a goddamn professional.

They talk about it after dinner. Barnes goes first, which happens almost never- except when it does these days.

“The money’s not going to last forever- I kept thinking, when I saw prices, or remembered them, that it was some kind of joke, part of the nightmare. I look at them now and wonder if I ever actually woke up. How the hell do we support ourselves?”

“How do you feel about mercenary work?”

Barnes frowns, looking down at the table. His metal hand balls in a fist, and he covers it with the palm of his other one.

“Is that something we can do?”

“Well, you’re uniquely suited, and once I’m back in fighting trim….,” Brock says, tapping his pencil on the scribbled lists. “That’s pretty much our skill-set. I know a few names in the business, some of whom might be willing to broker something for a big enough finder’s-fee. Couple of them might even take my call without needing a bribe not to turn me over. Malone’s dead, Bruiser’s in jail… Wilson- ugh, he’s good, but he’s a nightmare to work with…”

Brock keeps going, trying to come up with some options that will let them make use of their mutual skillset- and Bucky just gets quieter and quieter, until suddenly he stands up.

“I don’t want to,” he says, and walks out of the kitchen and through the front door.

Brock stares out the door at his retreating back, finally scrambling to his feet (three fucking tries).

“Shit.”

It’s the loose-ends discussion all over again, and he doesn’t know where Barnes is, and not three days ago he almost went into labor and he is Brock fucking Rumlow, goddamnit, he shouldn’t be
prone to such waterworks.

He tries and fails to putter around the kitchen, cleans a couple of their cache of weapons, paces the length of the cabin at a slow, breathless waddle to try and stay calm and detached. When that doesn’t work, doesn’t bring the world back into alignment, he rests on the couch and holds his head in his hands.

Barnes slips back in long about midnight. He finds Brock drowsing in his usual spot, hunched and tear-sick, and goes to his knees alongside.

Brock wakes up to his whispering.

“-please, please, please, don’t make me do it. Please-“

The former STRIKE commander stares down at Barnes, who’s shaking like a leaf, his eyes going wider and wider until they’re The Asset’s eyes, white-ringed like a horse about to spook.

Fuckin’ hell.

“Whoa, whoa there, fella…”

Bucky ends up grasped in his arms, shuddering as he tries to gain control of his breath, holding tight enough to creak and Brock just lets him.

They end up in a tangle side by side- there’s no room in Brock’s lap anymore. Buck hangs his head, like he could still hide behind his shorn hair, and takes the same soothing murmur he’s taken all these years like a balm.

They go forehead to forehead, and when Buck can meet his eyes, Brock strokes him softly down the back of his neck.

“Guess we know our limits now.”

A shaky little nod.

“I had this- speech all laid out. We’re outlaws, Barnes. We either gotta be real good at being bad, or flawless at being good. ‘Cause you, me and this baby, we’re not gonna get second chances.”

Buck is bundled up to his side, he can feel the thumping for himself. Kid’s getting stronger, more careful, picking its moments.

“So how’s this. I don’t tell you to do anything you don’t want to, and we figure this out tomorrow. ‘Cause I’m just about done for the night.”

I fucked up.

Bucky’s good with that. And in the morning, they start making a better fucking list.
You all are wonderful, thank you so much for reading and enjoying.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

So it turns out that Buck used to be pretty good with a wrench back in the day. Cars have changed a good bit since the old days, but the basic principles are still mostly the same. They figure maybe there can be a future in mechanic work, something other than murder or mayhem for hire. There’s still a hell of a lot of cash to pave their way, and they’ve been pretty frugal with it so far- it won’t last forever, but if they can figure out where to go it ought to get them there.

(“What languages can you speak?” Bucky frowns, and begins to slowly rattle things off in order of fluency. Brock ticks off places on the map.)

That’s just one of the things they hash out over the next day.

In the end Bucky doesn’t get his way on the healthcare issue, much as Brock would like to give it to him.

(“A doc sees these scars, they’re going to ask questions, want to know more- and unless you can get me a mob patch-man out here in the middle of nowhere, there isn’t enough money in the world gonna keep them from insisting on a hospital. If my options are go without or risk our IDs getting out there- I’ve gotta go without.”)

Bucky nods, once. Brock isn’t sure he’s really conceded, but he’s not pushing it for now.

Rumlow does not apologize. But in quiet moments, he breaks down and silently begs his kid for forgiveness, hand clamped over his mouth- because it’s all well and good to say you’d rather die than be a tortured lab-rat, but for preference he’d see it live and treat it like a goddamn prince/ess. He can’t lose this one- but there’s so many ways of losing, it’s hard to keep up.

He holds his belly in odd moments, and when Barnes wraiths up to him with begging eyes, he lets him touch too. There’s a schedule now, and a regimen James has cooked up that mostly makes him feel better, but Brock can’t argue too bad because the cramps haven’t come back, at least nothing like that horrible scare.

It involves an awful lot of sitting on his ass. He’s making new and better friends with the couch than ever before, only getting to help with meals when Barnes is really screwing it up (city. boys. Ugh.) Heavier chores like chopping wood and pumping water are right out- he ends up listening to a lot of radio while the cabin goes to wrack and ruin around him.

That’s where he hears it.

There’s only so much classic rock the human mind can take. Or oldies. Or even bubblegum pop, for those days when he’s really fucking bored (Barnes can only entertain him so much, he’s taking on the rest of the household duties and perimeter check, he can’t be here to coddle him all day). So he flips through the news stations, listening to the pundits and the pipers hashing out recent events and counting the summersaults baby can do in an hour.

“…-and in other news, yet another mysterious fire in eastern Europe revealed a deserted hidden base, presumed to have belonged to the terrorist paramilitary group known as HYDRA…”
He leans over, scrambles to grab the radio off the side table and set it atop his stomach, staring down at the dials as if they’ll reveal something more.

“...sources are few, but rumor has it that a man with a shield and his metal-winged companion have been spotted leaving the scene at more than one of these incidents. Does Captain America ride again? Speculation has been rampant since his disappearance after the attacks in DC, and—“

What. WHAT.

“...while confirmation has been few and far between, Cap did leave a message for all our listeners out there. This ad paid for by the Maria Stark Foundation—“

And it’s Steve’s voice, he never wants to hear it again and can’t stop listening to it talking about Sergeant James Barnes, long a prisoner and lost and confused, do not engage and if sighted, please call this number, any information will help.

It’s only the casing of the radio that’s cracked, yielding under Brock’s white-knuckled fingers as the signal fuzzes in and out.

“How could he DO THIS TO US?!”

Bucky. How could he do this to Bucky.

Putting more attention on Barnes isn’t going to help any damn thing. It means civilians pointing and gawking, it means more people looking, it means fucking danger and-

Metal fingers slide gently under his own, prise them from the battered old wooden box.

“First time hearing that one, huh?”

Brock looks up at Bucky, teeth clenched and fuming.

“You knew?”

Barnes shrugs his good shoulder, still holding Brock’s hand away from the cracked radio.

“Nothin’ to be done. He can’t run from a fight- and I gotta protect you. Stevie’s gotta do this one on his own.”

“That’s not what I meant—“ HYDRA is still out there. He doesn’t know if he should be overwhelmed or overjoyed or just plain over and done. Rogers is hunting them down, hunting him down, and he’s a danger to them and to himself.

“He’s set a fucking target on us.”

Barnes goes still for a moment, giving the lie to his next words. “Not out here- who’s gonna see us? I re-grow the beard, keep my head down if I go into town, who’s gonna know?”

“How the hell are you so calm about this?!”

Buck goes in for the ear nuzzle, which is not fucking fair. He pulls the radio away, sets it back in its place, and crowds in, breathing in and making sure Brock’s getting his scent too.

“Cause you’re doing all the worrying for me. Again. Like I asked you not to,” he murmurs, and Brock is ready to punch something or sigh and instead he crosses his arms like a damn five-year-old because it’s the most movement he’s got at the moment.
“Now- I get it. You ask the man to do one thing, and he goes and sails right over the top. But keep getting’ het up, and I’m gonna,” he says, kissing at Rumlow’s grumpy face. “-have to do something to calm you down.”

“I gotta-“

“I’ll show you the map where I got all his targets pinned out later. He’s being thorough.” Buck presses his lips to Brock’s cheekbone, and Brock grumbles. “But there’s still places for us to go.”

There is that.

Barnes presses his affections for a few moments more, and Brock tugs at his jacket.

“Haven’t you got something better to do?”

“Nope.”

“What about-“

“The dough’s punched down, wood’s chopped, ain’t nobody around for miles, and get this,” Bucky says, smirking a little. “They say necking these days is good for your blood-pressure.”

“Don’t you say it-!“

“This is good for you,” Bucky concludes, grinning.

Brock levers himself upright, glowering up at the younger omega.

“Son,” he says in reply, mocking the old-timey way Rogers would talk when he got pissy. “If you wanted to, all you had to do was ask.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for enjoying and commenting. Work is kicking my ass this week, but I'm trying to work on new bits as swiftly as possible. Hope you all keep enjoying!

Also! This story is now illustrated- some wonderful person (moonilicious) commissioned artwork from LePeru of Chapter 5! Please find it here- http://archiveofourown.org/works/2662934 , and give the artist some love.
They don’t go all the way, safe-mode still engaged- no need to bring on another close call. But it’s still sweet, and Brock wonders what the hell he’s been doing with his life that even with as checkered a past as he has, it’s only with these two he ever really figured out lovemaking.

The thought almost sends him to a screeching halt, but Bucky’s found that spot just where his ear joins the line of his jaw and is otherwise draped across him like a purring blanket, hands roving lazily. Brock’s got his ass cupped in broad palms, Buck’s straddling him and content to be gently worked and kneaded until he’s pliant- after he’s made sure that the pulse he hears with his ear pressed to Brock’s chest is soft and steady, of course.

The world outside is a crucible and a curse that will tear them apart. He knows this. But here, alone, with nothing to prove and no one to accuse, he lets the illusion roll on, like those holiday specials on TV. It’s even getting to be that time of year, the chill in the air starting to crisp up sharply, and he tries not to linger on all the ways this tiny, nebulous family can break.

There’s more planning to do. Baby supplies, a birth plan (as much of one as they can create), preparation to travel come spring once he’s healed- and in the meanwhile Barnes is agitating for something a little stronger than spit and spackle for the walls, because like hell is he keeping a fragile infant in this drafty cabin, and the winter is already gearing up to be a bad one.

“We’ll keep her warm,” Brock says, and knows it’s a sore point with Bucky.

Who doesn’t know the stories?

“Can’t let him catch cold,” Barnes murmurs, the little slur of tired there. “Carry ’em off on a chill wind…”

God bless the internet and Barnes’ foresight to steal a very good phone. Without accounts and routing numbers they can’t get things delivered, but a special expedition out to the nearest (way too far) hardware depot nets them the supplies needed to make the cabin fit for winter. Brock puts in the search string, scopes the place out with their little ‘walk-along’ app, makes a list of supplies and tutorial videos. Bucky makes the run.

(Some days, Barnes needs a mission. Brock handles it the best he can, outlining parameters and protocols for him, helping him fake humanity until he can reliably make it outside the home.)

Same goes for the infant gear- a few calls has the bulk supplies ready to be picked up and loaded, enough for what they’ll need before they travel, before the kid outgrows them. There’s even a real mattress tied down on top of the truck cabin, because Bucky can’t share the couch anymore- Brock’s into beach-ball territory, and he won’t be coming out of it anytime soon. They’re hardly the only folks around here who do cash only, not the only paranoid survivalist-types the local warehouses cater to.

They’ll be ready. He hopes to God they won’t need to be for about six more weeks- but they’ll be
The fire’s stoked, the October wind is whispering outside their carefully plastic-ed windows, and they’ve got nothing to do but sort each other out. Brock is returning the oft-delivered favor of backrubs, carefully pulling out the outermost of the knots around Bucky’s artificial muscles. The sounds he makes are almost inhuman, and the stillness between peaks of reaction is like a ragdoll, or a machine at rest. When he finally releases after a particularly hard spot finally goes soft and pliant under stroking fingers, Brock thinks that gasp and sigh has to get him at least a few weeks off in Purgatory.

This is the sort of thing he’d been responsible for during Buck’s time as The Asset- never as nice or as thorough, but just enough to keep HYDRA’s pet super-assassin functioning. (Inappropriate attachment will be grounds for reassignment- do try to remember that this is a delicately calibrated instrument, and it is a privilege to be allowed to work alongside him.)

Now- now it’s just a thank-you to the man who’s kept him alive.

Today was a long day full of finding every damn leak in the walls and slathering them with putty to keep out the chill. Barnes has been moving since, oh, about daybreak, because serum-enhanced vision be damned Brock will not be woken up before dawn when he’s eight months pregnant, and he can’t sleep through having another soldier moving around in the cabin, even one he likes.

Brock does not get to hunt for leaks. Brock gets to stay on the couch and gestate while slowly going bonkers. But he can at least feel how it’s warmer in here already, the fire not needing to be stoked white-hot to keep the place livable.

He runs his palms up and over Bucky’s shoulders, stroking the last of the day’s tension out of them. Barnes does the same for him when he’s keyed up after having watched birthing videos on the little screen, trying to anticipate what can be done and what can do wrong and, every so often, reliving the terror of his first time through.

(This time will be different.)

For starters, he knows a lot more about breathing through pain these days. (Buck sits behind him when he practices.)

“What would you do,” he murmurs that night, lying side by side. “If none of this was happening? If you hadn’t followed me, what would you be doing?”

Barnes looks up at the ceiling, head pillowed on his metal arm, which doesn’t get numb or at the very least doesn’t get pins and needles.

“Already took out a couple bases before I went looking for you. How I found the intel, actually- ran a search, trying to find any leads, and lo’n’behold- former handler, may be carrying valuable cargo, traced to about where you got that clunker in the driveway. Figured you were a better guide than the crazy I had swirling in my own head.

“Guess I lucked out you weren’t still true-blue.”

Brock shuffles a pillow under his hip, refrains from commenting.
James heaves in a deep breath, sighs it out like the north wind.

“Figure I’d be dead by now. Either takin’ out anyone I ever thought crossed my path, or starved to death ‘cause I had no fucking clue where to go or what to do. Get shot by cops like a rabid dog.”

“No mockingbirds here, huh.”

Barnes turns and squints at him in the dark.

“Nevermind- you wouldn’t’ve read it. I mean- as you are now. Holding up. What would you do if you weren’t here?”

“Still waitin’ for me to run out on you?”

And James presses a hand over Brock’s chest when he stiffens, like he’s trying to ease down the hot pulse of anger and fear— how does he know—?—that comes at his words. And in that instant he’s angry at himself, because what does it matter if someone leaves? He’s a Rumlow, they’ve endured worse.

He’s also a realist. There’s never a guarantee of anything lasting, even with a humdrum civilian. Factor in their mutual backgrounds, battlescars, and a baby he’s bound and determined will never see its father for fear of being taken away…

“Maybe I ain’t so much on the memory these days. Maybe I got a- a touch of battle fatigue. Maybe I’m a monster for what I am and I did. But I remember, Rummy- you don’t walk out on a mama. If I didn’t have you to look after, I’d be on Stevie’s six- just like I am right now.”

Then he pulls in close to Brock, and kisses his throat until the pulse that’s pounding there settles into a rhythm more to his liking. The throat of an ex-HYDRA agent with a bellyful of stolen seed, and he nuzzles and kisses until his enhanced senses tell him the blood’s running calmer, less forceful, and Brock is becalmed, if grumpy about it.

No mockingbirds here, indeed.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading and enjoying. You all make my day.
A few more weeks. The time is crawling by, and it’s gone far too fast for comfort. They hole up, well-supplied for winter but with Bucky getting fresh for them every chance he can. The last of the apples are sauced and canned, ready to keep in the chill. A couple of new quilts make their way into the truck, mass-produced but soft, and they’re unceremoniously added to the nest that’s building up in their bed. Plastic sheeting waits for the down and dirty business of giving birth, but in the meanwhile, Brock is giving in to his own stupid need and surrounding himself with whatever makes him comfortable.

About the time he starts doing that, this weird-calm comes over him, like a warm wave, when he’s far more used to violent surf or still, treacherously under-towed waters. Brock is content to let the world move around him, big and slow as he is, even as he knows that he really ought to be in a panic. It just-doesn’t catch.

Barnes, though… his good days are good, but his bad days are feral. And not the sort of wild-eyed, starvation-fueled turmoil that word usually conjures- he’s got the Soldier locked down into a disciplined machine, a panther on a leash. He increases patrols, on the lookout constantly for enemies, ghosting through the woods with an increasingly large share of their armory on his person.

(It’s always returned to its place, neatly stowed and thoroughly cleaned, no ammo missing- Brock’s pretty sure he would know if Barnes killed someone, but he trusts that even the Soldier knows the meaning of circumspect, as he’s been drilling it into his head since they first started going into town.)

And when he’s not out stalking the woods like a hungry ghost looking to feed?

He’s glued to Brock’s side. It’s kind of sweet and getting annoying.

He paces, he can’t sleep- he checks the preparations they’ve made again and again, lays alongside Brock whenever Brock will let him, and feels his belly until he’s firmly chased away. The infant travel carrier is dented but has proven itself worthy, and he lurks as Rumlow eats. Brock is almost certain that, if he thought he could get away with it, Barnes would sniff everything that hit his plate before Brock could put a fork to it.

(Setting his sidearm on the table before every meal seems to be working as a discouragement. Never pointed, ever- but it helps to establish social boundaries.)

Barnes is taking up the alpha role as best he can, but he’s also about as deeply committed as any omega can be when there’s a baby on the line. And so Brock does his best not to swat him, just rubs behind his ears and lets him cuddle and worry, listening to his swollen belly like it holds the secrets of the universe.

November third- nineteen days until it’s exactly forty weeks to the day.

Serenity is over.
Brock is far, far too pregnant for this nonsense— but it just up and struck him out of nowhere that this cabin is disgusting, and he can’t stand for another minute to leave it like this.

Barnes comes in from the trap-line with a string of game over his shoulder, only to find a broom pointed at him like a spear, and Rumlow wild-eyed on the other end.

“You set one fucking grimy boot on this floor and it will be the end of you.”

The floorboards are gleaming wetly— they’ve been scrubbed down with water and elbow-grease and aching knees, but he can’t leave it and he’s just about to sweep and scrub the porch as well, while the bedding steams far too close to the stove for comfort. He works slowly and carefully, always pausing when his body starts to tell him to— but the relentless war on dirt slogs ever, ever on.

He can’t help it. It has to get done.

“Brock,” Bucky says, setting his foot down and stepping just a bit back. “Let me help. You want it all clean and safe for the baby, right?”

That… that’s probably it. There’s just not enough he can do to make sure it’ll all turn out right, that he’s done everything he can—

“It’s gonna be all right, we can get this place cleaned out in no time, just sit down and I’ll start some coffee and we’ll talk about it, okay?” Same soothing nonsense-babble he’s used on Bucky during his own breakdowns, he knows it, but he’s aching-tired and his ankles hurt—

Brock sits down hard on the stripped sofa, burying his face in his hands. (The cushions have been beaten, the raggedy covers are drying after being boiled and look like they might fall apart before they can be reassembled together.)

“Young, my ma would get this way, hadda clean everything five times before the baby could come. You’ll be okay, sugar, we’ll make it right…”

“I’m not crazy.”

Because James Barnes has spent nearly seventy years in survival mode and those lessons are hard to ignore, he sets his catch on the porch table, and takes his muddy boots off before approaching Brock carefully, walking in his stocking feet across damp floorboards.

When he gets there he takes him in his arms, and rubs the older omega’s back and shoulders while he shudders.

“Naw, man, you’re just havin’ a baby. Crazy comes after.”

It’s been eight and a half months since Steve Rogers pressed Brock upon his back and made him a man of good carriage, and he is done. It is over, he is ready for this kid to be out, because he can’t stand up under his own power and he can’t breathe and his belly is huge. Rogers grows ’em big, and Brock is the unfortunate recipient of his super-soldierly fruitfulness. Barnes is lucky he hasn’t got to deal with this, he thinks, with his smaller frame and no, hell, he’d be a better omega to bear Rogers’ children anyway, being his bondmate in the first place and with the full-on serum making him stronger and more resistant to pain…

Bucky just rubs his back, steadying him with his warm-wrapped metal hand and digging his flesh knuckles carefully and precisely into over-stressed muscles, lets him bitch and moan under his breath because at the end of the day, what else can he do? He’s stuck being pregnant until he’s not pregnant anymore, and that’s a disaster he doesn’t yet dare contemplate.
It strikes him out of the clear blue sky that it should be Steve cuddling him, Steve he’s complaining to about putting this oversized child inside of him, and it makes his eyes smart and his voice choke and he hates that he’s gotten weepy. He can handle the big, terrifying swoop of loving the kid inside of him, like standing on the edge of a cliff listening to the little voice that says ‘jump’- but Rogers? He is not a sentimental man, even as an omega. Rogers was a patsy, a means to an end, a resource to be mined and abandoned-

-he was the first and last decent thing you ever touched, and if you hadn’t been such a fuck-up he’d be right here now.

This all tumbles out while Barnes is finishing up with his back, and lets him sob with gentle touches to his shoulders.

Time was, he’d rather have eaten a bullet than lose it like that, much less in front of someone else. Time was it would have been just that to do so in front of the sharks he called his brothers, in front of the snake he was.

Time was.

Chapter End Notes

You all are wonderful- thank you for continuing to read, to comment, and to enjoy. Please check out the awesome art that was commissioned for this story, and the short story by Andartha set very early on in Brock's HYDRA career- you can find them both under 'related works'.

My day, nay, my week, is made.
Chapter 27

Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

Hey all, hope you're still enjoying^^ A warning for the chapter ahead- Brock is still being Brock, that is, stubborn as all hell even when we're all yelling at him. I promise it will be okay, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Fifteen days.

When the late-fall heat hits, Buck tries to hide it. Fat chance, because they live in each other’s pockets and Brock can smell mild mood-changes he’s so attuned right now, much less the stomach-dropping body slam of hormones that James’s f’ed-up biology is throwing at him.

It’s been- almost three months, maybe, two and a half at least, so that’s a little better interval than it was before. Barnes flinches when Brock makes his slow, ungainly way towards him, sets down the cup and pitcher of water next to him at the table.

“You’re not fooling anybody, kid. Drink up, you’re gonna be going through a lot of it.”

James flicks his gaze to the side, as if looking for guilty escape, and reaches out to rest his palm on Brock’s stomach. He doesn’t have to reach very far.

Brock closes his own hand over the leather-clad metal, pressing it into place in what he hopes is reassurance.

“Hey. You’ll be okay. We got through last time no problems, right?”

“That’s- not it,” he says, rusty again. The Soldier isn’t mute, but is often silent, and Bucky is too worried to be charming these days. They’re both wearing thin in different places.

Brock sets down in the other chair, still keeping Buck’s metal hand in place as he goes.

“Talk to me.”

He does.

It’s not a long talk. Brock’s eyebrows climb higher and higher while Barnes ducks his head, and shows him the articles, and flushes hot and red.

When it’s done, Brock strokes his thumb over the back of Bucky’s hand, strong enough to trip its pressure-sensors, and then tugs at him and gestures for an assist in standing up.

“Good man. Good thinking.”

This heat is less of a misery, with supplies in place and a real fucking mattress and even the serum-
fed hellfire burning through James is lessened, with time and repetition. Brock takes his time, works his pretty Soldier into a gasping, begging mess at his own leisurely pace, laying by his side with a hand buried in between his thighs and always a gentle mouth at his chest. The flesh there is tender, even what remains over the artifice of his left pectoral muscles, and growing more so as they work through the heated days.

Between bouts, James rests his head over Brock’s heart, his hands over the baby in his womb.

“We’ll be okay, babe. We’ll be okay.”

But when he drops his hand lower, feels down below and at the sides, James frowns.

Twelve days.

The right stimulation at the right time can have impressive results. Brock grimaces at the echo of the scientists, the commanders who listened greedily to their words- but the phrase is true, whatever its origins. By the end of the heat, Bucky’s puffy and tender, and his milk starts to come in, slow but steady. It’s still a ways from his due-date, but it’s better to be prepared for what could happen at any time.

Buck starts talking again, but the frown he gets when he touches Brock’s sides doesn’t go away.

“It’s not settling right,” he mutters, when Rumlow finally asks him why the long face.

Eleven days.

“There’s time yet,” Brock says, tired and sore and in no mood for it. Barnes has been at him about finding someone again, and he’s explained again about stealth and not about the pulse of fear that flits through him as he imagines giving birth under the watchful eyes of HYDRA techs.

The book has been a horrible predator on his sense of anything going right, but it did mention that babies move around and flip back and forth a lot, even towards the very end of their time ensconced in their bearers. The internet on the phone agrees. He’s getting kicked up and down and all around- the kid will settle, and things will be fine, just fine.

Eight days.

“No.”

Barnes looks like he’s going to tear his hair out, but grits his teeth and stays silent.

Four days.

"Are you sure about this?"

Brock watches Bucky filling up the wash basin with narrowed eyes. It’s a long-ass trip to and from town- the bags of ice are starting to melt even with the chill weather, and it looks about as inviting as a dip in a fresh mountain stream would be, oh, in the middle of the winter.
"Indulge me, Rummy. Worst that happens, you yelp and splash, we pull you out and then spend the rest of the night in front of the stove with blankets."

"I think there are better ways to take a bath, and less risk of frostbite to some of my favorite parts," he says grumpily, hunching around the burger that was his price for even considering this nonsense. It's ridiculous how his definition of indulgence has changed, but these days a few quiet minutes from the wiggling bundle of trouble in his belly and a meal he didn't have to shoot first are high up on that list.

Now if his partner would just stop with the old-timey remedies for pregnant omegas, he could enjoy the last few weeks of his confinement in relative calm.

Bucky shakes the last few drops out of the plastic bag, and looks up with his hand on his hip.

"Look. Time’s gettin’ short, and our boy there ain’t settled right. This’ll make him move."

"This’ll give her a cold."

"Brock."

The face, always that fucking face… It’s like every little kid and lost puppy and social worker that was ever disappointed in you, with a hint of hurt underneath. It’s that face when you know someone’s right, even if what they’re asking for is entirely unreasonable.

It won’t kill him. It won’t hurt the kid, at least, not for as long as he’ll be doing it. And it’ll keep Buck distracted fromagitating for what they can’t have, not and risk way more trouble than is prudent.

(the way he whimpers ‘you can’t fuckin’ do that to me, Stevie…’ in the night like he’s still watching Cap run into the fires is- wrenching. But impractical. They can’t let anyone catch onto their trail, they can’t they can’t)

But damnit, he’s finishing his burger first. And the fries, if he has room.

“Jesus fuck it’s cold!”

“It’s s’posed to be,” Bucky says, keeping his hand steady as a rock on Brock’s hip. *Fuck-* his first instinct is to curl his whole body away from the freezing ice, and the baby goes wild inside him even as he stiffens up his legs and arms, trying to stay steady.

“**Fffffffff**fuck, Barnes,” Brock grunts, teeth clenching. “This had better work!”

“It’ll help,” the former Soldier says, in a voice that says he hopes to *God* it does.

He strokes his hip, keeping him down on all fours with his distended belly lowered into the wash tub, relentless and immovable until Brock is swearing and shivering and unwilling to take anymore. Then Buck springs into action, pulling his partner out of the tub and pouncing on him with stove-warmed towels, a blanket that swallows them both.

Brock is growling by the time they’re swaddled together, and he doesn’t stop for a good long while.
One day more.

It hits him like a missile-strike just what he’s gearing up for, and Brock reaches out for Barnes in the night, desperate and alive with need. James comes willingly.

The lovemaking is frantic.

“Promise me,” he whispers after, a soldier on the eve of battle. “If I don’t make it, you take this kid and you run. Get someplace safe, don’t let SHIELD or HYDRA get their hands on her.”

“You’re gonna make it,” Bucky murmurs, lips pressing to his temple, worry making his voice tight. “You’re both gonna make it, I won’t let you go. I won’t let go.”

The twenty-first passes without incident, only heartburn and sore feet, like the days before it. Brock walks the cabin floor, heavy and uncomfortable and embarrassed, while Bucky hovers until he’s chased out.

The morning of the second day after his due-date, Brock heaves out of bed, staggers to the kitchen, and throws up.

Bucky’s at his side in an instant, stroking his back and ushering him back to the main room of the cabin. They put down the plastic, water on to boil, the whole nine yards, and settle in to wait with a light dusting of snow outside.

The first contractions don’t wait long, and neither do the first signs of trouble.

Chapter End Notes

Working my way along, slowly but slowly. Hope you all are having a good holiday season and that you continue to enjoy^^ Your comments make my day.
Chapter 28

Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Excuse me, Captain Rogers- there is a phone-call for you, one I believe to be urgent.”

A hotline is often staffed by underpaid and overstressed persons, often with a minimum of training and not a great deal of backup. Hardly the sort of situation desired when straining for any hint of where one’s long-lost mate has gone.

Which is why this one is staffed by an AI currently pretending to be a middle-aged woman from Wisconsin (with subroutines devoted to monitoring calls received, compiling location and veracity of tips, and foiling attempts by anyone else to subvert and collect the data for nefarious purposes, thank you very much HYDRA’s programming department. Never bet against a Stark when data security is on the line, especially the electronic ones.)

Which is why the voice-matching analysis runs through the database so quickly, measuring pitch and cadence and certain, particular phrases with a degree of accuracy not often found outside of highly classified government programs.

Which is why the call from a claimed Sergeant-James-Barnes, 3-2-5-5-7, is escalated so thoroughly and so quickly.

The voice on the other end of the phone-line is- it can’t be. It rattles off a series of coordinates, latitude and longitude, growling in what sounds like Bucky’s voice, clear as day but thick with anger and what only Steve would recognize as worry.

“I need a medical chopper at these coordinates within two hours. No later, and sooner’s best.”

“Bucky, I-“

“You’re a real idiot, Rogers,” the voice snaps. There’s a pause, an in-drawn breath that sounds like whoever’s on the other end is pinching the bridge of his nose, and Steve curls around the phone in desperation, straining to hear. These are the first words he’s had from Buck since that day in the Helicarrier, and he doesn’t dare miss an instant.

“He don’t bear easy, you know that? Doesn’t carry well. He lost one once before, he ever tell you?”

“Bucky, who are you-? What-?” he starts out, scrambling, then sits up arrow-straight as it clicks. “Rumlow.” Brock. What had he done? Oh God, where was Bucky and what was Rumlow doing-

“Just get it done. Two hours. Or the next time I see you will be on the business end of a scope.”

The line clicks, dead.
There isn’t much in the way of howling wilderness anymore, but Bucky had somehow managed to find some. The coordinates take him down near a lonely cabin, well back from the road where a battered truck sits waiting, probably for supply runs, probably stolen.

The woods are dusted with early November snow, just enough to crackle underfoot. When Steve breathes in, he can almost feel it cut, the clear, crisp air that would have sent him into a hacking cough a lifetime ago.

He reaches the steps, casing as he goes. There’s light from the windows, and the whole thing looks surprisingly cozy for an assassin’s desperate hide-out.

The door isn’t locked.

When he cracks it open, the smell hits him first like a wave— heavy, deep-in scent that speaks of banded sisters, of mother and warmth and sex and he’s never actually been in a sorority house, but going by Tony’s descriptions he’d guess that this is what one would smell like.

On stepping into the cabin, the first thing he sees is Brock Rumlow, curled on the couch and panting, sweat dotting his hairline and trickling down his neck. The next thing he sees is Bucky, with a rifle pointed at his face and an expression that promises doom.

“Bucky,” Steve says softly, raising his hands to the air, away from the shield or his sidearms. “What’s this about?”

The love of his life doesn’t change stance, just keeps aiming in a business-like way.

“The chopper here?”

“Yeah, Buck- full emergency medical, with a hospital in a couple hours’ ride.”

“Buck, no, I don’t need this- why’d you have to get him involved?” Rumlow moans from the couch, looking desperately between the two of them. His arms are wrapped around his stomach, which looks to Steve like it’s about to burst. A chill goes through him, roots him to the floor, as suddenly the missed phone-calls, the frantic voice-mails begin to make sense.

He hadn’t been lying.

Bucky doesn’t answer Rumlow right away, just gives Steve a long, hard look, before turning up his rifle and stooping to grab a shoulder-bag that’s been standing at his feet.

“Baby’s lying wrong, I told you that two days ago.” Moving through the cabin, Bucky picks up a heavy coat from where it’s draped over a chair-back. He keeps his eye on Steve as he goes, changing out the rifle for a smaller handgun and hefting the duffle across his back, before bringing the coat over to the couch and offering it to Brock.

“And I’m not gonna let it ride until you’re all worn out and there’s nothin’ left but bad choices. Stevie here’s gonna help us before it comes to that, ain’t that right?” Bucky’s eyes have never looked this hard- or this scared. They’re clear, they’re sane, and they feel disturbingly similar to a pair of steel gun-barrels being pointed at him, actual pistol in hand aside.

Steve swallows carefully, and answers him. He’s telling the God’s-honest truth, but with the way Bucky’s looking, he sure doesn’t want to be taken for a liar.

“That’s right, Buck. We’ve got an obstetric team waiting at the hospital, and damn good medics on the bird.”
“Security?” he snaps.

“Vetted personally- called in some favors from folks I know. No HYDRA. No SHIELD. Speaking of which- if I’m not out of here in two minutes, they’re coming in after me.”

The corner of Bucky’s mouth quirks up without humor.

“Finally getting’ something through that thick head of yours, Rog-“ He gets cut off by a high, thin keen of pain from Rumlow. Brock’s knuckles are white as they both close in on him, his teeth gritted, and he only bats them off once the spasm’s passed, clutching at his stomach and looking equal parts pissed and exhausted.

“Fuckin’- okay. Okay, I’ll go with, I won’t fight you on this,” he pants, and Buck looks like he’s about to collapse with relief. Steve cautiously offers his arm, helps Brock slowly to his feet long enough to get the coat on him. It’s still a fair walk to the chopper through the snow, and despite the agony he’s plainly in, Brock still finds it in him to bitch under his breath when Steve sweeps him up bridal-style and carries him out over the threshold.

“So help me, Rogers, if you try to dump my ass in with SHIELD’s collection of black bags, I will cut this kid out myself and then stab you.”

“Noted,” he says.

Bucky closes the cabin door and walks behind them to the helicopter, duffle over his good shoulder and rifle on the other. He sweeps the treeline and the sky in a way that’s equal parts alien and heart-breakingly familiar, dark hair a smudge against the grey.

Brock looks back at him past Steve’s shoulder, gripping at his armored sleeve, and Steve finds it hard to believe- but just as hard to disbelieve- that the worry on his face is genuine.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, all! I'm going to be traveling next week so updates may slow down a bit. Hope you all are enjoying your holidays and continue to enjoy Fools Rush In. Your comments all make my day.
They pile in. It’s not actually a medical chopper - that wouldn’t have had nearly the room in it, and it was faster and easier to go through Stark, who’s been working on his own Quinjet-style plane in his off hours. Fury’s not around to say boo anymore, and given just how much and what kind of work has sprung up in the seven months since the Helicarriers - they needed something like this.

Steve is true to his word - they have medical personnel on standby in the bay, as well as Natasha and Sam on hand for security and for their relevant expertise in this situation. Only nothing about this situation is quite as planned.

Heads snap up as he’s silhouetted against the open bay. The engine’s been on low burn, waiting to take off and deal with whatever emergency they might find themselves handling.

“Take off in five- Bucky’s right behind me.”

“Steve, what-“ Sam’s eyes are wide and disbelieving, a match for Natasha’s, and he finally whistles softly through his teeth. “’It’s complicated,’ huh?”

“Very,” Steve grits, and Rumlow grimaces and tightens his grip around him, arms dug brutally into his shoulders. If he could get a hand free, he’d probably be punching him right now. Nat’s gaze flickers as she moves into high alert - that’s the only way he knows that Bucky’s just appeared, following him with sniper-soft footsteps.

He can’t turn, doesn’t turn, just keeps on stepping forward as the EMTs rush up to greet him, asking their questions and there isn’t an answer he can give them, words all stuck in his throat.

And then from behind, he hears the voice he never thought he’d hear again once more.

“He’s been havin’ contractions for about four hours now. Forty-six next Tuesday, type O negative, one previous late-term miscarriage, and we hadda scare about a month ago. Been fainting sometimes. Baby’s not lying right, I’m almost positive he’s sideways.”

As Bucky - Bucky - stalks in ahead of him while giving the medics his best death-glare, Rumlow tenses again, and if he could bring himself to touch Steve further than necessary he’d almost certainly be thumping his head against his shoulder.

“-thanks for sharing with everybody, Barnes…”

Buck just stands off to the side, rifle still in hand, and looks at the two of them expectantly.

Steve moves where he’s bid, approaching the cot where the medics want to examine their charge - when Brock jerks suddenly in his arms, a new wave of fear- and stress-scent coming off of him. Rumlow is instantly writhing, fear and shock plain on his face as he twists his body and tries to pin his knees together.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck OH SHIT.”
A sudden gush of warm fluid darkens his pants, his coat and Steve’s uniform. It leaves them both wet and appalled, and Brock cringes hard, trying to look away but there’s nowhere to look. Everywhere is someone who wants him dead, walls that hold him in-

Steve just shouts to the comms. “Tony, get us off the ground!”

“Roger that, Rogers. It’s three hundred and six miles to the nearest hospital, we’ve got a full tank of gas, half a pack of-”

Brock shouts over him, sweat-soaked and heavy in Steve’s arms and angry at the need to be carried even as he holds on tight (it’s just like Mali all over again).

“Finish that line and I will end you!”

They take off.

On the list of things Brock wishes had never happened to him, somewhere after being born and before the third season of Dog Cops (whatever the writers had been smoking, it had not been good shit)- having his water break with several dangerous and powerful former colleagues looking on is going in the top five.

Barnes takes him from Rogers, sits behind him as the medics look him over, silently growling at the entire room. His arms circle around Brock’s ribs, and he’s solid enough to brace against when the next pain hits.

And hit it does.

All considered it’s a relatively short trip. The jet is near-Quinjet capabilities, having been pulled from its hangar for this emergency before it could be completely tricked out and with Stark’s engineering pushing it as they redline all the way.

It doesn’t really feel that way, for any of the passengers involved.

“Christ that fucking hurts!”

Rumlow is curled on the bench, gripping Bucky’s arm like it’s the only thing between him and freefall and leaning back against the former Soldier’s chest. Bucky’s got his head hunched low over him, glower flicking around the room, person to person, assessing threat and intent.

The medics are working between his raised knees, looking him over, asking questions and Steve-Steve can’t quite hear over the rushing in his ears.

Natasha is watching the situation with gears turning plainly in her head, Sam talking soft and low to Bucky who only seems to hear about half of it. He’s armed, he’s angry- he’s afraid. So very afraid, Steve can smell it.

Afraid for Brock, who is trying real hard to catch on to his breath and let it take him through the pain. Sweat is dripping off him even in the chill of the plane’s belly, and Buck is even a little damp-browed next to him. Their mingled scent is part of what keeps him frozen, transfixed even as his
bondmate’s challenging gaze warns him to stay away.

(“Sir, you’re dilating well but your partner’s right- you need to refrain from pushing, it’ll only-“)

The world moves around him as he stands vigil, a fixed point unable to move, unable to speak. Rumlow pants heavily, unable to stop and unable to progress, and all they can any of them do is try to hold on until they get where they’re going. He groans, he cries- he bites down when Bucky gives him his belt, and he’s seen Rumlow shot before and handle it with more aplomb.

(He wonders, now, what those missions really were, who died when he wasn’t looking, what thefts and horrors he was complicit in all-unaware.)

Brock’s fist pounds into Bucky’s thigh, and he that was the Soldier, was Steve’s fiancé, takes it stoically.

(“Get him some goddamn morphine!” “Sir, we don’t-“) They don’t, not to pregnant omegas. This is not a troop transport, and this is not the war.

But oh, doesn’t it just feel that way.

Bucky turns his gaze on Steve, no longer growling, just holding on tight, and begging with his eyes- do something.

They hit the ground, are through the hospital doors and into the bright lights of the narrow, dingy corridors. Steve sees Bucky stop short, steel himself, and bull on through, his hand never leaving Brock’s shoulder. Rumlow himself is too far gone into someplace built by pain, having finally gotten his breathing into harness and his mission parameters straight. He’s enduring each contraction as long as he can, trying to wait until they can get him properly set up to get the kid out of him.

Captain Rogers stays one step behind on the right- shouts ahead to the nurses about what’s going on, then lets the medics take them in. Someone tries to stop Bucky- and turns right around again when Buck looks at him, rifle on his shoulder, murder in his eyes, and his metal hand gripped tight in Brock’s. They’ll be lucky if they can get him to put on scrubs.

Sam and Nat walk right in behind him, leaving Steve standing outside the OR, eyes still wide, still speechless.

Tony is the one coming up behind when he- does not so much go down like a felled tree, as sits down really hard in a plastic chair, which creaks dangerously under him as the world comes rushing back in.

Steve sucks in a breath; another. Tony opens his mouth, about to apply his usual brand of wit, and Steve looks up at him, and pleads-

“Don’t.”

Chapter End Notes
You all are wonderful and I'm glad you're enjoying. Thanks again to Bofurrific, who gives me the heart of the story, and of late to Andartha, who helps me polish its bones. Ya'll are wonderful.

Comments appreciated, your enjoyment moreso^^
Tony doesn’t.

But he gets right to the heart of the matter, which is almost worse.

“Okay, Cap, what gives? You wanna tell me what this was all about, because I completely get running off at a moment’s notice to rescue your hubby-bear- I volunteered, after all- but I don’t get who the other omega is,” Tony says, lying through his teeth. He knows, he’s gone through the files, but just knowing a name and a face and an affiliation doesn’t fill in the what and the why.

Steve swallows, takes in another breath, marveling at how it can come so easily when it feels like it ought to clog in his windpipe, choke him to death on nothing at all.

“He’s… I… We-”

Tony’s eyebrows are climbing, the slow dawning of realization coming up as the gears and wheels turn.

“Oh-ho, there is a story to be told here. So what’s got Captain America so scared he can’t go into a-okay, scratch that, I wouldn’t be caught dead in a delivery room and I’m omega. Guilty conscience?”

Steve’s face hits his hands.

“Yes.”

“JARVIS, you got the hospital security feeds yet?”

“Yes, sir,” the AI projects from Tony’s headset, electronic disdain evident in his voice. Tony’s not in the suit, but he has a certain amount of subtle exoskeleton and various bits of gear in place, enough to keep him out of much trouble. “As much as can be had,” JARVIS continues.

“I know, working with primitive tech can be sooo irritating. Needs must. So,” Tony says, pulling one of the chairs out to sit backwards on it, facing Steve. “Spill.”

“I left him to die.”

The silence that follows that statement is brief but enormous.

“Could you clarify that for me, Cap?”

Steve pinches the bridge of his nose, tries to breathe in, breathe out. He’s covered in amniotic fluid and trying to filter out conflicting scents, trying to keep it together when all he wants to do is fall apart.

“You need more background. Rumlow and I- we were working together under SHIELD. He was commander of the STRIKE unit, as backup under my command when we went into the field on Fury’s missions. We had a- we weren’t exactly stepping out.”
“Fuckbuddies?”

Steve gives Tony a look that says *why*.

“Close enough.”

“Amazing. Adapted to the 21st century without a soul knowing- yet he’s listed as, according to just-this-moment’s google search…” Tony says, tapping at his earpiece. “One of the missing HYDRA agents? Oof- once burned, twice shy, huh.”

“You have no idea.”

There’s a dark, snarling creature inside of him that rose up when he *saw* and *smelled*— Rumlows, Brock who’d always sworn he didn’t do attachments and wasn’t looking for anything deep, would break it off if he got clingy— heavily pregnant with his *baby* and screaming in pain. And even that dark creature quails in the face of his *mate* growling at him, clearly protecting the junior omega in their arrangement from an alpha he feels he can’t trust.

So Steve sits here, sick at heart and stomach and staring at the ground.

“I got the call a month after the Triskellion. I hadn’t seen him since he put a gun to my head in the middle of the street and marched me into the van. Hadn’t spoken since he told me it *wasn’t personal*. Hail HYDRA, he said. I didn’t *look* for him, Tony. If he was dead or alive, I didn’t care, I just never wanted to see or to think about him again.

“I was already in Romania, hunting down leads- and I start getting messages on my personal number, the one I never use, had forgot I *had*. It’s from a number I don’t know, and it’s *him*. No names, just his voice- he’s alive, he’s gotta talk to me, it’s important. Unfinished business. He’s in the hospital, he’s in trouble. He needs me. Three times, he says that. Then the next message-”

*the voice falls, almost a whisper, thick with tears and drugs and desperation. He says the words, and the world freezes over.*

“Grant- you gotta get me out of here. I’m fucking pregnant.”

“Nothing else. No details, nothing he’s not willing to have overheard by bugs. First time he’d said a name, and it was a fake but one I’d pay attention to. He’s good at what he does, I have to give him that. And it could be HYDRA trying to play games- it could be him trying to play me. It could even be real.

“I don’t know.

“I was elbow-deep in an op to clear out a base, one that had information *and* a lot of soldiers ready to march. I couldn’t back out without losing a lot of trails, letting a whole lot of people get hurt. That took a day and a half. Dealing with the retaliation ambush took another three. And by the time I got back state-side, there’s no Brock Rumlow anywhere in DC’s hospitals. Plenty of brunette omegas hurt in the collapse, and believe me, I think I managed to meet all of them- but he’s long gone, and no one can ID him from the name I gave, the pictures I had.”

Tony rests his chin on his crossed wrists, head tilted.
“I had wondered about the new search terms you’d wanted plugged in when you finally called in the cavalry.”

“I didn’t tell Sam. Just that I had to check on things, leads back in the States. I was- he’d never-“

More than humiliated. Ashamed.

Turn over the loyalty unto death you’d been taught that a bond was, because these days it’s all bio-bonds and pheromone-perfumes and you’re allowed to move beyond, to live past your best and brightest star having winked out. You’re supposed to light a candle, not just curse the darkness.

And then your fingers get singed. Only it’s not just your fingers, it’s everything you’ve built up around you in the time since they pulled you out of the ice.

Ashes, ashes.

All fall down.

It goes on for a while. Tony is not what one calls a good listener, and Steve is not looking to confess. It just works out that way.

“I looked. For both of them. And there was nothing to find, the trail went cold and I was back to chasing down snakeholes and listening for anyone who’d seen a dark-haired veteran.”

Anthony Edward Stark is not speechless, but he is certainly impressed.

“Rogers, you may be the paragon of the Americas but when you fuck up, boy do you do it big.”

If his head weren’t swimming, heart weren’t aching, he might snap back with a ‘Thanks’- but they are, and he’s just-

He just can’t.

Brock’s scent is all over him and Bucky is alive and there’s a kid about to come into this mess-

“Sir-“ JARVIS crackles to life on Tony’s earpiece.

“Uh, Steve-“

“Rogers, get in here!” Natasha barks over the comms. They’re still linked, earpieces in for what might have been (might still be) a violent, bloody mission.

In the background there’s a shrill cry of pain, and the shouting of doctors.

Steve is up and through the doors before the echoes fade.
Once again, because I have no impulse control whatsoever- please accept this offering of fic as part of a happy new year, and I beg your patience as I write the next part. Your reading and enjoyment is appreciated, and your comments never fail to make my day^^
Chapter 31

Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The last thing he remembers, the plane was-

No, the last thing, it was Rogers, righteous in fury, and he-

You never forget your first bullet, the one you take, that slams into you and shakes the shiny off from a newly minted soldier.

This time it’s in the belly, not the ribs. It hurts. Hot and bright and he’s screaming, it hurts.

Maybe he’ll die here, with his first friends, his fellow soldiers, long before they were his enemies.

There’s shouting and it’s Mama and Dad and they’re done, it’s the last argument before the car roars off and

It comes and it goes in flashes, in pain and numbness and he hears shouting over him as he lurches upward through the mud, tries to see through swimming eyes and squints up, up into the battle overhead-

-Ricky cut his hair. The new uniform looks good on him, and he came back, he’s here to see the baby-

The baby-? He can’t hear it- they’re barking back and forth, garbled and angry, and the dark-haired fellow is holding the bed-rail with a creaking grip, snarling up at Ricky. He’s ragged and pale, and his throat pulses in a growl that threatens hot lead and cold graves, in that order.

Who’s that guy?

Ricky steps back, turns tail and walks, and no, no, he can’t leave again-

There’s pain in his stomach and his limbs won’t move and where is his baby?!

And the bubble of panic bursts in his throat when he hears an infant’s cry, a high thin wail, and it all goes quiet.

When he finally opens his eyes again, the room is- it’s a room. It’s unlit but for sun through the slats of blinds in the window, and he knows it’s a hospital by the smell, and the quiet beeping.

The shadow by his right moves, and he turns to see-

Barnes. In the visitor’s chair, trailing off the song he was humming, and he’s got his dark coat open. His t-shirt’s been split down the middle, in order to let the little bundle in his arms be pressed to his swollen chest.

“Hey,” he says softly. “You’re awake.”
Reality comes creeping back in for Brock like a brackish tide. A slow moan of horror builds its way up from the depths of him, only to stop when the pain of his sore, stitched abdomen hits like a roadblock. He grabs at the railings of his bed, fists gripping tight while he gasps.

“James- James, fuck, what did you-“

Buck looks at him, soft and terrible gentle.

“You were this close to dying.”

Brock sputters to a stop.

“Somethin’ tore,” he says, reaching out to cover Brock’s hand with his metal one, skin-warmed and held lightly. “They had to rush. Got you put back together now, not too bad, but it was real exciting for a few minutes.”

“We’ve got to get- out,” Brock hisses, trying to stay focused, to wake up-

“We’re not getting’ out,” Buck says. His eyes flick across the window, the door, then back down to him. He’s checked, there are guards or other obstructions he’s not mentioning. “We’re not runnin’ anymore. Not just yet. First- you gotta meet your boy.”

And he’s holding out the little bundle, which turns and mews and-

And Brock can’t run anymore.

“Told ya I wouldn’t let go.”

Brock falls back into the up-tilted bed, breathless, and lets Buck place the infant in his arms.

"You gotta watch for his head, that's- yeah, you got it," Barnes murmurs, watching the two of them with a boy's smile on his face. The unfamiliar weight settles into his arms, carefully arranged in the crook of his elbow, and Brock is left staring down at his son, his little, warm, breathing son.

"What happened to the-" he manages, stuttering to a halt as he just looks down, transfixed by the sight and sound and tiny movements and smell. He hunches around the bundle in his arms in spite of the stab of pain it brings from his incision, and brings him up close, nose practically on top of the soft little head, sniffing deep.

He will know this scent until the day he dies.

"The, ah, rescue team? After you- the birth, it started goin’ bad, the stuff they gave you to numb up wasn’t sticking the way it was s’posed to and they knocked you out, had to, to get the baby out safe. I said none of them should be around when you woke up, they’d scare- well."

Brock looks up from his boy for a moment, the fascination of his little fists, disbelief writ wide on his face.

"And- Rogers, Romanoff, the rest, they went along with this?"

Bucky ducks his head, rubs the back of his neck as he smiles. "I kinda got- insistent."

“You used the Soldier-face, didn’t you.”
“I got a reputation, why shouldn’t I use it? After all- I paid for it.”

He gives a clattering little chuckle. Brock can see the cracks in his smile, the little tremble under the flippant humor where he’s channeling all he can remember of the old Barnes to cover for the new. He’s been holding on so hard and so long, and now that he’s back in- if not the bosom of his family, at least with folks that can get him help he needs- the strain is showing.

Hopefully, he won’t have to hold on too much longer.

“You stood off Rogers for me.”

“I- you were hurting and I couldn’t see anything but red. I knew him- God, I knew his scent, but all I could see was a threat.”

Another stab- another thing he’s stolen, or helped steal, or stood by and allowed to be carried off under his nose. Stress does funny things to people- and sometimes a birthing mother or their companions might take exception to the father being present, wishing to guard vulnerable young from a sire that might- wouldn’t, but might- hurt them.

You’re not slipping, he thinks, and hunts for the right words. Barnes is torn the fuck up over what he did as the Soldier- but the thing that keeps him up nights, more than a hundred named and nameless missions, is what he almost did to his mate. What he might do again, if he slips.

“Come here,” he says instead, and turns, as little as he can, leaning over to face his partner.

Partner. Supposed that was the word for it. There’s more words to be had, things like went behind my back and what are we gonna do now and all those things he can’t say lest they be said to him, but right now-

Right now Barnes is shucking off his shoes, the coat full of weapons (insane), and sliding in alongside him, careful as can be. He’s had long practice worming into the small space leftover, and though it takes a few, cautious shifts- there’s room for him in the bed. He pulls the coat over them, on top of the blankets, and lets the familiar weight of it settle.

And there’s them, curled together in a tiny little hospital room, around his tiny little son.

“Where’s the rest of him?” Brock wonders aloud, still croaking from the tubes, still breathing in the scent. He wants to pull open the blankets, check him over from the top of his head to the soles of his little feet- but tired is snatching at him again, weighing him down like pulling mud, and the kid’s resting peaceful, little snuffling breaths like everything he’s ever wanted to hear. And Bucky would tell him if there was something wrong. “He felt a lot bigger when he was tapdancing on my bladder.”

“He’s a little bruiser,” Bucky insists, eyes dancing. He reaches over, delicately strokes the line of the kid’s brow with his right ring finger. “Got the nurses all charmed once he got cleaned up. Big healthy boy.”

Despite everything.

“And… and Rogers?”

“He was a little too busy with me,” Buck says, guiltily. He leans in, head on Brock’s shoulder, still gently stroking the baby’s scrunched face with a touch lighter than a butterfly. He twitches, squints in his sleep, and Buck pulls his hand away to cup Brock’s elbow, support their little cradle. “I was- not seeing straight. He held on to me, and I let him. Until they had you all stitched up, and then I had to let him go. Had to.”
“And then you barked him off, and the Widow, and- I think that guy was at the Triskellion…”

“Yep.” Bucky sighs gustily, a strange big movement from a man for whom stealth and subordination has been air.

There’s no way this can be happening. He should be in cuffs, and one man, even the Soldier, holding off the whole of the staff without blood spattered on the walls? Highly unlikely. And if Steve is here- then why is Bucky with him?

Either it’s a setup for a cruel joke, or he’s still out of his mind on drugs and bad reactions to same. And he’d rather the latter, to be honest. Just stay safe in this nice, quiet room for a little while, let the fight go out of him for just one day.

He’s so tired.

The baby frowns, squirms a little in his arms, then blinks open his eyes. Brock just drifts there for a while, staring into them.

If this is a hallucination, maybe he’ll stay here in dreamland for a while.

Chapter End Notes

You are all wonderful, and I thank you for reading and commenting. I enjoy this so much.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

All good things must end. He sleeps, wakes, and sleeps again. Bucky’s there each time, lets him drift with light touches, takes the baby when he starts to fuss and presses him to his breast. Brock would object, but- lingering anesthesia, that can’t be good for him, and just in case-

Just in case.

The doc comes in, tells him what went down. He listens with half an ear, cataloguing the important bits- no heavy lifting for a while, change the dressing daily like any other wound. If he ever has another- highly unlikely- it’ll have to be the knife again, because this time around-

They almost didn’t make it.

His boy almost didn’t make it, because of his stubbornness. His fear.

He bites back filthy loathing regret and smothers it down by signing the paperwork, making a silly little mark that’s still a gesture of claiming into this world, this world he would have torn down. But it still lingers on, and so must be dealt with on an as-needed basis.

And that’s how little Benjamin Rumlow gets his name.

When the knock comes, Bucky’s head snaps up, and he crowds over Brock where he cradles Ben, mantling like a hawk over her nest before he sees Rogers step in. The door is open behind him, Romanoff and that fellow who’d confronted him in the top floors of the Triskellion standing like men-at-arms on the other side. Barnes relaxes by slow inches, and finally turns to Brock with a sigh.

“Time to pay the piper,” he says, and leans over, kissing Brock gently on the forehead before he turns and slips from the bed.

On his way out the door he turns and looks at Rogers, lingering. His hands don’t rise, don’t reach out and touch, but his chin rises and his eyes glint in hurt.

“He kept me alive long enough to find you again,” he says to Rogers, and steps through the door.

When Rogers comes in, Brock has this flash of- completely insane worry about the sight he must present. Sweat-clamy and covered in scars, reeking of antiseptic, still puffy in the face and belly from carrying- his hair is a mess, he hasn’t slept in about three days, he’s got bags under his eyes you could hide bodies in…

And Rogers looks just the same.

No- his hair’s a little different, like he’s trying to grow it out back the way he had it a few years ago, only it’s not quite there yet and tossed up wild. His mouth is in a thin, level line, and his eyes are
hard as bronze, mirror-flat the way they were the last time he looked into them. And Brock, still sensitized on hormones, can smell the simmering anger, carefully banked.

A muscle tics in Rogers’ jaw, and that breaks the spell, has Brock realizing that he’s been sitting here gaping like a fish. His shoulders lock up, and his arms tighten around his boy all un-bidden.

He thought he could do this. Stand strong in the face of it. And he’s realizing just how woefully unprepared he is, as Rogers just stands there, silent and strong.

Brock looks down, away, like the coward he is.

*I’m not ready.*

And he was never going to be.

“There’s a strongbox in my apartment,” he breaks out suddenly, chest locked around a breath that won’t quite swallow down.

“You’ve probably already got it. Not the safe, that was- you’ve probably already got that too. But the recipes, the St. Martin medal, the three silver cups, the old pike’s-head- those should go to him.”

He wishes someone was screaming in his ear, grinding a boot down on his fingers. He’s been drowned on land and hung out to dry- old hat. A knife would be welcome, electric wire, glass.

“He’s had two different great-grandsires with *jealous husband* listed as cause of death. He’s the fifth firstborn omega male in a direct line back to when Wilhelm Rumlow ran off with an Italian girl and his mama swore she’d curse him to the tenth generation. He’ll probably- “*need milk, need love, need a dog and a tire swing and need not to be a test subject, a sponge for secrets and lies.*”

He forces his arms to ease, to hold the swaddled infant outward. Ben squirms a little, makes a soft, disgruntled noise, and his heart, his breasts *hurt*.

“He should know this.”

Brock is digging hurriedly like an animal in the drawers and boxes of his own mind, trying to remember *what was important*. This is the only family history of his, what little it’s worth, that Ben will ever have- this is the moment, his heart is drumming in his ears and he feels sick with need and horror and Rogers is right. there.

There’s silence, and his arms are starting to tremble.

“If you're going to do it- take my kid now, before he gets attached.”

Ben is whimpering. Brock’s going to be sick.

"If you're gonna *do* it, Rogers..."

"That depends on you." And when he looks up, it's not anger he sees on Steve's face, not rage or disdain or anything he could reasonably deal with.

No, it's that cold, empty blank of a face, so painfully neutral as to appear grey- and that, Brock cannot for the life of him handle.
"Give me a reason."

"I can give you everything I know. HYDRA’s operations, dirty agents, politicians, plans, bases, recruitment methods..." Brock lists off, starting fast and tapering off until his voice is almost gone.

"But I can't give you that. I haven't got a single reason you shouldn't throw me in the darkest hole you can find and forget. Take your mate, take the baby if you want him- it's what I would do," he finishes, quiet and bitter.

A moment. Rogers’ mouth twists, his eyes narrow like he’s squinting at a glint of sun. The tremble in his shoulders must be rage, and Brock winces away, looking down again. Omega-humble for the first time in his life.

“Let’s try ‘everything you know’ for a start.”

Brock looks up, heart in his throat.

_Is this happening? Is this actually a chance?_

It's at least a few more moments with his baby in his arms, and that, he cannot throw away.

He's hunting for the right first words, where to even begin when Ben suddenly _wails_, and the sound shatters in the small room. Rogers jerks, steps back- Brock pulls the baby in, swearing viciously as he suddenly notices the wet patches on the front of his hospital gown. Ben squirms again, writhing as he makes his demand known loudly, and Brock hurriedly settles him in his arm, pulling open the gown and letting the newborn’s mouth find his nipple, the way he’s seen James do it. His son latches on, eyes still furrowed in resentment, and suckles like the world can go hang, for all he cares.

And Brock is left just staring down at him, feeling that same terrible _pull_ inside him as the world around them disappears.

His other hand trembles as he strokes the side of Ben’s face, lets his finger be captured by a tiny, grasping fist.

By the time he looks up, Rogers is gone.

Steve makes it to the break room where Natasha reading through files, where Tony is typing madly away. They both turn at the sound of his entrance, the waves of vile, rolling _distress_ coming off of him.

“I’m going to be sick. I’m going to be fucking sick,” he says in despair, tears in his eyes, and does so.

Chapter End Notes

First contact- and no one is ready for it. Once again, thanks to Bofurrific always and
forever, and to Andartha for helping me polish this. Slowly we are catching up to the main posting (because plague and work have slowed my writing, but hopefully I can rebuild the pad again).

Thank you all for your comments and your kindness.
Chapter Notes

To those of you who've also read this story at the kink meme- this chapter is heavily edited from its original version, hopefully avoiding the reader confusion as to bonds and their consequences. It's half regular-verse infatuation, half ElfQuest-style Recognition, all breeding urge and hormone-driven emotional attachment with a whole lot of societal drama built up around it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Of all people. Of all times. Why him?

Why Rumlow?

And why hadn’t he thought, why hadn’t he realized it could happen? That it was happening?

A bond.

He hadn’t even known for sure that there was a bond, until he’d stepped into the room and felt the shock like the recoil on a jammed gun. Like a rubber-band stretched for miles had suddenly snapped back, and he knew. Knew he was trapped in a misbegotten bondmating- either a mistake by both parties, to be so unguarded as to let it form, or a snare for one of them, and a callous deliberation by the other.

And given the way Rumlow had made his loyalties clear- it had to have been a trap set by a devious liar, one willing to put their body where their mouth was.

When he had come up from the ice, he’d been mourning a life and a love and a whole world wiped away, and clinging to any port in a storm- and Rumlow had been that. Fire in the night, and a watcher on his six. No demands, no promises- just a biting smile and dark hair and an intensity that burned, to fill the hole in his heart.

And then an electrified knife in the back, the whole damned wound ripped open all over again, for him, for the world.

After the Triskellion, he’d been filled with a blazing anger that had seen HYDRA base after HYDRA base go up in flames. But even that couldn’t always burn out the cold, pernicious thing that pulled at his edges and drained him, the grey hurt that sometimes made it hard to get up and face the next morning even though his body was whole and well. Just like before. Just like when he’d lost Bucky.

(He’d been so sure it was only that still.)

But it hadn’t been.

The bond-withdrawal had been because of Rumlow- not his own lost mate, but that deceitful, treasonous liar-
Please, please God. It couldn’t be a full bond, a real one, not to *him*…

“Steve- Steve, breathe,” Nat is saying softly. Her artificial beta-perfume is wafting gently, supposed to be soothing, but his enhanced senses tell him its chemical origin and find it irritating. Still—her voice is soothing and skillful, and she brings him out of it, careful, as if she does this every day. As if he had ever let another person in this modern age see him like this.

Well.

Save one.

“I got him to promise us information,” he finally says, swallowing down the lump in his throat. Nat has her hand on his shoulder, stronger in her silence than any alpha. “He’s willing to give us anything. But I don’t think I can go back in there again.”

“Why?”

And there it is. No running away.

“When it comes to this agent- I’m compromised.”

*Compromised.* What a safe, sanitized way to say it.

He’s had his soul stolen, and he wants it back.

The way he’d heard it growing up, a bond was supposed to be something holy, a sacred troth. It was meant to be a sign, scent and a sudden rapport telling you that this was the person God had meant for you to be with, to have and to hold, to honor and love and to make a family with. Sometimes it came on strong and sudden, sometimes it grew between with time, but it was *sacred* when it happened.

Oh, the adults always went on about how people used to hold it far more holy, going to great trials to seek out their proper bondmate, and you young people today, no morals, no respect, either treating it lightly or doing without- every generation, that’s how the song went. But you couldn’t expect love at first sight for every pair, and the whole purpose of a honeymoon was to spend time together, to let a partial bond solidify into something that would bind a couple for life. And playing the field, well-that was a good way to cast a wider net for potential matches, your ‘best fit’ for a whole heart and healthy kids.

(He’d always wanted Bucky to be able to have children, and back then- he knew he couldn’t provide. He’d have been happy as a father instead of a sire.)

Even bonded, there had always been marriages gone bad, or half-formed bonds forced whole in haste and repented at leisure, when people suddenly found their perfect other half in a stranger while having already settled for someone else who had been ‘almost right’ at the time. But between alpha and omega, the appearance of a full, true bond was one of the few things that could get the church to grant you a divorce (that is, unless you were called Henry, eighth of your name, and married to a woman who’s brother was owed a lot of favors by the Pope. Even the sacred is often subject to the political).

And in the other direction- used to be that if you were suddenly stuck in a bond you didn’t want, three years in a nunnery could serve as a ‘quickie’ divorce/un-handfasting from what would otherwise be a reason to marry in great haste, lest your tarrying be seen as flouting God’s will.

Those three years in isolation weren’t just a legal formality.
If you could make it that long, held safe behind stone walls and supported by brothers and sisters-you could be just about sure that the bond was broken, and that you were over the worst of the effects it could have.

Some said it was easier to quit drinking.

And unwanted bonds, or weak ones where they were wanted, were hardly the only things that could go wrong. Worse than misalliance was-misuse.

Sometimes a bond would only form one way- the other partner would feel no obligation, or not enough, to their bound mate, and could use their attachment to force them into service, as a whore or a spy or simply as a servile, unequal partner, depending on their mate for physical comfort and emotional validation that would never come.

(There was one in every tenement, Mrs. Hart on the third floor, Mr. Brown around the corner- you could hear the domestic happening, could always hear gossip in the morning about how their alpha had walked or they’d finally taken the kids and run, only to come crawling back.)

The callous and the cruel had been known to force one-way bonds from the vulnerable, keeping them in isolation until their only choice was to depend on their captor, literal or emotional. And many a fairy tale- many a ghost story- was built around some poor bride whose bondmate could turn the ties that bound back upon themselves.

And what else would an agent like Rumlow have done? The advice in the gym, the nights over when old ghosts came creeping, the meals and beers out that led to evenings in...

lies

But ones he’d fallen willingly for.

“Steve,” Nat interrupts his racing thoughts, pulling him back to reality like a splash of cold water. “You’re going to have to. I’ll back you up- but if you’ve gotten him to talk, you’ll need to keep up a presence. It shows a united front, and it adds weight to any promises we might make. And whatever relationship you had- that’s something we can build on. It has to be taken into consideration.”

“Speaking of which,” Tony intercedes, still tapping merrily away at light-based keys. “Ran the sequences, special-deluxe service. Congrats, Cap- the kid is yours.”

Steve doesn’t think- can’t believe- that Rumlow has a true bond with him. Can’t trust that Rumlow’s even capable of the kind of depth of affection that could make a bond more than a shackle, after the easy jokes they’d shared and the soothing intimacy between them had turned out to be nothing but a scab over infection.

But that Rumlow’s desperately protective of the child he’d borne- that he can almost believe. And it pulls at him, makes him alpha-desperate to protect, to guard and provide even though he knows it for a lie. That this is hormones and manipulation to keep him from thinking straight.

For now, all he knows is that he doesn’t know if he can step back into that room, look at Rumlow waxy-pale and curled desperately around their infant son, and threaten to take the child away from him.

Barnes sits down in the near-deserted cafeteria. After a cautious sniff and barely-there taste test, complete with brief wait to see if there are any ill effects, he takes a sip of the alleged coffee, black,
and shudders like an addict having just hit upon their latest fix.

“Just like old times,” he mutters, and sculls it.

“Man, this stuff is god-awful,” Sam says, watching Cap’s best guy work his way through a mug of what has to be the worst industrial-grade hospital caffeine he’s ever tasted, and that’s saying something, with a pinch of salt and a wince.

“Just like Morita used to make.”

Then again, he wasn’t out on the front in World War II. Sometimes the old-timers have a point.

“Sounds like you remember some.”

“Some,” Barnes agrees, quietly scanning the room before settling back to stare at his- companion? Interrogator? “Not all. A lot, but- some of it’s jumbled.”

Sam gives him a little nod, sets his hands to rest on the table. He knows the tricks to set someone at ease, to ensure a lack of threat- a black alpha has good reason to know them, and a counselor damn well ought to.

“Been in the woods long?”

“Long enough. Sometimes it feels like forever.”

“I hear you. Been doing a spell of that myself, the last, oh, few months.” Following Cap had led down hundreds of miles of European highways, dirt roads and tarmacs in pursuit of- well, of one James Buchanan Barnes, seated here as he lives and breathes.

Crushing HYDRA heads along the way being a nice little bonus on the side.

But that’s not the important thing here.

It’s a quiet, halting little conversation they have. Coffee is followed by what might be charitably called scrambled eggs, and even the bacon is subjected to the same brief taste-test. Now Sam knows what a full-on foraging-in-the-woods test looks like, and that takes a lot longer- Barnes catches his quirked eyebrow and returns with one of his own.

“I don’t have to do this, you know,” he says, looking down at his plate with a furrowed brow. “I really don’t. Not if I don’t want to- and you probably don’t have anything that could do for me anyway. Call it habit. The last- many years, I dunno how many waking, it was protocol to test anything not given to me by a handler. I’m hardly enough that a little bit hits fast and then stops working, but…”

But. But those brief seconds of intoxication could be fatal to the mission, especially with a paralytic or other lethally incapacitating substance. Way back, when he had been on the complex missions, the ones where he spoke and listened and looked other men in the eyes- this sort of thing had been a regular danger, one he had been instructed especially to be cautious of.

“-habit.”

“Habit,” Sam agrees.

And so it goes. Sam doesn’t try to pull out secrets - this isn’t about intel, but evaluation. There’s
plenty of time for that once they can figure out if Barnes is for real and with it, or on the verge of something that’ll leave shrapnel in bystanders.

What is important is that Barnes seems- together. Maybe patched together, but he’s not as bad off as Sam would have expected, given the sheer scale of the trauma he’s been through. There’s a lot there he needs to get out, but the man’s got a solid sense of priorities. Sam is good at getting others to spill what they’re ready to spill, and Barnes has an awful, awful lot to talk about- 

“This is nice and all, but you’re not brass,” Barnes finally says, with a look that cuts right through the small talk.

“You’re Stevie’s friend, I get that. You been watchin’ his back for me while I couldn’t. But I got- what is it- promises to keep. Miles to go before I sleep. A kid and a mate that needs protecting. And I figure the bigger prize than a small-fry like Brock is- well. Me.”

“And you’re… looking to make a trade?”

Ohh, Nat’s gonna love this.

“Hey,” Barnes says flatly, glowering just the slightest little bit. “I don’t got everything back, but I remember gangsters turning state’s evidence when I was a kid. I’ve seen- heard- of folks that tried to in- in the folks that had charge of me.” That seems to shake him, makes Barnes wince and shudder in a way that makes Sam wonder what could make a man who’s seen and done that much look like that.

“Not a good way to end up. But I remember they tried, and what their executioners said about how they did it after. Doesn’t matter what I listen to, long as I keep my mouth shut until the next session in the Machine, hey?”

…okay, Sam. You’ve heard- not worse. But you’ve heard it before. It hadn’t all been aerial acrobatics and swooping in to save Cap’s sweet ass from his own fool mission- tons of recon meant tons of rescued data, and some of that data was stuff that related not just to HYDRA’s mission in general, but to Sergeant Barnes’ use and misuse over the last seven decades. Steve knew at least the basics of all of it- but sometimes, you had to throw yourself on a grenade just to make sure that he didn’t.

They’d shared out the duty of combing through it all.

“Why do you feel you need to do that?”

“Why am I trying to sacrifice myself, you mean?” Barnes says, and the look on his face is way too fucking familiar. “Because Stevie’s gonna try to do the right thing, like he always does- and it’s gonna kill him.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, enjoying, and commenting. Special thanks to Bofurrific always for the heart of the story, and for this chapter especially, to Andartha listening to me bash my forehead against the keyboard and gently suggesting how to make it, my words, ‘stop sucking.’
“Something tells me that ain’t a bunch of flowers behind your back,” Brock says tiredly from his hospital bed. Ben is curled in his arms, a tiny, sleeping, wrinkly scrap of a human amidst scratchy hospital blankets.

Steve takes up guard position at the door. Romanoff is the one who steps up to the foot of the bed, face pretty and neutral as a pearl mask, and she’s the one who speaks, bringing out the recording device she’d been holding behind her back.

“You’ve stated that you’re willing to trade information on HYDRA’s operations. Everything you know.”

Ah. So it’s that time.

“I am.”

“That’s an awful lot of information. Before we go making deals, I’d like to get a sample- what exactly is on offer that the authorities might be interested in trading for. So let’s talk about what other projects HYDRA had on the burner. Insight was meant to be the blitz attack- what are the primary threats now?” Big guns right away. People can accuse Romanoff of being subtle, but never unambitious.

Brock looks over to Steve, trying to confirm with him because Natasha’s poker-face is and has always been superior.

“She for real? This isn’t just me spilling everything for your entertainment, there’s actually gonna be something negotiated for me?”

Rogers stares at him, that hateful blank look, but nods once. And that’s enough for Brock to lean back into the bed, sighing.

“Then let’s get this over with. Got your pencil, Agent Romanoff? ‘Cause I’m gonna say this once.” And he tells them.

With his baby pressed against his heart, he talks straight through for what feels like hours, pausing only when the kid fusses or the nurse comes in to check on him. He sips his ice-water, slow and careful, and keeps going long past the point where he wishes he could take a rest. He can sleep later- this is too important.

Rogers is watching him, and his frown gets deeper and deeper the longer the interrogation wears on. Brock thinks he’s about to call him out on something, when Romanoff frowns.

“You just said that happened in Tibet when it’s on public record as in Timbuktu.”

“I did?” he says, squinting tiredly. “I did. Shit. I’m not- I’m not lying…”

“…we’ll continue this later.”
“Just wait a sec, lemme finish- this’s important…”

“Enough,” growls Steve. Brock lifts his head sharply, surprised to hear Rogers go that feral-sounding- and even more at the bone-deep resonance it strikes in him.

“Rumlow-“ he starts- pauses. Shakes his head. “Get some sleep. We’ll start again in the morning.”

The nurse that waltzes in with pads and linens in arms as they leave the room gives them the eye and a hearty sniff, and Steve can’t disagree with her. His Ma would have his hide if she knew he was putting the screws, however metaphorical, to a new mother- no matter what their crimes.

*She’ll need rest and water and lots of good food- things to rebuild the lost blood and strengthen the milk.* He’ll be bleeding for a while, Steve knows, and that’s probably what the pads are for. Not the first time he’s seen an omega in trouble being helped through the aftermath, Ma was always good about that. Milk- that takes a lot out of a person, and the kid has a hearty appetite, if he knows nothing else yet he knows this. And Steve catches himself wondering if he can make sure the cafeteria knows to put tomatoes on the chicken sandwich they have scheduled for today, the way that Brock likes.

He has to stop and stand for a moment after that.

“‘You’re brooding again.”

“Tell me this isn’t worth being broody over.” How can he do his job this way? Pulled constantly two directions by what his head and his gut are telling him, in such sharp contrast that it cuts both ways?

“We’ve got your back, Rogers. You can do this.”

“But should I?”

She stops, and looks him over, and rests her hand on his arm with one of those close-mouthed sighs.

“Unless you can think of another way to get the information we need, while making sure he doesn’t stab you in the back again. Look at it this way, Steve- you haven’t actually promised or threatened anything, you’re letting his assumptions do your work for you. That’s a very good position to be in.”

*For you, maybe.*

Nat goes on ahead at his word, lets him take a moment to sort himself out.

Rumlow is a criminal and a liar. And if the service record that came out with the rest of HYDRA’s data is in any way accurate, then he’s been committing high treason since he was eighteen. He’s murdered- so many people, and was willing to murder so, so many more. Everything they had together was a sham, a false fool’s game- and he wishes he could have seen it, understood the distance behind the jokes and found some kind of sign that under it all, things were so wrong.

And yet, there’s still a small part of Steve that worries if Rumlow’s getting what he needs. That can’t stop worrying.

When he’d first been mingling among the STRIKE unit and their commander had come into the meeting room and shaken his hand, it was almost like color coming back into the world. At the time, he’d assumed it was the thrill of being part of a team, of feeling alive and useful again. Discovering it had been *more* than just renewed camaraderie and purpose, that it had been a *bond* shoots the cold
rage down through his stomach all over again, at Rumlow, at himself, because it used to be Bucky who made the world come alive, even before they’d finally made the bond in the glow of his miraculous new health. And it should never have been anybody but Bucky who could light his sky like that.

Instead, he’d been lingering with Rumlow while Bucky suffered, alive but still beyond his reach…

When he can hold it together again, he continues down the hall. It’s almost creepily quiet. This wing of the hospital is practically deserted- Tony’s money, for all that his willingness to use it can get uncomfortable, can also remove a lot of obstacles.

Which is why, when the metal arm reaches out of an empty dark room and hauls him in, no one hears his yelp.

“Rogers,” Bucky breathes, holding him tight, and Steve can’t help but follow suit, wrapping his arms around the strange, familiar frame of his lover. “Steve.” The dark-haired omega leans his head into his alpha’s chest, sniffing deeply, and Rogers can’t help but return that too, breathing in deep of the lost half of himself he thought he would never see again.

“Bucky.”

Maybe. Maybe there was something right left in the world after all.

Chapter End Notes

Friends, readers, commenters, lend me your ears... I love you all and take great joy in your enjoyment of this fic. Thank you for your comments and kudos, and just for reading and liking. Special thanks for Bofurrific and Andartha, both of whom keep giving me terrible, wonderful ideas.
They linger together for what feels like an hour and is only a moment, just breathing. When he can pull out of the sweet fog of home and family, Steve leans his head against Buck’s, has to collect himself before he can even whimper.

They grapple quietly together, fighting to take in as much of each other as they can, little hushed whines and whimpers escaping into the silence of the room. When leather-clad metal fingers stroke behind his ear, he almost cries.

“Stay with me. Please.” And he doesn’t even know if he’s asking for the night, or the hour, or forever, only that he needs-

“I can’t,” Bucky whispers, looking up at him with drowning eyes, and he’s so close and yet so far. “There’s so many reasons that I can’t.”

“Bucky- talk with me. Just talk. Please.”

And that stops Buck cold as he’s trying to pull away, makes him shake as he breathes and looks back at Steve like some beautiful, terrible thing. He glances at the door, then back to Steve again, quick little jerks that are more than halfway to feral.

“Tomorrow. Tomorrow, I- I’m not ready yet.”

He’s pulled down into a last, desperate kiss, cupping his omega’s dark head in his hands- and then he’s alone again, almost alone enough to hear the wind baying along the side of the train.

A lesser alpha would howl.

Brock barely stirs when Bucky crawls into the bed beside him, cautious as ever.

“Where you been?” he murmurs sleepily.

“Same as you- singin’ for my supper,” Buck replies, stifling a yawn. He sounds more than tired, and when he hunches into Brock’s space, leaning his head on his shoulder, his eyes are red-rimmed. The shirt he’s got on is new, un-cut at the neck, and it smells almost fresh from the gift-shop-

Except there’s alpha all over it.

Brock snorts, snaps his head back from the too-familiar scent. He realizes he’s growling when Ben starts to fuss in his bassinet, and has to reign it in to comfort him before whipping back to Bucky with a silent snarl.

“You knew?”
(“Mister- Smith,” the doctor says, inspecting her chart. She’s alpha, in charge, and brooking no nonsense. “During the surgery, we took a standard swab-test of your scent-glands as well as a blood-sample. The results are in, and I’m concerned.”

Brock glowers silently, but as much as he hates it, he’s also well-trained when it comes to medics’ instructions. And this might be important, for his boy.

“Your cortisol is too high, your thyroxin levels are too low, and your pheromone pattern is a mess, highly abnormal- among other things. Overall, the lab results indicate not just severe acute bond-withdrawal, but possibly a long-term chronic condition.”

……

“I’m sorry, could you say that again?”

……

Black and white. Color print-outs of graphs and charts. Math and science and chemical numbers straight up and without a middleman and a physician interpreting without superior orders don’t fucking lie.

……

Fuck. Fucking Steve. Fucking Steve and fucking Ricky and fucking fuck all of them. Every alpha under the sun, from his sire to his teenhood boyfriend to every single one he’d fucked to get over him to goddamn fucking Steven Grant Rogers, Captain. And his own fucking weakness in letting them get under his skin.

And fuck them especially for not feeling a damn thing, while leaving him on the hook.

It’s not fucking fair.

“So this means what, for me?”

“Effects-wise, or in terms of course of treatment?” she says, looking over the tops of her glasses. “I recommend a full physical at your earliest convenience, and possibly a course of relationship counseling, if repairing the relationship in question is an option. Otherwise, it’s probably only the sister-bond we’re detecting that’s kept you even remotely functional.”

It’s real.

It’s real and he can’t hide it and can’t hide from it and once again he’s over a goddamn barrel to someone who can barely deign to acknowledge he’s alive.
There’s treatments to keep the worst of it off- antidepressants and hormone/pheromone therapy are all things modern science has brought to the table for omegas in the throes of separation. But most of them? Not an option. Not when he’s nursing an infant. Artificial pheremones maybe, but those were usually only a weak palliative without stronger interventions.

“As for why this is so important- everyone’s reaction is different, but yours is an especially bad case. You may have already experienced some or all of these, given the- incomplete nature of the medical history we have. But physically, it means vulnerability to a number of ailments, from high blood-pressure up to and including potentially fatal heart arrhythmias. There’s also a high risk of psychiatric illnesses such as depression, anxiety, even psychosis in rare cases.“

“I have never been depressed in my life! I’ve been pissed off-“ but Benjamin doesn’t like that, hates when he raises his voice and Brock falls into gentle shushing, I’m sorry I’m sorry, until the fussing passes. He turns his attention from the baby in his arms, and looks up at the doc again with a sigh.

“What can I do?”

She softens, just the slightest little bit. It’s not the first misbegotten relationship she’s seen, where there’s a need for an alpha and no good options. Omega’s curse.

“What you can do, if you can’t go along with my recommendations? Is to take your time, stay close to those who support you, and to go easy on yourself. Avoid stress, inasmuch as you can. If you have an alpha friend, or someone willing to stand in that role, ask them to contribute to scent therapy, it’s always better to have the real thing if you can. Otherwise, there are artificial aids…”

Most or all of which is impossible. But he’ll carry on, because the other option- is not an option.)

“You need him,” Bucky murmurs, exhaustion thick in his voice. It’s like that first heat all over again, trying to share something that’s not his to give- and that Brock doesn’t want. Dealer at the detox meeting.

He offers up his hand, strokes along Brock’s jaw with neutral metal fingers that reek of Steve.

First hit’s free.

He chases his fingers with his own face, nuzzling into the scent shared between them.

“And so do I.”

“You can have him,” Brock mutters, but still shudders, still inhales deeply and pulls him close, because this is medicinal purposes and no other reason.

He has to keep functioning. He can’t afford to slip.

It’s not like anyone is going to catch him if he falls.
Thank you all for your patience, for reading and enjoying and commenting. To Bofuriffic and Andartha, always, for helping me with this.
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The man at the table is almost dead-on a match for the DC footage, if better-shaved and with shorter hair. His expression is neither flat nor shark-like, as one might expect from an assassin, but it is wary, and his hunched body shows mistrust.

"Once more for the camera?"

"Yes," says the woman offscreen, Romanoff.

"Sergeant James Barnes, 32557038. I want to debrief- but I also gotta make sure my mate and kid are okay. I have been a free man for about eight months now. As for why I didn't-report immediately... I had to get back into my right mind first. That took time. And my partner needed me. Still needs me. That's why I'm here."

“You’ve stated that you wish to offer up information for the safe custody of one Brock Rumlow, and his newborn, who shares no genetic material with you. Would you care to say why?”

“Because I trained him. I helped make him what he is. And don’t get me wrong, I will see HYDRA taken apart, piece by piece- but first I’m taking back what I want from it.”

The metal hand on the table-top clenches with a whine of servos.

It has been thirty-two hours since their arrival at the hospital, and Maria Hill is now on deck.

The prisoner is still ensconced in his hospital room, with the Winter Soldier playing bodyguard when he’s not debriefing with this or that Avenger. What intel they’ve managed to gather has been recorded and relayed, their assessments reassessed and now it is time for someone to make decisions.

Or at least it will be, once she’s got all her cats corralled.
One might ask what she’s doing here. Tony Stark has work he should be doing, certainly, but keeping a/the genius playboy omega in line and on task is not her job description. Technically, she is a very high-level data entry specialist dealing in very specific types of data.

In practice, she is a liaison between what working pieces remain of SHIELD, those (few) trusted members and the various agencies they have farmed themselves out to, and the newly re-formed Avengers. Some of whom are talented at making her life difficult.

“You want to do what?” Captain Rogers says.

“Get out in front of this. There’s a whole lot explosive potential in this situation, Captain Rogers, and while my first instinct is to bury it all where it will never see daylight- you and I both know that’s not possible to do.”

He still looks like someone slapped him with a fish. Clearly, this situation is not being handled well- or about as well as it ever has been with regards to Rogers, which is a crying fucking shame as far as she’s concerned. (The footage from his initial waking- that still breaks her heart, to have to treat any returned soldier that way- but there is always, always a test.)

“By spinning some yarn-“

“Captain,” Maria says, looking calm and elegant in high-end business casual, but still quietly ready to destroy anyone she should care to take down. “On the one hand, you have a foot-soldier from a neo-fascist terror organization, who’s pulled off a manipulative honeytrap scam in order to get out of punishment for, and possibly as an aid to, committing high treason. On the other, you have a scared, repentant omega who came to their senses for the love of their bondmate, who’s spent the last seven months alone and on the run protecting your child from those who would harm it- and who brought Sergeant Barnes, your true lover and longest running POW in the world, back into the fold.

“Which one fills the public with more confidence? And for that matter- which one scares the shit out of HYDRA the most?”

Rogers is quiet, and Hill presses her advantage while he is, because this is important.

“If we handle this wrong, and get found out- there’s no telling how much damage it could do. If we handle it right- it could net us a lot of public support, and it also puts HYDRA off their game because they don’t know how much information we have.”
“You’re talking about giving carte blanche—"

“No, I’m recommending that we take a certain course, and give him every opportunity and incentive to stick to it. We can use this. It is not Rumlow getting off scot-free, it’s him serving our needs and getting what he wants so long as he cooperates.”

Steve looks- exhausted, she thinks. He rubs his face, pale and shocky with red-rimmed eyes. He hasn’t been sleeping, and he looks like he could use a few good hours with a warm bed, a stiff drink, and his mate.

“None of this is right,” he says, and she thinks he may be in the wrong business.

“We aren’t announcing anything right away. Just laying contingency plans for when and if we have to,” she says.

Hill’s men arrive the next day.

Brock barely sees them, just knows that there are suddenly more suits and he knows the Avengers are talking with people, coordinating all the craziness of this little rescue mission. It looks like they’re going to be using this hospital as the base of operations, until such times as they can move Rumlow.

(They could have after twenty-four, but almost nobody involved is feeling up to rushing just now.)

There are more interrogations. Interviews, really, because Brock knows interrogation, SHIELD style and HYDRA style, and this is not it. He’s eating regularly, his baby is left to lie at his breast, and he speaks as long as he can from a clean, if not comfy, bed. Even out here he’s sure they could find a wet-nurse to provide both food and skin-to-skin bonding for an infant, they don’t need to leave Ben with him even for compassion’s sake. They break every two hours or so, because that’s usually when Ben starts to snuffle and whimper, and if feeding and changing is not accomplished in a hurry, there will be a weeping and a wailing and a gnashing of gums such that further interrogation cannot be pursued.

This cycle of nursing and diaper-changes continues even when they aren’t there asking him questions, through the night, so Brock’s just a little loopy right now. Barnes helps when he’s there,
but Brock still wakes up- he can’t not when his son cries, and watches what happens because he might trust James with his son but he doesn’t trust anyone else around them with anything.

Rogers stays distant, and they do their damnedest not to pay attention to each other in a room while Romanoff takes charge of directing the questions. There’s still so much to tell, so much he can offer- but he tries to stay on the topics that she chooses, and even as he hates himself for a traitor he knows that in the end, it’s just- letters and numbers he can offer up in trade.

There is no reward at the end of this but his life and his child- and it’s the only end he’s willing to put resources toward anymore.

Barnes goes away, every day. He comes back, bearing the scent of an alpha, and Brock reaches for him with greedy hands even as he loathes himself.

Barnes comes back.

Brock is under no illusions about how much observation he’s probably under. He just tries to save the weeping spells for when nobody’s there to witness it personally, bites it back until it explodes out of him.

On the third day of his life, they take Benjamin away to the nurse’s station to test his reflexes. Well, that’s an understatement- it’s really a full battery of tests, and while Brock is almost delirious to see him well cared-for, it also means his baby is out of his arms and in the hands of strangers.

Buck is there, for once, and helps him limp and gasp his way into the shower by way of distraction- everything is stiff and sore, and he can’t stand the stink of himself a moment longer. He waves off Barnes once he’s in the little plastic chair, and takes stock as he leans into the hot water, trying not to gasp.

Incision- healing. No infection, and he hasn’t managed to pull any stitches (not that he had the will to run anywhere). Head- full of cotton and fear, but the hot water sluicing through his hair is like a post-orgasmic haze, and he just leans against the ceramic tile, letting it flow over him like a stone in a river.

His arms are still strong, if shaky, and his gun-callouses are still there. His feet aren’t swollen anymore, his hips are aching still but they’ll work their way back to pre-waddle state eventually- until
then he’s sporting the classic post-birth omega hourglass, even if he didn’t actually give birth through it. He can tighten that up, regain his strength and his figure-

If he lives long enough to reach a gym.

When he’s out, Barnes is taken off again, and Brock is left alone.

There’s only so much time he can spend on crossword puzzles (and where that newspaper came from he doesn’t know, but it’s at least a week old. Still, it’s got some stuff on the state of the world he’s been absent from these last many months, and it’s worth catching up on.)

When he can’t look at that any longer and not go cross-eyed, he looks down at the gift Romanoff so-helpfully clamped on his arm while they were first doing his epidural. In addition to his hospital tag, he’s got a metal bracelet that has no apparent clasp and will not come off. He’s seen the same thing on Barnes, and he kicks himself for letting them get cornered like this. Nervous energy has him turning it this way and that, listening to its extremely faint hum. It doesn’t bend, and it’s tight enough that just dislocating a thumb isn’t going to get it off.

He’s not in a good condition to be pacing, but there’s nothing else for it. He’s being kept in the dark and fed shit, his arms are empty and he has no one-

He’s being a needy little omega and he hates it, hates it.

Fuck it. A tracking bracelet implies that they can find him if he wanders, they trust their own measures enough to leave him here alone, with an open door and no one directly sitting on him-

He’s going to find his boy, or Barnes or Rogers or someone he can demand answers from-

The bow across the doorway almost hits him in the tit, and he looks down and to the side to see a dishwater-blond alpha giving him the grimmest, meanest little smile he’s ever seen.

“Barton,” Brock says, swallowing. Clint Barton, he’d hung out with STRIKE sometimes, always a good guy to have on your op, he took the shots and got them done, but he was always an outsider, never a potential recruit.
(Even after the alien invasion, HR said they didn’t want him- he was too far dug in to certain mindsets they didn’t think they could turn to their advantage.)

Barton looks him up, and then down- not in a sleazy way, he’s one for other alphas and beta-boys, but in a clear and contemptuous assessment. Brock knows he’s in no great condition- he’s still shaky and his scars are all over the place, he doesn’t stink anymore but he smells of distress and he’s got no weapons…

His gaze lingers on the bracelet, and Barton’s lips quirk just that little extra bit, his keen eyes narrowed. He makes a mocking sweep with his bow, like a toll bridge admitting passage.

Brock sneers a bit as he walks slowly out into the hall. If SHIELD’s pet circus act wants to give him enough rope to hang himself with, he can press that advantage to find what he needs.

“Hey Rumlow!” He almost jumps, and turns back with a glare.

“Close the barn door, would ya? Not everyone needs to be staring at your ass.”

Brock growls, and tugs his gown into place as he stalks carefully away.

Chapter End Notes

Always, thanks to Bofurrific and Andartha, heart and bones. Hope you all are continuing to enjoy- your comments make my day^^

If you like, feel free to join me at my Tumblr. I can promise nothing but occasional random ideas and pictures of cats.
The tiled halls echo with distant foot-steps, full of empty smells- the kind when a place is trying to be sterile and is mostly just cleaned a lot. It’s old and familiar- it clung to his mother when she came home, worn and proud and aching.

It helps.

The storm in his head is quieter. The snarling creature in his belly is reduced to a grumble, and its usual roar, alternately raging against the trap or dragging against the reigns trying to pull him towards the one who betrayed him, has faded into the background for now.

He searches for the pull towards Bucky- and to his relief, it’s there, and strong. Thankfully, unlike Rumlow, Bucky isn’t pouring out distressed-mother signals. It’s hard enough to bear what he’s scenting off Rumlow, Steve wouldn’t be able to hold on to his sanity if Buck was that anxious and miserable too. But even though Bucky’s hurt and needing, he’s strong enough to spend the day closeted with Sam and Natasha, Maria and her people- and he’s been tamping down on his side of the bond, leaving Steve shut out. It’s strange and terrifying to have that wall there, one that’s never been before except when Bucky was royally pissed at him, like you-got-into-a-fistfight-in-the-pouring-rain-and-gave-someone-your-coat-on-the-way-home-what-the-fuck-Stevie angry.

But he doesn’t seem angry, at least, not since the initial call. Steve might say he was afraid- of him? For Rumlow?

Whatever it is, Bucky has his reasons. Said he needed space. Said he wasn’t ready. Steve can’t argue with that- he can want all he wants, but he won’t put pressure on his bond-mate, not after what he’s been through.

So. His mate needs time off. Steve’s made it almost three years, he can handle another few days. Or forever, if that’s what Bucky needs.

Steve’s breath fogs the glass of the nurse’s station, where his son (his son) is being carefully tested and weighed and measured.

With one mate not wanting his protection and another he’s almost certain doesn’t deserves it, he at least can consider who he really needs to ensure is protected in this unholy tangle.

The baby's eyes are dark grey and squinting, flitting every which-way in order to try and take in this whole new world. He wonders if they'll stay as they are, if they'll turn bright blue or tawny brown, if the fuzz on his tiny head will come in dark or fair.

"Benjamin Rumlow," he murmurs, only just hesitating over the last name on the bassinet. He leans over, trying to see anything of himself in that tiny face. It's too soon to tell. "It's good to meet you, Ben. Wonder where you got a name like that."

"Well, I was hardly gonna call him Mordred."
Steve turns around sharply to find Rumlow leaning against the wall, and he swallows down the roiling dark. Not the time. Not the place.

The omega is trying and failing to play it nonchalant, with his arms crossed and his trademark smirk faltering from his face. He shuffles forward a few steps, hesitant in a way Steve’s never seen him before.

"Subtlety's not my strong point. I named him for my granddad," Rumlow murmurs, looking past him through the window.

"What are you doing-"

"Relax, Cap," Brock says, finally looking him in the eye for a brief shock of a second before turning back. He raises his left wrist, gives it an elegant twist like a model. "Got your present. Must've set you back a ways- you sure know how to make a guy feel special."

It's not a SHIELD model, coming in red and gold instead of silver, but it does the job well enough- tracker, monitor, electronic interference, possibly remote detonation- Steve really hopes Tony was kidding about that part.

"I meant out of bed. You're recovering from surgery, you shouldn't be up and walking around."

Rumlow’s still pale, almost grey under the tan. He's got one arm supporting his midsection, the other resting on the wall, and the smile he's got pasted on reminds Steve of just how much of a mask that cocky swagger always was.

"Oh, I'm aware that I just got a whole human being ripped out of me, and believe me I'm still feeling it. But you gotta remember, Rogers- sometimes there are perks that come with the job. Perks like getting shot up like a lab-rat with whatever bits of the serum they could make stable." The STRIKE commander- the HYDRA agent- locks his arms around himself and still stares straight ahead, trying to keep his gaze on the baby and mostly just managing to stare into space.

"I bounce back a little faster than I oughta. Not as much as I'd like, but..."

Fast enough that he’s on his feet, even after the birth and all its attendant blood-loss (Steve can still hear the horrible burble of the suction, the plastic jar filling with red-)

Medical records aside- it had been a good thing Bucky had known Rumlow’s blood-type.

“…what are you doing out here, Rumlow. Really.” Escape is always a possibility- always a priority. It depends on whether or not Rumlow still considers himself a soldier in enemy hands… whether he thinks he could take the child with him. If he even wants the child- he seems so attached, but he’s certainly lied about that before.

Brock jerks his chin toward the nurse’s station.

"Whadda you think? Didn’t know I was going to be sharing the observation window- if you want me to leave, I’ll go," he says tartly.

The set of his shoulders says differently. Rumlow looks like he’d rather chew glass than leave, and if he could force some down Steve’s throat, he would.

God, that’s refreshing. Better by far than being smiled at and told everything is fine, when it’s very clearly not.
(“Busy tonight, Rogers.” “Look, we had some laughs, let’s just leave it at that, okay?” “I don’t need some big alpha cramping my style.” It’s like with spring, their easy rapport had melted away with the snow. And he’d been left confused and spinning, but trying to respect, because if an omega doesn’t want you? You don’t get close.

No matter how close you were, once upon a time. In the elevator, he’s almost happy for a moment, even with all the loss that brings it about (Rumlow do not apologize)- because Brock is talking to him outside of a mission again.)

He’s about to say- he doesn’t even know what, because what can you say? –when a flicker of movement has them both turning sharply toward the window again. It’s just the nurse picking up the baby for another test, but they stare like cats in unison, following her movement behind the glass. This is their son. His son, even by the wrong omega. And Steve might never have known him.

He doesn’t even know Benjamin’s scent yet.

From the corner of his eye, he catches Rumlow staring at him now.

“What.”

The omega snorts, and looks away shaking his head. His throat works, like he’s chewing words and swallowing them down again.

“Look. I’ve seen what happens when mommy and daddy are fighting, and baby’s left off to the side. I gotta make sure he’s gonna be okay- even if mommy’s not around. There’s not a goddamn thing I can say that’ll make this,” he says, flicking his hand between the two of them, the tart gone right out of his voice. “-right. Just- just don’t take it out on my kid.”

“I wouldn’t,” Steve says tightly, and stays firmly his few feet away. Rumlow is steadfastly not looking at him, like shame is even a thing he understands. But there’s no further defense, no explanations- just a quiet that stretches thin and brittle.

He wants to ask how could you think that but then, there’s a lot he doesn’t know about the way Brock thinks.

“Have you held him yet?”

Like that.

“You made it clear you’d tear the head off anyone who came near him.”

Rumlow shrugs, still looking away.

“He should know his daddy’s scent.” Whether or not he’ll ever become familiar enough with his mother’s as to remember when he’s grown.

There’s nothing about this situation that’s normal. If they were- if this were a family instead of a war-crimes trial waiting to happen, there’d be one of the family rooms they have in hospitals these days, a substitute for the post-birth nesting you did at home, back in the day. Dim lighting, soothing colors, and a big soft bed for the parents and baby to curl up together and bond, with room for the other kids to snuggle in between them and get their new sibling’s scent.

This is nothing like that. Bright lights, cold cuffs, and he can still smell the tang of blood in the air. The baby held by nurses and doctors while they try to sort out who will stay and who will go and
who is going to end up in prison.

It’s enough to make his stomach clench again, and he expects to see Brock smiling, a hint of gloating at having gotten his in with the mark, *you have what you wanted but not the way you wanted at all.*

Mostly, though, he just looks tired.

"Go on. You know you want to," Brock says, motioning for Steve to go on in, a careless wave instead of the crisp military sign he’s used to from him.

Steve hesitates, mostly because he thinks the scarred, dark-haired omega looks like he's on the verge of collapse. Brock's not trembling yet, but it looks like he's holding it off by sheer force of will, and that can't last forever. And even now, the thought of him crashing to the ground because he just can’t stand up any longer-

(it is *just like Mali again*)

"If you sit down." Why is he even negotiating this?

"Fine by me."

There's a chair to be had in the hall, and Steve hauls it over to the window and Rumlow sits down before he can fall down. Up close he smells of hospital chemicals and terror and sick and *exhaustion*, but under it is- something that stirs uneasy protective instincts in Steve, feelings that he knows he's going to have to put under lock and key in order to do the right thing- feelings that clash with the *loathing* that roils in his belly. But until that moment arrives...

The nurse lets him in, has been observing their drama without subtitles through the glass pane. She spends a few moments teaching him the right way, how to cradle his arm and to hold firmly, but gently, and to support the head.

And then the tiny bundle of blankets is in his arms and it's too late to back out-

And he's a tiny, tiny thing. Much too small to be the cause of all this trouble (*oh Stevie, if ever there was a recipient of 'may your children be just like you'...*) But his head fits in the palm of his hand, and his scent is new and clean and *oh, Stevie boy, you are in trouble now*...

Ben Rumlow goggles up at him, just as confused and lost as the rest of them, but with a much simpler agenda. Eat, sleep, and stay safe and warm- and if Steve has anything to say about it, that will never, ever be a problem.

He looks up, and Brock is looking through the window from his seat, broad fingertips resting against the glass. The look on his face isn't triumph. It's like the heart he doesn't have is about to break in two.

Chapter End Notes
Whoo! Another two-week interval- work, she is a harsh mistress, but eating is conducive to writing^^ Thanks always to Bofurrific and Andartha, heart and bones. Hope you all are enjoying, and thank you for your comments, kudos, and hits, they always make my day (especially comments!)
Rogers turns his head back, staring down at their son with a million far-away thoughts clearly flickering behind his eyes- and by the time he’ll look back up again, Brock will be gone. He’s done his good deed for the century- now he’s just making his slow way through the halls, back to his room. He nods courteously to his guardian archer at the end of the hall, flashes his tracking bracelet and walks in again as straight and tall as he can.

Shuts the door. Lays down on the bed.

Fucking loses it.

Because Ben’s better off.

Cap’ll take care of him like I never could. Him and Jamie both.

Right thing is to think about the baby. That’s the mission- and what’s a little pain if it’s the mission?

Cap’s gonna take him, it’s the right thing. And Cap, fuck him very much, always does the right thing.

……

Everything he was afraid of has come true.

……

He’s trying desperately to keep quiet, but the sobs take him even as he tries to bite them back, hurting as they pull at his incision but he can’t stop, won’t stop. Couldn’t if he tried.

Because what he saw back there looked so right. There’s no way he can insert himself into that picture without breaking the glass, staining the photo. Jamie’s gonna love that boy to pieces, watch him grow, catch his first steps. Take him to school, teach him to catch, feed him ice-cream, and they’ll know each other’s scent, each other’s names. He’s an enemy agent on the hook for high treason, there was never a chance they were going to let Ben stay with him, be tainted by him. Rogers is going to raise his boy to be a Good Man™ with Barnes while he rots, and who the fuck is he to say that isn’t the best for everyone?

(just a trashy little omega, good for nothing but spreading his legs and letting other people take what they want out of him)
Just like old times. Just used and thrown away again, curled on his side in a hospital bed and trying not to miss what was never his.

That’s how Bucky finds him hours later when he slips in alongside with barely a murmur. He’s dead tired too, has to be, from talking and talking and talking to his hosts, captors, friends in low places that need all the gory details. That’s why he doesn’t smell it right away, doesn’t hear it, until he’s right up on him, and then he’s frozen around Brock in a full-body rictus of horror.

The bleak despair coming off him coats the back of the tongue like soot. Black clouds like you’d see over the factories, just as strong and just as poisonous.

“-my boy, he’s gonna take my boy,” Brock is whispering, voice long since gone hoarse and salt staining his face until it burns in its tracks.

Buck leans in again despite the reek of grief, tries to touch his partner’s shoulder, his cheek, offer some comfort in the face of a storm bearing down.

“Sugar, what-“

The room goes about ten degrees colder. Rumlow freezes beside him, goes statue-still under his hand until he slowly turns over to stare at Buck. His eyes are red-rimmed and wide, too wide.

The vicious elbow-jab comes as a surprise, catches him in the side and knocks the breath out of him.

“Don’t you fucking call me that!” Brock shouts, and Buck is scrambling backwards, all the brute grace of the Soldier vanished.

“Get away from me, you goddamn freak,” the older omega growls, and Buck freezes just on the edge of the bed, unable to do anything but watch the dam break. “Thought this was gonna work out okay, huh? Thought we’d go to Steve and everything would be just fine. Fuck you, Barnes- it was isolation, and hormones, and, and fucking brain damage that got us this far. And now I’m trapped, and you- you. You’ve got it all.”

Brock’s staring at Bucky, the sort of rage painted on his face that could burn down countries.

“Congratulations, Barnes- you didn’t even have to cut me open to steal my baby.”

Clint Barton is not a nosy guy. Inasmuch as you can be that and still be a spy, anyway- but sometimes, it’s hard not to overhear things said in private, not to see things that other people overlook.

Right now, it’s real hard not to notice Sergeant J. Barnes exiting the room he’s been set to guard at speed, considerably faster and more desperate-looking than when he entered. Something clatters against the wall- a tray, a bed-pan maybe, it’s not his business. He’s just here to keep the vigil.

Keep a willful traitor contained.

If Rumlow wants to throw away his only ally with a tantrum, that’s his lookout.

Barnes- the goddamn Winter Soldier- scrambles down the hall with barely a backward glance,
moving like the hounds of hell are after him. He doesn’t acknowledge Barton’s barely-there salute, gone too fast for Clint to even make it fully honor-bond or loose in jest.

See- there’s a whole lot of things Clint’s keeping a lid on, because to actually pull them out like silks from the magician’s sleeve is inviting a whole lot more personal involvement than is right for a professional agent of SHIELD. Or what’s left of it. He’s still got his badge, dented and in need of a polish as it is (thing’s stopped a bullet once or twice, he’d been thinking about requisitioning a new one when everything went to hell the first time).

(After that, well- it didn’t really matter)

Suffice to say, if he were to really let himself look into that bag of trouble, he thinks he’d end up doing something he’d call forgivable but the rest of the world wouldn’t think so, and he’s already got too much of that mud on his hands.

And that’s not his call.

Cap’s got a family to protect, including from itself. Clint would much rather take care of business than see the guy hurt again, but family is family, and not anyone else’s business. Not unless they ask.

So he perches on his chair, and cleans his bow, and watches.

Steve is sitting quietly, cradling the infant who is his son with a lump in his throat and a mind gone blank. He’d gone to sleep after the nurses had been done with him, even in the arms of a virtual stranger, and Steve is just- holding him, absorbing his scent into thought and memory, like a father’s supposed to.

*You’ll be safe*, he promises. *You’ll be taken care of.*

He and Bucky- they’d wanted kids so bad. Had known it was going to take a lot of work, first to afford them and then to father them. They’d known they were meant since they were teens, had grown into each other- but the bond wouldn’t take, was their choice instead of their bodies moving into synch with each other properly, and more than one fight he’d gotten into had been over jackasses making comments about how he should free up that sweet little omega he was tying down, let Bucky go to a real man.

If Bucky had wanted to go, he could and would have. They had each other- they were content to be unorthodox. But it didn’t help that in order to get a decent job, Buck had to hold off getting married so anyone’d hire him, even the military. They’d take an omega talented at mayhem as he was, but only if he didn’t have a ring on his finger.

The serum had changed everything and nothing. The bond had slid into place over the couple of days the troops had been recovering from their march back from the facility. Even on government-issued suppressant pills, Buck had fit into him, scent and soul, like a puzzle-piece finally matching up, and everyone had grinned at them, made sly jokes about ‘when’s the wedding’.

But there was no time. There was a war on, and one that had just become a lot more personal to them both, them and the men they’d broken out with.

So a quick handfasting and a steady supply of pills had kept propriety and practicality satisfied, while they and the Howling Commandos sought and burned out HYDRA operations wherever they could find them.
And then the train. And he’d woken up again, when he’d meant to follow, and had taken up the duty once more because it was the right thing to do.

Children, like the rest of it, had been a dream long snuffed. He’d only been looking for a little light in the darkness with Rumlow, and instead gotten far more than he’d bargained for.

“But you’re worth it,” he whispers softly, hardly daring to breathe lest he disturb his son. No matter what, you’ll be well, he promises. He’s been a terrible mate, he’s going to be a better father if it kills him.

It’s a right fucking mess they’re all in. He wants to cringe every time he thinks of it- the bonds he has and the way he’s handled them, the way he has to handle them right now. And it’s not even the stepping out on Bucky, being forsworn by accident that pricks at him (he couldn’t have known he should have known).

What really sets the hair on his neck standing up, besides having bonded to a HYDRA agent (and wouldn’t Zola be having fits of electric cackles about that)- is that he didn’t even realize he had bonded again. What does that say about him?

Even if it was a stealth move by some kind of a- a thief of love- he should have fucking well noticed.

The more he thinks about it, the more he can spot the little hints. The bright jump of happiness in his stomach every day on seeing each other. The ease with which they’d worked on the battlefield, smooth as silk- it wasn’t just leader and second, good soldiers, they were in sync with each other. How good Brock’d smelled to Steve in those rare moments he could catch it- Brock was religious with the scent neutralizer, but during a long night of rumpled sheets or after showers in the morning, he shoulda been catching the changes when they happened.

But he hadn’t noticed, so wrapped up in his own losses and willing to take Rumlow at his word, the easy outs he’d offered. Seems a little hypocritical, now, him being so hard on Nick Fury for not noticing that HYDRA had been growing inside his organization.

As for worrying himself sick over being led astray and pulled this way and that by a one-way bond… turns out he needn’t have worried. Things had gotten real exciting when Nat, for whom patient confidentiality is a suggestion at best, had gotten him the medical reports on her StarkPad.

It takes a lot to get Natasha to react that openly. She’s been schooled in controlling herself for a very long time, but what she found there had made her whistle under her breath and turn the pad over to him with raised brows.

It had taken him a few moments to make sense of the doctors’ shorthand medical gibberish on the screen, but when he did, he’d had to sit down.

Because Rumlow’s been in heavy bond withdrawal. For months. The sort you don’t get without a bone-deep biological bond- and the sort that’s been known to come with heavy side-effects. All those old stories of broken hearts leading to death, girls and omega-boys becoming rusalkas and yuki-onna after pining away had a basis in medical fact. Hypertension, heavy depression, heart attacks… suicides.

And miscarriage. It doesn’t happen to every abandoned omega, but the lack of hormonal support is an added stress- and if a body feels overburdened and unprotected…

The rates are just… much higher. The doctors believe that if it weren’t for a sister-bond with Bucky keeping him stable, there’s a real likelihood that Rumlow wouldn’t have been able to carry his child,
their child, to term.

What was it Bucky had said to him over the phone?

“He don’t bear easy, you know that? Doesn’t carry well. He lost one once before, he ever tell you?”

The thought that he could have lost Ben before he even knew he existed—leaves Steve heartsick and jittery, cradling his warm weight in a quiet hospital room. It goes without saying that there’s a whole lot of Brock’s history that he never knew about—and he’s going to need to rectify that, there’s a whole new can of worms—

For now, the point is that the bond is real. It’s solid. And it goes both ways, because you don’t get that kind of response without feeling something, even if it is just nature fucking around with you. Even if this whole thing started as an attempt to trap him, now Brock’s caught in it too.

And that puts the misery he can feel roiling off of Rumlow in a different perspective. Makes him wonder about the growing distance between them, when Brock had to have known what was coming up. Had he been trying to break the bond preemptively, spare himself some of the heart-ache? It would mean that Steve was having some kind of effect on him, but—

What kind of person could cut their own heart out, kill their bonded on orders? What would it take to push someone that far, that they’d be willing to try?

(Bucky. Doesn’t. Fucking. Count.)

His arms go tight, and Benjamin’s brow starts to furrow, his breathing changes and he starts to mew, make little noises of discontent as he begins to wake up.

“Oh no, no— it’s okay, little guy, we’ll be alright—“ Steve says hurriedly, shifting him in his arms and starting to bounce him just a little. “We’ll be okay. Hush, little baby… come on, don’t you cry…”

Bucky was always the better singer. Somehow it doesn’t surprise Steve that he shows up at just this moment, though the rush in which he does it is a little startling.

The stricken look on his face is even more so.

“What did you DO?”

Chapter End Notes

*hides from rain of vegetables*

Thank you to Bofurrific, for the heart, and Andartha, for the bones. Ya'll are my faves.

And thank you to everyone who reads, kudos'es and comments, you all make my day every time.

If you like, feel free to join me at my tumblr. I can only promise weird ideas in the middle of the night, pictures of cats, and occasional swearing over how I can't figure out
how to use tumblr.
Bucky’s wild-eyed, hair up in spikes (running the metal hand through does interesting things with static). His eyes narrow in on the baby, and Steve’s grip tightens protectively, just the tiniest bit- the jostle is still enough to disturb the infant, who sets up a fuss on waking.

But he still hands Ben over when Buck makes a soft whimpering sound and says “Give ‘im here.” The small, dark-haired newborn swiftly changes hands, and Buck shoves aside the layers of his gift-shop nursing shirt, popping a nipple into the baby’s mouth and soothing his cries.

“That’s it, that’s my boy…” Buck is murmuring, and Steve can see the relaxation hit him, the drop in his shoulders, the sudden softness in his voice and it just makes him ache to watch.

This is how it should have been with them.

Then Buck glances up again, and it’s cold blue steel all over again.

“I just came from the room.”

Brock’s room, where he’s been staying in the evenings, where Steve goes with Nat to be her silent backup, carrot and stick, to keep Rumlow talking.

“You know what I found there?”

Steve straightens up, on point like a hound.

“Something’s up with Rumlow? Is he- unwell? He was walking around earlier, I told him that wasn’t a good idea-“ Any other time, he might crack wise. Not here. Not now. Not after everything.

“Yeah, this is about Rumlow. Mother of your child. Bond-sister to your mate. Backed up in a corner with nowhere to go. And you know what he thinks, Rogers?” Buck is asking, stage-whisper not hurting the baby’s sensitive ears while he nurses, but managing to convey plenty of quiet rage all the same.

“He thinks we’re gonna steal his baby. He thinks we’re gonna throw him away and let him get locked up. Even though he’s giving up info, even though I’m giving up intel for him. He’s getting ready to die, Stevie,” Bucky says.

“How do you-?”

“Think I don’t know what that smells like?” he growls softly. “Saw it often enough in the camps and the facilities. I know when someone’s given up. Eating themselves on the inside. Can we- can we not do that, Steve? I need to not do that. Not to anyone, but especially not to him,” he says, hefting the baby’s weight in his arms.

“I’m not going to abandon him- jeez, Bucky- I just…”

“You just don’t wanna give an inch to an enemy,” Buck grumbles, still looking at him with eyes that have seen too much but still, miraculously, have some vinegar-sharp spark in them. “Think maybe
you should let him know that? ’Cause it looks to me like he thinks he’s never gonna see Ben again.”

“He kept you prisoner,” Steve says, quiet but ringing, like a pebble in a still pond. “He tried to kill me. And not just me. He. Is. HYDRA. Why do you want to save him?”

The exhaustion that suddenly hitches Bucky’s shoulders- it’s a palpable wave coming off him, crested by his turning to look at Steve with the weight of ages in his eyes.

“I’ve known him a lot longer than you have, pal. Longer than he gives me credit for. Even if I was out of it for a lot of it, I can look back and see a whole lot more than I did at the time. Like you,” he says, tapping his temple with the free hand not supporting the baby at his breast- the baby Rumlow had borne in secret, alone except for Bucky, the baby that should have been theirs together. “And those maps. I seen a lot of them come and go, Rogers. Helped make the cull. Watched ’em grow into little fingerling HYDRA agents, and I tell you, Stevie, you start ’em young enough? Scared and stupid-desperate? You don’t need electricity to brainwash them.”

Bucky presses his lips together, giving them a small and determined edge.

“And I think he’s one of the few that got somethin’ worth salvaging.”

Steve swallows, stands at the edge of that terrible gap between them, shorter than a yard and a hundred miles long. And Bucky looks up from where Ben is nursing, meets his mate’s gaze, eyes gone dark and imploring.

“Steve- he’s in real bad shape. The bond-break’s hurting him like nobody’s business, and he thinks he’s gonna lose the last good thing he’s ever had. He’s out of HYDRA- and he’s got nothing and no one left. He’s getting’ ready to die, Stevie. Are you ready to let him?”

It takes him a few minutes, considering his options as he watches Bucky nurse their- no, his and Rumlow’s son. Buck switches sides halfway through, as if he’d just got done watching his ma do it with one of his little sisters, as if there weren’t seventy years and a thousand nightmares between who he was then and what he is now. Gives Ben a little pat on the back, flesh hand for preference, and watches the baby yawn himself back to sleep in his arms. His eyes are a little distant, but they’re not wide and blank, not feral-wild and darting.

The look he gave promises that Steve had better have an answer by the time he’s done, and it had better be the right one- and God alone knows what he’ll do if it isn’t.

And Steve- Steve thinks.

About stories. And soldiers. And salvage.

The last time he’d seen his mate- Bucky hadn’t known himself, much less Steve. Hollow-eyed and carved lean, only muscles meant for killing left of him.

When Bucky leans over the baby, he looks- painfully familiar, echoes of carefree before-the-war amid the restless paranoia of within-the-war and the stunning, leashed lethality of after-the-war. His voice is unbroken, strong and clear if a little rusty. He doesn’t cower. He doesn’t beg, he growls to defend his unwelcomed HYDRA charge- and he does so without slavish devotion, without some-cracked feeling of pretending to be Bucky the way he does in Steve’s nightmares.

Dressed like a vagrant and unshaven or not, he’s clean and well-fed, and his scent is still off, but recognizable without stress and drugs marring it.
He looks like a person, not a poorly-maintained machine.

Rumlow would have been better-served keeping him off-balance, the cold part of Steve’s mind notes. Letting the damage remain, maybe even make it worse. Making him dependent, a prize puppet he could offer up for his safety while still holding the strings in the heart of the Avengers’ tower- a real asset to have for a prisoner who needed something to trade on. He’s seen- just a few, all he could stomach, of the old vids and records. Dead-eyed photos, transcripts of sessions with Zola- *Your mate isn’t coming for you. He’s dead.* The beatings are hard, the imprisonment harder. Watching the fight burn out of Bucky, burn through him, like a coal-ember about to collapse in ashes- that’s hardest of all.

And later, when the scent and the strength and the sense of himself had been *stripped*, there are sessions with another man, one who fiddles with a ring and speaks sweetly, and his *words*-

The Faustus Method, it’s called in the notes. The work of a Russian scientist named Fennhoff, and it means that after years of vicious, snarling resistance even fresh out of the ice- Bucky breaks for the first time with a smile on his face.

The electric shocks are infinitely more effective after that.

Sam wouldn’t let him go through all of it at once, would make him stop reading and re-reading- but he knows the gist. The- Soldier- would be clear and obedient for a while, sometimes years at a time, and sleeping in the ice prolonged it- but eventually he would need some new reassurance to re-stabilize him. The Chair is a brute method, and there is a difference between not disobeying, and complying with enthusiasm. Fennhoff dies. It takes a long time before they feel the benefits outweigh the risks of allowing the Soldier to bond, even partially, but in order to maintain their asset *something* must be done.

Pierce had looked an awful lot like him when he was younger.

Never an untoward touch on record- but the little offerings of comfort make the Soldier obey, if not relax, and Pierce’s words echo Fennhoff’s.

*We’re doing the right thing, making the world safe again. For families. Don’t you want a safe place for your family?*

The bond is only ever a partial, and Pierce is, in fact, a loyal alpha to his own wife. When next things go haywire they bring in a series of candidates, in hopes that a new handler will make the difference.

The record is incomplete, but Rumlow’s name crops up. Reports say ‘much improved’, ‘subject is efficient and calm’- ‘decommission unnecessary.’ There’s only a few clips of video- Rumlow is thorough and hard-eyed as he does his job, handles the Soldier like one imagines a stable-boy would a horse, and is congratulated for the effectiveness of his methods in a way that makes it sound like it was all their idea in the first place.

If Rumlow had kept Bucky hungry for direction, for praise, for human contact- he could’ve had a servant and bodyguard, an obedient doll who wouldn’t have disobeyed and called *him*.

*(But they’d both be dead by now, then, Rumlow and the baby with him- and then where would Bucky be?)*

And that’s the thing, Steve thinks. While it makes sense for Rumlow to have kept his head low after the fall of the Triskelion, see how the chips fell- after that, a loyal agent should have been able to get
help, easy as pie. Surely the prize he carried and the prize he’d bonded would have paid his way, gotten him handsomely praised and rewarded and coddled through the rest of his pregnancy. All he would have had to do was give up his bond-mate and his baby.

So once the dust had settled- why hadn’t Rumlow gone back to HYDRA?

Maybe Rumlow hadn’t known about his bond with Steve, but it was clear he’d been struggling with it aware or not… and he’d still been ready to turn on him like a wolf on sheep. But for sake of- maybe Bucky, and very definitely Ben- there had been a line he wasn’t willing to cross, to the point where he’d been willing to risk dying in childbirth, alone and unaided by anyone who could lead HYDRA to him.

When Steve’s done thinking, he reaches out, more cautious than he wants to be, and touches Bucky’s shoulder.

“We have work to do.”

The smile that trembles across Buck’s face is full of relief.

“ Took ya long enough, doll.”

The team is, understandably, in an uproar (and they haven’t even told Clint yet, won’t that be fun). Steve nods and listens and rides right over them.

With Bucky at his side it’s easy- they slide right back into the old one-two punch, Steve with his ‘I’m full of shit but I know what I’m doing’ smile that made you want to believe and Buck with the smoldering dark ‘this is what’s going to happen, and this is why- and if you don’t like it, try me and see what happens’. His silent glower radiates over the room, making everyone want to look away and pay attention to his mate instead of his lurking shadow.

“You sure you’ve thought this through, Steve?” Sam isn’t impressed by the bluster, but he knows they wouldn’t be doing this without a damn good reason. His arms are crossed, his lips pursed, and his brows are climbing for the ceiling. Nat is standing next to the desk he’s sitting on- she’d been about to go and relieve Clint, and while she can believe what she’s hearing, it’s a near thing. She keeps darting her gaze between them, like she’s somehow seen this before- hasn’t placed it yet, but it pings for her.

“Yes, and that’s why we’re doing this. Witness protection requires that you actually protect the witness- and for medical reasons as well as just who is after him—“

“Like the CIA, Interpol…?” Tony interjects.

“HYDRA,” Bucky says from his hiding spot behind Steve’s shoulder, and gets a jump out of the inventor. Stark hasn’t heard him speak since they first got in, and it’s right out of the old reels, including some of Howard Stark’s private collection. The two of them have kept their distance up ’til now, for sake of some truth to Zola’s implications or because Tony just doesn’t like dealing with the emotional stuff, Steve doesn’t know.

“He’s giving you information. He kept valuable material out of HYDRA’s hands,” Bucky says, hefting Ben’s blanket-wrapped weight in such a way that it draws every eye in the room to it, even if his first instinct is to keep the baby, and everyone else involved, tucked away in a den away from prying lookie-lous. “If the higher-ups realize… if they even suspect that he did it deliberately… that’s a one-way trip to the Pit. Ain’t nothing comes back out of the Pit except training videos to toughen
the recruits- and things like *me.*”

Everyone, even Tony, is quiet at that.

“So,” Steve finally breaks the silence. “We need to finalize some things with Maria, possibly tap Sharon for our CIA liaison, and Tony, I’m gonna have to ask if that offer still stands-“

“Even in expanded form?” Stark says, a corner of his mouth curling up in a smile. “I get keeping your enemies closer- I’ll get Pep on the line, living arrangements will be squared away by the time we get home. You need another floor?”

“I think we’ll be just fine, thanks,” Steve says modestly.

Maria would, presumably, be the hardest nut to crack.

Instead, she quirks a smile at him, looking up from her report and says “That’s one way to do it.”

“You were thinking about this the whole time,” Steve huffs from the doorway. Director/Data Entry Specialist Hill twirls her chair a little from side to side, pushing herself with the toe of a shoe she would never have worn except on an undercover op before SHIELD fell.

“I thought it was a strong contender. I didn’t want to push until you’d had a chance to work things out for yourself- since, oh, what was it, you would be ‘taking it under advisement, but SHIELD does not give orders around here anymore.’”

“And they don’t.” Good intentions, good ideals, and, for the most part, good people- but when a fascist organization can infiltrate at the highest levels and no one notices a thing, you have to break it down and begin again.

His only regret is not being able to protect more people from the fallout.

“No,” Maria agrees, standing up from her temporary desk. She doesn’t loom like Fury did, but a pleasant smile and a long-legged pace can do just as well. “But we’re good on establishing protocol and drawing on long years of experience in the security and intelligence game, and those of us that are left, we’ve got the contacts to make thing happen. Like immunity deals and creative ways of paying your debt to society without making people dead- maybe disappeared a little, but not dead.”

“You’re okay with this deal?”

“I want HYDRA to suffer, Captain. I would love it for every individual HYDRA agent to suffer. But,” she says, her hands flat on the desk and presence suddenly two sizes too big for her calm beta smell. “We have bigger fish to fry, and our key witness is in a real delicate state, while our key asset- and returned hero- is making maintaining that state a condition of his cooperation. I would not like to see either of them slip away. So this is the best option all around.”

So sayeth Maria Hill. With that hurdle passed, now it’s time to put actions to words.

"James is back again," Brock thinks dully. He hasn’t had much to say, do or think since he’d chased his once-partner out of here. Just curled in a ball and letting the salt-water drip down his face, waiting for the axe to fall.
Temper, temper. Did you think you were gonna win friends this way?

He’s approached with caution, touched with care, nuzzled with gentle hands and fingers. James pulls him into a sitting position, murmurs softly it’s gonna be okay and other lies. Brock lets him, turns his face away, closes his eyes.

He hears footsteps at the door, catches a whiff- has to open his eyes to a squint. Rogers is standing in the doorway with a face like a brick wall, Benjamin in his arms, and Brock can feel his heart squeeze, is suddenly awake with adrenaline.

Bucky’s got a hand on the back of his neck, gentle as can be, and with that contact-apology he knows. Why else would they both be here? All three?

This is goodbye.

Rogers, big and blonde and fucking poisonous beautiful, covers the length of the room in three strides with the baby held carefully against his broad chest, curled in the safest place he’s ever been.

“Please,” the word is torn from Brock’s pale lips, breath caught between his clenched teeth. Rogers reaches his bedside, sets the baby in his shaking arms, slips his fingers away and leaves Ben in Brock’s grip for what has to be the last time.

“Rogers, please, don’t do this. Just take him, please, don’t toy with me like this…”

Brock’s head is down, his body clenched around this moment like he can keep it safe- Ben asleep in his arms, the world grey at his edges.

His alpha hasn’t touched him since hauling him from that tiny cabin. James is draped around his left shoulder, but the hand that settles on his right one, hesitant and brief, is Steve’s.

“The terms of your parole are as follows.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait, gang, I'm trying to not post until I've got the next chapter done up on the meme, and the current one's slow going. I'll be getting the main meme-post updated in a few days, but meanwhile, have a late/early! update here.

Thank you all for reading, enjoying, and commenting, hearing from you all makes my day. Always, special thanks to bofurrific and Andartha, heart and bones of this story.
“Whu- what?” His voice hasn’t cracked like this since he was a teenager, no, since- he doesn’t think he’s ever been this raw. You put away tears when you become a man, a soldier- more than a soldier, an agent. You put them away.

“SHIELD is offering you a deal for immunity. But there are some heavy conditions, and they are not, at this point, negotiable.”

Brock pulls his son in against his chest, blinking up in stupefied disbelief. Rogers is in full Cap-mode, the kind that lectures on the rightness of causes and eating your vegetables and, apparently, offers straws to drowning men.

“This is not an easy out. You’re going to work for it, continue cooperate fully with your interviewers. No stone un-turned- and more may be asked of you later. There will be heavy monitoring, check-ins with a parole officer- and therapy. For both of you.”

Bucky snorts, but a look arcs between the two of them and the sniper quiets, still leaning against Brock. Makes sense, a stunned part of his brain is slowly churning out. Want to make sure the Stockholm syndrome’s broken, get Barnes standing on his own two feet.

And of course, gotta keep your star witness from doing anything stupid, like going full-on Lady Macbeth.

“You’ll be residing in Stark Tower. Space will be provided for you- and your son. Protection.”

He’s been in this place before, where you’re more than half-dead and all you want is to finish up and drop- but someone’s gone and stuck you with a needle full of adrenaline and now it feels like pure, burning -hot life is suddenly coursing through your corpse’s veins again.

You splutter for breath and cough up things you’d rather not think about, your heart’s tattooing double-time and you know you’re gonna make it- but it still really fucking hurts.

James holds him through the shivering, cascading breakdown. Ben is moving in his arms, eyes squinted as he makes little protesting sounds against Brock’s heaving chest, but he can’t, he can’t let go, he can’t- fucking- stop-

Steve is so fucking stoic you wouldn’t think he felt a thing if you weren’t watching his arms, the set of his shoulders. The way his eyes go dark in hurt, when the world doesn’t measure up and he hides behind disappointment.

“…I’ve failed you in a number of ways.” And Brock is caught somewhere between no shit and another deep spasm of knowing the lie, because in all things-

_He_ failed first.
Buck is curled around Rumlow, holding on to the older man as he’s utterly lost in sobbing, and Steve feels it tear in his guts even as another part of him rumbles good-the vicious little part that watched the mission footage after the fact, watched Rumlow’s fingers fly over the keys to get the Helicarriers into the air, watched him fight for the opportunity to set the mass slaughter into motion- saw him gun down other SHIELD agents who got in the way. The part that stood smelling blood and bleach in sterile halls, watching how many other people cried just like that from their hospital beds, finding out their wife or their friend or their kid interning at SHIELD wouldn’t come home (Captain America visits the survivors, at least a little, before he hunts for his own walking wounded).

He has a dozen different voices baying in him, all demanding one thing or another but none of them happy with what is.

And amidst all that, one of his omegas is in pain.

Buck glances to him, at Steve’s hands that clutch at air and cannot give comfort. A soft rumble echoes from him, wrapped around Brock’s side as the older omega leans into the younger, and Buck’s arms support Brock’s trembling ones, wrapped around their fussing child. It’s the same sound that carried Steve through a fever or three, when they’d been living in scandalous mutual bachelorhood, and this time- it’s not for him.

It’s probably best if he leaves the room and lets them get on with comforting each other. Rumlow’s been run to physical and mental exhaustion, and with the way he’s flinched every time they’ve been in a room together… There’s nothing useful Steve can bring to the table right now.

This is omega-time.

He starts to slip away when Bucky catches his hand. Metal to flesh, and the squeeze is just as delicate as if it were his own skin and bone. Steve looks back, and while Buck’s face is turned away, chin tucked on top of Rumlow’s head, the message is clear.

Don’t let go.

His fingers tighten, and Buck’s metal hand responds in kind, reeling him in. And there’s nothing for it, nothing he would like better, nothing he can do but carefully drape himself around them, warm skin scarred and hospital cotton and the smell of mate mate mate. Bucky’s purring cuts through everything, quiets Rumlow until he’s just quietly shaking, face pressed into Buck’s neck. He jerks when Steve’s hand finds his shoulder again, curling inward, but slowly, slowly, he seems to relax.

He could break him right now, with a few well-deserved words, and the realization sickens him.

I’m so angry with you- but I can’t leave you like this.

It takes a bit to work up the rumble- this wasn’t something you did in public, not the way he was raised- and his throat sticks a bit, gone dry. But eventually he starts up, deep and rolling, matching his cadence to Bucky’s- and soon it sees the three of them, Rumlow and Bucky and little Ben, all calm in the strained circle of his arms.
Whoo! Short chapter this time, gang, and still trying to rebuild the pad, work is being a pain. Hope you all are still enjoying- your comments make my day, always^^

Special thanks to Bofurrific and Andartha, heart and bones.

If you like, feel free to join me at my tumblr- I can only promise occasional odd bouts of humor and pictures of cats.
The birth of a son should be a cause for celebration. Joy should be unbounded, welcome made ready and a strong probability of alcoholic toasts and cigars being passed around. (If Thor were here, there’d be all that and a roasted pig, and probably fireworks as well.)

As it is, it’s a very subdued homecoming at Stark Tower.

It’s an odd little procession that makes its way into the top floors. The weather is cold and clear, and they all of them walk as swiftly as possible in from the harsh chill of the rooftop landing pad. Tony Stark is first in the door, followed by Sam and Captain America, back straight as a stick. He’s followed by two ragged omega men, clutching a baby and each other- their clothes are bundled against the cold, and if anyone were watching who paid even the slightest bit of attention to the news, they might recognize their faces from the top of several most-wanted lists.

Rumlow is moving slowly, still aching from birth and emergency surgery, while James Barnes keeps his flesh arm slung over him, across the shoulders of Steve’s leather jacket. Their heads are close together, and if they whisper, no one else is hearing what they say. The baby they huddle around is so well-bundled he barely fusses from the wind.

Clint and Natasha bring up the rear, making sure everyone is herded in.

“Welcome one and all, Starks, super-soldiers and spies,” Tony says, spreading his arms with a flourish as soon as they’re inside.

“Ahem.”

“And Air Force, thank you, Sam, I get it enough from Rhodey already- look, the ten-cent tour starts now.” Colored lights swirl into being om the air over the nearest table, forming a 3-D map of the upper-most portion of the tower. “Common areas are here, here and here- private elevator here. The gym- pool- entertainment center-”

“Welcome home, Sir.” Buck twitches.

“And that’s JARVIS. If you have questions you can ask him, 24/7, he knows how these things are done-“

The two, no, three newest residents are looking- overwhelmed. Rumlow is hunched ever deeper around his newborn, while Barnes is glowering, looking more and more like fight or flight is about to be an issue.

“We can cover the common areas in more depth later,” Steve interrupts, and sets a careful hand on Bucky’s shoulder. We’re safe. You’re safe. Everything will copacetic.

The tension humming under his hand says he’d better deliver up on those promises. Brock is getting that look, like he wants to snap but he’s under the thumb of a superior officer and is just forcibly
This is getting out of hand, and Brock is in no mood for the whole song and dance. Stark and his spy-building can get stuffed, the Widow and Barton and that guy with the wings can all-

Rogers does the smart thing and hustles them along, away from the press of people that makes Brock, makes him and James both want to run away and hide. Ordinarily he’s one to stand his ground and fight but he’s not five days from having an infant delivered into his arms and this is barely not-hostile territory and every part of him is screaming for a quiet, guarded space, with no strangers and no staring and please, God, something that smells like safe and home.

No such luck on the home part. But once they move away from the crowd, it’s quiet enough that he can hear James breathing beside him, hear himself think, feel the warm, squirmy weight of Benjamin in his arms.


He is not under fire. They are not in danger. It just-feels that way.

The three of them move quickly down the hall and into the elevator to Steve’s floor. Kitchen, open floor-plan, nice big living room that could probably hold all three of their childhood homes combined-

“I’m over here,” Steve says, pointing towards his own room while leading them to the others-equidistant from the exits, locking doors (biometrics will keep out anyone they don’t want, and preferences can be listed with Stark’s AI). Individual bathrooms, everything so new he can still smell the caulk, and when they finally get to what’s supposed to be his room they stop.

Rogers steps back, leaving them to creep forward and investigate this new space. Brock holds Ben against his shoulder, leaning against the door-frame as he looks in while James takes point.

The room is warm and welcoming, decorated with a sensible kind of good taste, and even the weak winter sunlight seems pleasant as it drifts through the windows. Barnes moves through like a wraith, scanning the length and breadth, poking at knick-knacks, gadgets and linens, picking them up and bringing them back for Brock’s inspection, his weary nod. There’s a nursery, fully stocked, everything solid and clearly of the highest quality and safety-ratings, and he thinks his eyes are smarting again, tears about to spill because it’s not what they’d picked out, not what James had traveled long roads to bring back to him, and it’s a stupid thing to be upset by.

It’s all clean and fresh, and smells nothing like them.

But what’s really got Brock staring is the bed.

It’s big enough for two, easily (maybe three), has curtains to draw for an omega’s oft-desired close, small space- and more, it looks like someone took half a crib and hooked it onto the side, with its own little mattress and sheet. Brock doesn’t say a word, just strides across the room, glances back at the two of them, and sets Ben down carefully into the little balcony before sitting down on the edge.

“I’m done for now.”

Rogers stands in the door-frame, filling it, and the sun hits him just so- the carved-marble cheek, worried mouth and sable-brush lashes framing guilty eyes.
“Is there anything you-“

“No. Just-“ *I need* so much to be different.

“Food,” Barnes says firmly, glancing at Rogers. “Anything. As long as it’s not moving and there’s no peppers. In an hour.”

“I-“ Steve says, looking between them and finally nodding. “I can do that.”

He backs away, leaves the door cracked behind him, and James is the one who carefully closes it.

Brock strips off the shoes he’s been issued, the coat he’d bundled into, and lays down alongside his son. After a few moments of watching Ben wiggle and squint, clutching tightly at his finger, Brock looks over his shoulder and sighs.

“Yes, you can come too. No shoes.”

James pauses for a moment, then leaves off making a final circuit of pacing the room. He shrugs off his own coat, and snuggles into Brock’s back, warm and solid and slightly bristly.

“Still mad at me.” It’s not a question. They’re right back under custody of SHIELD and Rogers and almost everything they’d been running from, has been brought home to roost by doing *exactly what Brock had asked him not to*. Necessary or not.

“Yeah.”

Barnes tenses, then nuzzles against him and reaches back to pluck at the covers, pulling them from their carefully tucked-in arrangement and rolling them onto the two of them to give a little more warmth, a little more cover. He reaches across Brock’s shoulder, strokes his arm on the way to touch the baby’s stomach, his little feet encased in infant-safe cloth, his warm face.

“Sorry, not sorry.”

“It’s not right, you being more up on the slang than *I* am.” Buck snorts into the back of his neck, moving to rest his hand at his partner’s hip, careful around the edge of the dressing beneath his shirt.

“Can’t help it. I think it’s somethin’ in my arm, makes the phone work better. Lotta catchin’ up to do.”

Brock swallows tightly, a lump in his throat. It’s all gone to pieces, but he is alive. And his boy, his baby boy is *alive*, warm and breathing and starting to make little noises that mean he wants to be held tight again.

“Barnes.”

“Yeah, sugar?”

“Just draw the curtains.”

James grunts, shuffles off and pulls the drapes shut, scuttling back in to the warm, cave-like safety as they close.

They’re all out like lights in minutes.
That last one was short. Have another.

Bofurific and Andartha, heart and bones. And thank you to everyone who reads, likes and comments, you all make my day^^
Chapter 42

Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve’s not helpless in the kitchen, but his hands are a little shaky and enhanced memory or not, he’s fairly certain anything he touches is going to end in disaster right now. So Sam’s got him peeling potatoes while he works the eggs and cheese, and Nat is diligently applying knife to onion at a safe distance.

“This is one of those times where you go all comfort-food,” Sam says, cracking and whisking. He moves to a rhythm that carries him back and forth between carton and bowl, easy and calm. “Hard to go wrong with migas, even if Barnes is being a philistine about the peppers.”

“He’s expressing a preference and looking after his needs, that’s something,” Nat interjects, a corner of her mouth quirked up as the bulb is rendered into fine, neat chunks. “That’s a lot of recovery in a little time.” She’s known a little more about this sort of thing than she’d care to. Sam’s facing away from her, and his smile goes a little sad.

Steve speaks up from his end of the kitchen table, digging out an eye from the spud with the tip of the peeler. “He’s looking after Brock. They’re sunk deep in feral-territory, but Bucky’s taking point for him and making sure he’s got what he needs. Like he was the alpha.”

Inwardly, Steve cringes. Bucky’d had to take that role because Brock had needed someone, and he hadn’t been there.

Sam frowns, and then turns and throws him one of those looks.

“Steve, I can hear you start guilt-tripping from here. Look here, man- I was with you. We were pinned down. There was no other way any of us were gonna get out of Romania alive, we had to take care of business and that’s not your fault, that’s HYDRA’s.”

Sam’s hands are steady, like his wings, like his voice, even as he keeps the flow going. Tap, crack, tap, crack, and the whisk tings against the sides of the bowl- this is going to be a big batch, but given what they know about super-soldierly appetites, it may be just enough. And now he gives Steve a glance that is equal parts worry and decided lack of guff-taking.

“Not actually telling me- now that, that was a problem. We’re gonna have a talk about that, oh never you mind. But I get it- it wasn’t something you could believe and it wasn’t something you could discount. And things got in the way.”

“I wanted it to be a lie,” Steve says quietly, no longer ruthlessly digging into the potato but holding it still, peeler in one hand and staring at it. It’s no apple, to divine the name of your sweetheart from its fallen peelings, but it’s got his focus nonetheless. “I wanted to think it was a clean break, that I could write off everything and couldn’t trust anything he said. Because if any of it was real, then it all hurt.”

He looks up at Sam, and his voice cracks.

“I have a son, and I didn’t want him to be real.”
Sam breathes out a deep sigh, but his eyes are kind as he chews over his next words to his friend.

“Rogers, I may be a therapist but I ain’t your therapist. I’m pretty sure you do want him now that you’re certain he exists. Cute little mite, too.” Not that anyone else has gotten much of a close look at Ben since Natasha first handed him to Bucky, bloody and squalling- the newborn had broken through the Soldier’s white-knuckle rage and terror with a whimpered hiccup, and apart from his visit to the nurse’s station, had been firmly Mommy Territory ever since.

“Yes, but-“ Sam points the whisk in his direction, and Nat stifles a disgusted giggle as yolk drips a slow ribbon to the floor.

“And nobody’s being thrown out of windows or despairing that they’re locked in a tower, and we’re pretty sure Barnes at least is not about to rampage. You all got some serious stuff to work through- but for right now, everyone’s safe. That’s something, and you shouldn’t be ignoring that. Take it for what it is, and figure out the next step after you’ve had a good meal.”

Everyone is safe.

Slowly, Steve nods. Sam is right, and for now he just has to make sure they stay that way. The first trip out to repay some of the massive favors SHIELD’s remnants have pulled is in a week- hopefully time enough to get everyone settled, and to get a better feel for what situation they’ve got on their hands.

Steve grabs a paper towel, hands it to Sam, who cleans up the drips from the floor and then sets to heating the oil in one of the biggest skillets the kitchen has. The other alpha jerks his chin in the direction of the potatoes Steve’s been neglecting.

“Better get those things diced up, this’ll heat slow but once it’s hot-“

They’ll be ready.

Sam and Nat have taken themselves off, leaving only a little beta-perfume and a whiff of friend-alpha behind, along with a small mountain of eggs scrambled with fried potatoes, onions, tomato and crushed tortilla strips, staying warm in the oven. Steve’s left to wait, making a study of the too-many files and favors he’s going to have to do, to make sure that the deal stays solid. Even a year after the failure of Insight, there’s still fires to put out everywhere, always new things crawling out from where giants have battled and knocked over all the rocks, and while Maria is brokering who gets what, he’s going to have to gear up and gladhand as well as commit to missions known and unknown.

He taps away at his StarkPad, one foot jiggling, in the middle of the apartment. He’s barely more familiar with the place than either of his omegas, but if he can get things to settle down (ha ha) then he thinks he’d like to spend more time here. Really get used to it as his and home.

The two omegas- his mates- come inching out after a little over an hour. Brock has the baby bundled up and cradled in the crook of his arm, and Bucky leads cautiously, but without the heavy suspicion that glints in Brock’s eyes.

“Somethin’ smells good,” Buck says, a hint of a smile tilting his mouth.

Steve gives him a crooked smile back, which flits out of existence as he notes Brock’s solemn expression, and gets up to pull out plates and dish up for all of them. Protect, provide- comfort. These are the duties of an alpha and a host, regardless of all else.
Ice and ideology are too big to tackle in this instance- but he can make sure everyone’s properly fed.

There’s a little bit of a scramble once Rumlow realizes he can’t really put the baby down on the table and eating one-handed is a problem, but as Bucky quickly proves, there’s a rolling bassinet in the nursery for just such occasions. The panic dies out in Brock’s eyes, and soon they can all silently fall upon their food like wolves, starving after winter.

If Brock makes a sound that could be taken for post-orgasmic on biting in, nobody says anything. Buck’s quieter, but even he lets a little noise escape, delight and desperation clear in every line of him, and just as Rumlow nudges his plate at him, so he pushes at Steve’s, silently telling him to eat, damnit. Pick up the damn fork, Stevie, you’ll never get stronger if you don’t at least get something in you.

About the second round of platefuls, the air redolent with fried onion and butter, Steve speaks up.

“Is there anything you need?”

“Aside from the other shoe to drop?” Brock’s voice is calm, but the hunch of his shoulders says otherwise. His hand drops below the table, seeking out the baby in his bassinet, and Buck’s hand is there as well. There’s a faint burble, the sound of a waking child, as Benjamin is stroked for reassurance.

“The only other shoe is this- you’re both safe here. You’ll have a day to settle in, and then the deal picks up again, right where we left off,” Steve says, carefully setting down his fork. “Brock- you’ll be talking with Agent Kruger the day after tomorrow, that’s when he gets in.”

Brock winces, and slowly nods. Steffan Kruger- the man was known for being as big a Coulson fanboy as Coulson had been a Cap fanboy. He strove to match the man in record, unflappable nature, and bland amiability over a razor-honed mind. He even had the look, with a face-shaped face and close-cut hair, a suit among suits.

He’d also frequently been partnered with Agent 13, Sharon Carter, and wouldn’t that be a picnic.

Carter had faced him down, in the control room for Insight’s launch- had gotten a gun on him, and only the fact that she’d stood too close had given him the chance to knock it from her hand and get to the computer terminal. If she ever sees him again-

They’re going to see each other again. That’s just the way his luck works. And he’ll just have to grit his teeth and bear it if he wants to keep this arrangement in place, for sake of his son.

“The immunity deal cost a lot of favors- I’m going to be working on paying those off once everyone’s settled.”

“Sure it’ll stick?” James pipes up, looking sidelong at his mate, his fingers over Brock’s on the baby’s warm tummy, feather-light.

“It damn well better,” Steve says tightly. “I’m going to make sure it does.”

“For me, too?”

“Buck- of course-“

“They’ll want to hang someone,” James says, not quite meeting his mate’s eyes. “My hands, my face, all over everything. All cover blown.” And Brock grimaces, because he’s right- they had to have been preparing to cut off loose ends if INSIGHT failed, to spend all their collected secrecy like
that a big showy distraction and scandal to take the heat off the organization itself. The Soldier was an effective boogey-man in-ranks, would be a valuable symbol of power and look-what-we-can-do if HYDRA succeeded- but only if he was mission-successful and stable. Neither of which he’d been, at the end.

Shitty maintenance, user error, or was he just too strong to hold forever? The sister-bond was supposed to have kept him under control, and it made him less erratic- but a rope to a drowning man means he can pull himself up, if he’s strong enough.

Or pull you down with him.

Steve swallows. “Yes, Bucky, you have a deal for immunity too. You shouldn’t need one, though,” and he can’t keep the growl out of his voice.

“Shouldn’t. Still do.”

It all lapses into silence, because to dig into the heart of it would- there’s no good way it could end. So they sit, and eat, and when Ben starts to make little fussing sounds, there’s a wordless back-and-forth between the two omegas that ends with Brock undoing his shirt and letting the baby suckle.

Rogers tries not to stare. Brock snorts to himself, turning sideways in his chair so he’s not flashing everything, and settles into the brief fog of here, now, everything is right.

He concentrates on Ben’s little face, trying to see something of himself in the rounded features, the snub nose and sprinkling of dark hair. He’ll be a sweetheart when he’s grown, he thinks, and he didn’t know you could feel pride and despair at the same time, because five generations of Rumlow men with bastards in their bellies says beauty is no great gift. And lord knows, no one’s gonna trust him with a shotgun after this.

When it comes time to switch sides, Ben scrunches up his face, blinking up at him and whimpering in dismay over this interruption in his meal- but he’s swiftly on the other tit, and snuffles contentedly with his mama’s finger tracing his brow.

“Shh, shh- got you, baby, got you,” Brock whispers, and tries very hard to tune out everything else, to ignore the fact that he is the specter at the feast.

But if the firing squad isn’t about to pop out of nowhere, then he’s got more important things to think about. Like acquiring a decent sports-bra or three in male-omega sizes, the kind with pockets for pads- if he’s going to put himself back into fighting trim, he’ll need to keep these contained. Jamie’d packed a bag with essentials before calling for rescue, but there’d been shit selection at the warehouse store and most of what they’d laid hands on was going to stay in that little lost cabin until hell froze over...

Rogers’ voice breaks through the fog, pulls him back to the table and the awkward tableau they make.

 “…could I-?”

Brock shakes his head, blinks back at the blonde alpha.

“Could you what?”

James glances between them, and his mouth quirks again, the little laughing smile.

“Think Steve wants to hold the baby, sugar.”
“Don’t call me that,” Brock grousers, but looks between the two of them, finally exhaling sharply and
forcing himself to relax before he upsets his son. Past his shoulder, Steve is clamping up into neutral-
face again, like he knows he’s overstepped, and for a moment, Brock wants to let him.

Hey, gratitude is not something he’s ever been good at.

Ben slacks off, blinks up at him, and makes a contented little sound. Brock feels an answering
rumble start up in his chest, and lets it trill for a moment before swallowing it down again, carefully
handing Ben off to James with a curt nod in Steve’s direction. That lets him concentrate on putting
himself to rights again, buttoning up- he feels so sloppy, in the wake of nine months of being
pregnant and a nightmare birth, the uprooting of what little order he’d made for himself out in the
wilderness with Barnes.

Jamie takes Ben in his arms, pets him gently and coos, still looking too right out of the corner of his
eye- and lets Steve lean over, lets him watch and touch and smell, become less of a stranger. Mindful
of the alpha’s nerves, James negotiates the transfer just as carefully as he’d first done with Brock,
only this time laying Ben up against his father’s shoulder instead of the crook of his arm.

There’s a fog of love and fretfulness coming off of Rogers, strong warm alpha, who’s got that same
stunned look in his eye as he’d had the first time. Some alphas don’t get attached easy, especially if
there’s been strife in their bond- but the way he’s smelling, even across the table, honey warmed by
first thaw and the sharp hiss of smoke and vinegar suppressed by good feeling-

Ben burps up on him, a little spill of undigested milk, and Rogers still looks smitten.

“Just like Rebecca, huh?” James says, and Steve lights up as much at those words as at the baby in
his arms. Brock wants to take his son back right then, to flee from this intimate moment between
mates with a shared history that he’s no good part of, but Buck sets his hand back on his, making a
soft, soothing hum that tries to calm his jangled nerves.

Safe, the Soldier’s scent and soft smile and easy slouch exude, turning the old tricks back on his
former handler. Safe.

I’ll believe it when I see it, and he knows that’s his hormones talking, but he clams up and sits
through, and manages not to snap or tremble when the kid is placed back in his arms when Rogers
goes and changes his shirt. He is not jealous, or scared. His son deserves all the love in the world,
from anyone and everyone, and just because he wants to bolt and hide away from everything doesn’t
mean Ben shouldn’t get cuddles from Daddy, too.

He and Barnes might have had a nap earlier, but the toll of the last week has been considerable. They
break it up a short while after Rogers comes back in a fresh shirt and holds Ben a little more,
marveling at the tiny hands and soft little tufts of downy black hair, even laughing a bit when Ben
bops his little fist against Rogers’ patrician nose.

James strokes his back as they lie down together. The bed’s almost too soft, but they’ve both got the
knack of falling asleep anywhere, at a moment’s notice- you never know when you might get
another chance to catch some zz’s.

He’s also got the soldier’s knack for waking up at the slightest disturbance, and finds himself awake
again at oh-dark-thirty, to the feeling of an empty spot next to him, coming up out of the dark to a
curious silence.
His immediate thought is where’s Ben, but he’s right there, to his left, breathing softly in his little crib. No cry, no feeding or diaper-change imminent. His back is cold, and James is gone, his covers rumpled and over a spot that’s still barely warm.

Could be nothing. Even super-soldiers have gotta piss sometime, he knows it, but his heart’s plummeting in freefall toward his gut anyway, this is not right, it’s wrongwrongwrong.

Careful, Brock slides from the bed, follows his ears and his nose to the hall. All quiet, no intruders, no reason for this rise of hair on the back of his neck. He moves on, creeping like this is a mission, listening for the sound of the other occupants.

They’re silhouetted in the common area, embracing so tight it’s like they’re curled together into one being. The whispers are soft, the words breathless.

“-missed you so much, I missed you, I love you, I’m sorry-“

“-I’m sorry, I wish I’d remembered sooner, I remembered you-“

On and on it goes. I missed you, I forgive you, I love you. I love you.

It hurts to look at, and it’s hard to look away.

Finally he starts to ease his way back from the corner he’s looking around, intent on padding his way back before they can notice they’re being observed. The conversation’s taken a turn for the serious, little bits and hiccups of what’s passed between them, what’s happened on both sides of the seventy year gap.

The last thing he hears before he shuts the door is Rogers saying “Did I make the right decision, Bucky?”

“Doll, you didn’t make the wrong one.”

Chapter End Notes

To Bofurrific and Andartha, heart and bones of this story. Ya'll are a delight in my life.

The same to all of you who read and enjoy. You all make my day.

My Tumblr is here- come for the cats, stay for the odd figments at two in the morning.
Sometime before dawn, James crawls back in behind him. Brock stirs, recognizes- and goes quiet.

There’s nothing to say.

The next two days are slow and quiet. The universe seems to have decided to grant them a little recovery-time, getting in some desperately needed nesting before hitting them with everything else. James is splitting his time between the nursery and, presumably, cuddling with Steve. When he comes back he has food, clinging alpha-scent, and a dopey grin on his face. Brock pretends not to notice.

He should be happy for him. It just doesn’t come easy.

Sleep comes and goes. Brock spends the intervals between mostly in the rocking chair, a big solid oak number. It holds his weight, hell, it holds James’s, with barely a squeak, and Brock can go for hours at a time with just him and Ben and the slow, gentle motion of back-and-forth, watching the sun go by. His body is trying to catch up, and so is his brain- there’s a lot to process, reserves to replenish, and after having been on tenterhooks thinking he wouldn’t ever get to see his son again, he cherishes every moment they’re skin to skin.

“Hush,” he says, murmuring, holding his infant’s tiny hand and nuzzling it, keeping away from the coarse stubble on his face. “Gotta find you some new lullabies- hush, little baby…”

If he tries, gives the old memory a good rummage, there’s stuff to be had, he thinks. Grandpa Ben, the few times he’d visited as a kid before the old man shuffled off- he’d sung softly, things from his grandma and grandpa in the old country. Half-remembered melody, a couple of lyrics- his German’s for shit, didn’t come up often his line of work, but it’s enough to repeat a little bit of the chorus.

“-weißt Du wieviel Sternlein stehen an dem blauen Himmelszelt…” Brock murmurs, soft and toneless, and Grandpa’s namesake doesn’t mind that he’ll never have a vocal career, just likes daddy’s humming. Do you know how many stars there are?

Ben’s is a soft baby scent, clean and neutral with youth but hints of honey-apple-lemon just barely there amid clean skin and the faint odor of drying meat from his cord-stump. He yawns sweetly and when he’s not sleeping he blinks all around, staring in wide wonder at this new world.

But the world’s not so new, really. And his boy doesn’t know anything yet, about the people who’d hurt him, who’d love to lay their hands on him.

Same old problems, Brock thinks. But he’ll make sure they don’t touch him. Anything, blood, body, bone, he’ll sacrifice anything he has left to make sure his kid is safe.

Already tried burning down the world once. Didn’t take, so I gotta focus on what I have on hand to trade.
So far, no one’s come for him. So far, the deal Steve spoke of is holding. So far.

And he’s behaving, being a good little turn-coat, because he’d already thrown in his lot during those first, hysterical hours after birth, and he knows there will be no forgiveness if HYDRA finds out. And even if they don’t- he’s been gone so long, with no assigned op for an excuse, he’d have to make some huge gesture to show his loyalty and usefulness at the same time. Like handing over the Soldier he’d ‘tamed’, or a tiny bundle of Captain America’s genetic material. His m- his partner, or his kid.

That, he is not willing to do.

SHIELD, or its remnants, will almost certainly be doing freaky ungodly things with whatever of his blood and Ben’s they’ve collected, because you don’t work for an organization this long and this deep and not know its dirty little secrets. But they won’t dissect an infant, won’t raise him up for a little attack dog, won’t even let him grow up hungry and desperate to make their offers more appealing.

He believed in the cause, but-

Not for his baby boy.

And that’s the secret shame of it. Because he’s prided himself on his devotion, the faith he’s put in where no God could go. He was trained to give his body, breath and soul for the cause- because he trusted that it would be for a better world. He’d kept to that bargain. I will ask nothing of others I would not require of myself- knowing that anything and everything may be asked of me, in order to give the world the order and peace it deserves.

But at the first truly serious challenge- the first time it got really personal, asking him to sacrifice the family he’d vowed would be secondary to HYDRA’s goals? He’s crumbling faster than a cake in the rain, his weakness plain for anyone to see, still not fully purged from his body and soul after almost thirty years of work.

Only you, kid, Brock thinks, looking down at his sleeping son, only for you, and tries not to drown in the chest-crushing wave of guilt that follows. James had been a hollowed out blank and Brock had only maintained protocol, never tried to improve the lot of a human being, a bond-sister, who’d been made into a heavy weapon. Steve had been Brock’s lover… his mate, for all it was unintended, and he’d been willing enough to throw him to the wolves, because even if he’d admitted how bad he’d fallen it wouldn’t have mattered.

They were sacrifices. Needful sacrifices. As he had been told, as he had believed.

And if they weren’t- if they weren’t, then what about everything else he’d done?

So there’s a crying jag or two after that pops into his head. That’s fine. No one’s around to see it, are they? Hell, an existential crisis like that, even his Team would’ve understood, before they’d gently prodded him to see if he was really weakening, if they needed to initiate weak-link protocol or he was just hormonal and blowing off steam. Jack would’ve thumped him awkwardly on the back, rested his head over his STRIKE-brother’s, if he were-

Fuck. FUCK.

He clamps down on that door as quickly as possible, because if he starts crying about his Team he’s going to be dehydrated before nightfall. And he’s got a date tomorrow, talking with Kruger to keep
on spilling his guts until he’s got no more to spill. He is not going to show up for that red-eyed and whimpering.

Ben starts crying because he’s freaking out and kids can smell that shit. It takes a good long while of pacing the room and rocking him to get him back to sleep, no, it’s okay, mama’s fine, daddy’s fine, he hasn’t picked which one he likes best yet and it’s the modern day, okay? Omega men can call themselves daddy and keep their own names even if they aren’t single these days.

Brock gets it under control before James shows up again, has Ben put down and is trying to quickly scrub off the air of distress, but he still gets suddenly muffled in super-soldier hug.

“I’m fine, dammit,” he growls, voice cracking. And James hasn’t lost his sarcastic edge, just looks at him before pressing their brows together. He’s got Steve on his collar and dark circles under his eyes. He’s burning the midnight oil too, for all that Brock’s mostly taken over the nursing again- his quiet patrols have not ceased.

He hunts restlessly for dangers to his returned family- by now he has the layout and relevant exits of every floor he’s been able to reach memorized, including security measures and countermeasures (the Soldier is photographic for tactical purposes, dry-erase for disciplinary). And Brock asks again, with his eyes closed, with a metal hand on the back of his neck and the scent of well-cured tobacco, warm wool and gunpowder in his nostrils.

“Why are you here with me? Haven’t you got more important stuff, you know, with your mate?” Cool fingertips card through the mess of his hair, tingle on his neck, and James nuzzles softly against the side of his face, stubble on- shit, he has shaved, I’m the one looking like a mess…

“S.’ Plural,” Bucky says, and kisses his nose.

There is blinking. There is- very quiet, Ben is just back to sleep- spluttering. There may be a very brief batting with a bathrobe-clad arm, which fazes Barnes not one bit.

“For the love of God, why?” Brock finally hisses, looking at the other omega’s face in complete bafflement. “Why are you still here with me? I’m not your handler anymore, you’ve got your mate and the baby’s safe- you could be making up for lost time, not feeding into a forced bond you never asked for!”

“Do you want me to go?” James asks, looking at Brock from arms’ length distance, and Brock wants to bristle at that look, like he’s the one acting nest-crazy.

“That’s not the point-! You shouldn’t be here, you should have other priorities…”

“Brock… Do you want me to go?”

“…no…” His voice cracks again, and James pulls him in again, nuzzles softly against his neck.

“Sugar,” he breathes, “I got the security measures figured out and I know the fastest exit to go by, and how to travel with a convalescing omega and a newborn,” James, Bucky, whispers into Brock’s ear. “If you want to go, we’ll go.” Even if I want to stay, say his begging eyes and the pouting frown.

And Brock is flabbergasted, because this is the sort of love he’s used to from his Team, this is how soldiers show love- the contingency, the promise of ‘we’ll get out of here, someday, just say the word.’ And he doesn’t deserve it, that’s the whole goddamn point.

“I think… I think you need to be here, though,” Buck continues softly. “It’s good for you. And me.
And, well…” The benefit of a certain little pink bundle, eyes closed to the world in his blue-star onesie, goes without saying.

There’s maybe a little quiet snuffling, and some definite trembling after that. James stays wrapped around him for a little while, and Brock leans back on the bed and lets him.

“...you’re my mate,” he whispers. “We got pushed together by the bond, but we found each other anyway. I don’t wanna lose what we had, what I had. Not because of HYDRA, not because you’re scared. You don’t have to be scared, Brock…”

Nobody said there wouldn’t be growing pains.

So mid-afternoon, it finally feels safe enough to venture out again, with Benjamin in his arms and Bucky at his back. The whole place smells like Steve where it doesn’t smell like grilled cheese and tomato soup, and that’s the reason he’s got a shiver down his back, nothing more. Got nothing to do with what Barnes was saying before the last nap.

They gave me a metal hand, I didn’t want it but it’s mine now- I want to see what I can do with it, with nobody telling me what to do. Don’t you want to give that a try? See what you are outside of HYDRA?

You can be more. I can. You can. And I think you want to.

He supposes he doesn’t have a lot of choice in the matter if Barnes is going to stick to him like this-no matter how ridiculous his reasons.

Have to do right by your partner.

Brock shuffles to his spot at the table, carefully ignoring Rogers where he works at the stove, and Buck sits down at his side, their boy wrapped up and blinking in his bassinet between them.

Their alpha flips the last sandwich, washes his hands without a word, and hauls the platter over. Bowls of soup follow, and they sit in the fading winter noon-light that’s filtering through the big windows. The cheese is melty and good inside crunchy crisp bread, tomato real and rich in the scratch soup, and they all three keep their heads bowed, chewing away.

Silent meals and safe harbor. If that’s what it’s going to be, then Brock can work with this for now.

Chapter End Notes

For the heart and the bones, I thank Bofurrific and Andartha, always. And thank you all for reading and enjoying and commenting^^

This is what Grandpa Ben looked and sounded like. You can read a snippet about him
and his son here.
Chapter 44
Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

Be warned, mention of past child harm in this one. HYDRA does bad shit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This has got long day written all over it, Sam thinks, but he still hauls himself up and gets ready for his morning run. There’s a track and an atrium and plenty of ways to keep off the encroaching winter blahs, and so long as he’s got the hospitality of Stark Tower, he’s happy to take advantage.

JARVIS is a pretty good appointment-keeper if you’re not The Stark himself. Today’s the day that Steve’s new house-guest is supposed to start earning his keep, and with Rogers escorting his Soldierly mate to his first therapy appointment, someone’s gotta keep an eye on their resident (witness protection candidate? Plea-bargainer? Something). Make sure he gets where he’s supposed to go, make sure he doesn’t get into anything he’s not supposed to- he’s been cooperative so far, but then, there’s a whole lot of internet that says that isn’t always the best indicator.

Sam’s seen some things, but Brock Rumlow and what he’s learned about how HYDRA operates its STRIKE teams? Up until recently, he’d have labeled it some sort of overblown fictional account, real Snow Crash-levels of trying-too-hard-to-look-tough bullcrap.

Hell, he’s walked into situations he didn’t think he was gonna walk out of, but it was always, always with the expectation that his buddies were behind him, and that he’d back them up as well. This whole living with someone, fighting alongside them, eating with them, then dropping them in a volcano nonsense, if that’s what your superiors asked of you? That’s something else. That’s something else again entirely.

Not all the STRIKE units were HYDRA, he knows that- Nat and Clint had been Team Delta all by their lonesome. But Alpha- Rollins, Rumlow, Delgado, Asena, Whelan and Callahan- all of them had files, and all of them had reps.

If he had read those files cold, not knowing who they worked for, his first guess might’ve been somewhere between “mob” and “apocalyptic cult.” The pieces are all there- HYDRA snaps its fingers and they didn’t have a problem, say, kidnapping a teen from Little League practice and sending a couple of his fingers back to mom, so she’d cough up security codes to a top-secret government lab. The fact that it’s a clean job, the only marks on the kid, and the exchange is made doesn’t change the fact that they cut off a kid’s fingers. And that’s just one of many, many other missions, with differing levels of depravity each time. If the order is given- the order is obeyed.

The HYDRA-loyal STRIKE units don’t seem to have any kind of ‘no man left behind’ policy, either. If it was a choice between endangering mission success and attempting rescue of a fallen comrade- mission trumps all. Alpha’s got the fewest instances of the known STRIKE teams, but even for them, there’s times when those who can’t be retrieved are shot before they can decide that being a prisoner and singing for their supper isn’t so bad. The list adds up over the years, casualties reported to SHIELD that under the surface were closer to friendly fire… Schaeffer, Pembroke, Nagata, Webb… If they don’t do it themselves, their brothers-in-arms are more than willing to do it
for them.

There’s a creepy kind of sense to it, given the gun of secrecy they lived under, but, man- cold.

Based on all that, he’s gotta wonder what’s going on with Barnes to want to hang on to his old handler. Bonds happen in some of the strangest places, but there’s a big difference between being an abused attack dog, and being the pit-organizer holding the leash.

Rumlow is waiting in the common floor’s living room, settled on one of Stark’s ridiculous man-eating couches, baby on his shoulder and a diaper bag at his feet. Sam doesn’t know quite what he was expecting, but somehow, even after watching the birth go down the way it did, it wasn’t this.

Rumlow’s a wreck.

Dark circles under his eyes, hair clean but long and slightly wild, perma-stubble- Sam’s seriously flashing back to when his eldest sister had her first, up at all hours of the night and wild-eyed those few instances she could be coaxed out of her nest. The kid makes a sound and Rumlow’s ear is instantly turned, clearly running down a mental checklist of ‘what disaster could this be?’ before finally deciding it was just a coo and he can relax and pay attention to the stranger in his midst again.

Quite a bit different, Sam thinks, from the man who’d shrugged out of his armor and gone for a knock-down, drag-out fist-fight while the skies were being set on fire.

Sam mentally rolls up his sleeves and walks on over, smiling (okay, smirking, just a little).

“Order only comes through pain, huh?”

Rumlow rolls his eyes toward him with an air of exhausted spite, not bothering to try and get up from the monster comfy cushions.

“There is no order. Only the feeding. And changing. Naptime is a small mercy from those who dwell on high…”

And Sam can laugh, grinning widely, because if you can’t laugh at the big bads or their minions then they’ve won.

“Yeah, well, we’ve got Kruger waiting on you, so up and at ’em.”

Rumlow makes no move to get off the couch, just glares like the alpha’s good mood is a personal affront. Sam’s seen hungover drunks waiting for the sunshine to come and kill them with more enthusiasm, and it just splits his face wider.

“And you’re here why, exactly?” He knows damn well, or else he wouldn’t have been waiting. “I’m pretty sure I could find my way myself. Guy in the ceiling’s got a pretty solid grasp of directions if I need help.”

“Well… my man JARVIS is pretty good, I’ll admit, but letting a guest of your… caliber, wander around the Tower unescorted? It just wouldn’t have that personal touch, you know?”

“Oh yeah, I can see where you really feel the need to get personal, there,” Rumlw gripes, patting the baby on his shoulder one more time and getting a satisfactory little belch from him. He breaks off from paying Sam any attention at that, hefting the baby back into the crook of his arm and wiping his lips with the rag that had been stationed over his shoulder, just in case.
Little Benjamin looks healthy, seems happy—he’s content in his mama’s scarred arms, and accepts being snuggled into the sling Rumlows rigging up with a sleepy little sigh.

“Mmm, me, not so much, I’m just here to do a friend a favor. Tomorrow, though, you’ve got Barton—and he does not approve.” No he does not. Clint’s another one of this new pack of friends who’s got a story or two, a hard time sleeping, and—having tasted it once or twice—a real low tolerance for betrayal or anyone hurting what he thinks of as family. Above all others, Sam thinks Clint is the one who most realizes that they’ve formed an old-fashioned pack out of the Avengers.

Mister ex-HYDRA snorts, and pushes himself upright in all his sweat-pantsed glory, and stoops to pick up the diaper bag before Sam can go for it. No hitch, no real grimace of pain, JARVIS would say if vital signs read fever or distress—Sam’s more familiar with the immediate patch-ups of emergency field surgery, but it looks like he’s recovering well.

“Tell him to get in line. Come on, kiddo,” Rumlows, patting Steve’s son on the back, with the first hint of a smile Sam’s seen from him. “Daddy’s gotta go pay the rent.”

They make it down to the appointed room in plenty of time, and Brock thinks that Wilson has to be there for show— he can feel a faint tug on his tracking bracelet every time he passes through an elevator door, like the building’s deciding whether or not he can pass each time. And God help him if it decides against, because he knows the kind of pull a magnetic cuff can exert, even before Stark’s tinkered with them.

His escort waves him in the direction of the conference room where a man of middling everything is waiting, in a neat suit with neat hair and a neat clipboard that probably contains a checklist of all the life-and-death questions Brock’s got to answer.

Wilson glances between them, then sidelong at Brock, strong arms crossing as he tilts his head.

“You sure you want the little guy with you for this?”

Kruger—his reading glasses on, his pen pre-clicked—ignores Brock completely and smiles at Ben, eyes going crinkled at the edges in a genuine ‘aww’ sort of look. Brock tenses, because while he knows the little beta man has an ungodly affection for kittens and small children, this is still prelude to interrogation, and children have no place here.

“You will take this kid from my cold dead hands, at which point that will be the only thing you get from me,” Rumlows says, face unchanging.

“No, no, it’s quite alright,” Kruger says, that same little smile on his face. Brock is beginning to think that, like his mentor, he breaks people by simply being that irritatingly calm all the time. “Please come in, Agent Rumlows— rather, Mister Rumlows. We’re quite ready for you.”

Intellectually, Brock knows that it’s unlikely that they’d stuff him into a cold room with a two-way mirror and a metal table. It still feels wrong when he steps in to what looks like a small conference room, complete with sleek black-topped table, executive-style chairs, and big windows made of Stark-special bullet-proof glass. The cameras are all discreet, the mics the same, and he’s sure there’s more advanced heat- and bio-sensors around.

It’s comfortably warm, despite the grey December sky outside over the city. There’s a trash-can with a sealed lid, a portable crib set up (in case he would ever, ever let this child out of his hands while outside his nest, theoretically he knows that’s a thing people do but the back of his head is shouting
“Nice,” is what his lips say, because fuck you all, he’ll bow his head but he won’t kneel. If he sells out he’ll do it his way.

“We do like to be prepared.” Kruger smiles again, and picks up a folder. Brock would almost rather he be picking up some legit instrument of torture, because he knows where he stands with those. This is like meeting the HR representative from Hell.

“Shall we begin?”

Chapter End Notes

First, thanks to Bofurrific, without whom this would never have gotten off the ground or continued this long. You gave it life, and continue to this day.

And to Andartha, who brings the wham-hammer of editing, and all you lovely folks who enjoy reading it^^

Now with new illustration by blueandorange!
Brock narrows his eyes, still glancing around with more than a hint of suspicion. It’s too calm, too easy. He doesn’t trust it.

“Where’s Carter?” You usually never saw one of them without the other on this sort of thing, they came up the ranks together and had partnered on most ops that didn’t require going solo.

“She’s in an observatory capacity,” Steffan says, pulling out a sheet and adding it to his clipboard. There’s a cup of coffee for him, a pitcher and glass of water for Brock, and a whole lot of notes in neat stacks at the other end of the table. “We trust her judgement on the back-end.”

Sharon *spit-fire* Carter, Granny’s little legacy- she’d tried to stop him at the moment Insight was meant to launch, and got cut up and thrown down for her troubles. They probably don’t want her in here just so he doesn’t get his head blown off in the first thirty seconds.

Fine by him.

Kruger goes over the basics, establishing baselines and reconfirming vital statistics, general stuff that serves to try and put the subject at ease and get them talking. He’s got to wonder who the hell they think they’re dealing with- some rookie who’ll drop his guard just because they start out babying him, so they can hit with the heavy stuff just when he’s gotten used to it being all cushy?

Been there. Done that. Better to get it done and get it over with, because he’s not a greenhorn and they’re not any of them getting any younger.

Brock goes in waiting for the gut-punch, but it never hits- at least, not yet. Just Kruger droning like a vacuum cleaner, and Brock thinks *this has to be a novel technique- boring your subject into compliance. They’ll spill anything just to not hear Kruger sounding like he’s doing his taxes.* He could almost be waiting to debrief in the waiting room outside Pierce’s office, only there’s no dose of adrenaline to keep him keen with mingled excitement and fear.

Ben spends most of the session sprawled on his tummy in the middle of a blanket, on the table, where Brock can see him and stroke his back. The little guy looks around intently with big, blinking eyes, sometimes snuffling softly and trying to lift his head a few times, and Kruger only looks up when Rumlow’s fallen completely silent for too long, still staring at his son in wonder.

“If I’m not interrupting…?”

“No, no,” Brock says, mimicking his interrogator’s earlier reassurances as he snaps back to reality, a jolt through his heart as he realizes just how caught up in Benjamin’s movements he was. “We’re fine. Ah- lived in New York for a couple of years, long before they moved me out to DC, should all be there in the records…”

The really time-relevant stuff he might have brought to the table either isn’t a priority or has already become a reality. This is- this is soft stuff, all easy verifies, and it’s almost insulting.

No, forget get that, *forget* almost, it’s *completely* insulting, and finally he snaps. Maybe if he pokes
back, digs and needles a bit, he can find out what the fuck they actually want, and consider giving it to them.

“Are we going to get down to business, or just dick around all day?”

Kruger is so matter-of-fact on the comeback, he might as well be talking about the weather, and he gives the bite the same attention one might a buzzing fly.

“We need to establish what you sound like when you’re lying. After all, you’re so good at it.”

A muscle tics in Brock’s jaw, something that might be a grimace and might be a smile. This- this, he knows.

By the time he gets out of there, it’s barely afternoon. Ben is snug against his chest, drowsing poutily in the sling after being awake for so long at once, and as soon as he’s out of Wilson’s sight Brock stops in the hallway, leans against the wall and sniffs the top of his son’s head, breathing in and out and trying to get the delayed shakes to stay that way a little longer.

It’s like he’s got no stamina left, frayed and on edge where before he could grin in the face of looming death and pain and say ‘bring it.’ Sitting there in that room, talking to that quiet company man- it scares him like his first time under fire.

Neither Steve nor James is there when he gets into the apartment, though their scents linger. The rolling bassinet is still at the side of the table from last night’s meal, because everyone likes it when Ben is with them, and Brock takes one look at the place, asks JARVIS if the common floor is clear, and heads to the elevator with the bassinet in tow.

He needs to get his hands in some dough, and he doesn’t want to do it here.

The communal kitchen is a sleek, chrome-edged affair, and best of all, it’s deserted. There’s about every gadget someone could want and a few they wouldn’t, either stowed in discreet shelving units in the cabinets below or sitting, shrine-like, on the smooth granite counters.

That ungodly-fancy coffee machine is a temptation almost beyond bearing, but if he can resist the booze, he can resist the caffeine too- at least, for a few months yet. Besides, the way he feels? Stimulants are the last thing he needs.

Flour- like, four different varieties, and good stuff, too. Honey, salt, yeast from some famous brewer- simple enough, he just needs something he can punch without either popping a stitch or bringing down the wrath of God on his own head. Ben sleeps like a little snuffly log while the counters are dusted and Brock sets to work.

By the time James and Steve show up, there’s a couple loaves’ worth of sticky dough stuck way back in their mutual fridge for a slow rise, and Brock’s cleaned up after his session of temperamental bread-pounding. No traces.

Words to live by.
Bofurrific and Andartha, the heart and the bones. And thank you to everyone who reads and enjoys and comments, you all keep making my day.

Tumble on by!
The next day Barton escorts him in, dour and sour and not saying a word. That’s one thoroughly burned bridge, by Brock’s guess, not that he expected much different. With Wilson, it’s simple enough- they were at cross-purposes, on opposite sides, and the winged soldier got his ass beat for being out of practice and in Brock’s way. (Almost) no harm, no foul- now they’re just on opposite sides, trying to live peaceably under one roof. Cheerful needling abounds.

Barton, though… Barton hung out with STRIKE team Alpha. They’d gone for beers and shot pool together. Teased him when it turned out his little teacher’s-pet crush had finally come to fruition (and kept it in their back pockets, because knowledge is best held until the opportune moment). They weren’t best buddies- but they’d been casual, safe to relax with. Fellow grunts under the high-handed agents who directed them on the field.

Barton’s silence is withering. Brock’s not worth wasting his words on, hands or voice, and Clint lets him know that with the narrowing of his eyes and the twitch of his back, walking on like a prison warden.

Kruger, on the other hand, keeps playing softball to start, and it takes all Brock’s got not to take the man by the lapels and say fucking well give it to me straight, I can handle it.

When he gets back shortly before noon, he’s even more on edge than the day before. Idleness helps nothing, just lets him stew, and so it’s back to the common-floor kitchen again, once again with Ben softly snoozing in his bassinet. Brock takes breaks every so often, brief interrupts of the chopping, dicing and seasoning so he can peek in on his sleeping son, still unable to get over the fact that he’s here and his.

That afternoon’s project is a chicken (well, two, in quarters), arranged on a rack so that the fat drips down over the roasting potatoes to mingle with chopped onions and rosemary. Easy, fast, and enough repetitive motion to replace cleaning a gun (James gave up all of his).

He doesn’t need to do this. Food is plentiful in the Tower, he doesn’t care if anyone else eats it, trusts it.

This is for him.

God, he feels like a teenager again, and in absolutely none of the fun ways.

The day after that, Agent Romanoff shows up, and all she does is smile. Sharp little teeth kept tucked away behind a little quirk of her mouth, and Brock doesn’t know if he should smile back or just shiver in fear.

She’s one of HYDRA’s distant protégés by way of the Red Room (incestuous in tech, rivals under the surface, enemies on the field- when you have similar interests, these things get messy). Barton
was the one who brought her in when every other SHIELD officer insisted that a feral half-child assassin, product of some of the most vicious training the intelligence community could disavow, should be put down for the good of all and her own peace. Causes aren’t her biggest concern, but she’s loyal to her friends.

The thing is you can’t tell if you’re not one until the knife slips in.

“Lemme see the little guy,” she asks, smelling omega today, and Brock hesitates a moment before he does so. Ben frowns up at her, makes a few discontented noises before she coos him into jolliness again, eyes squinted in adoration.

“He’s the sweetest thing. You ought to be congratulated,” she says, and does not, still smiling.

Blueberry tarts, fussy and precise, appear on the cooling rack that afternoon.

Barton shows up in the main room (thank you JARVIS) just in time to find a bowl of icing sitting next to them, un-drizzled. Brock only learns about it afterwards, he’s long since back in the nursery, when JARVIS sees fit to notify him, unprompted and unasked. Keeping up with events is a good idea, especially when deep in enemy territory, and when asked nothing seems to bar the man in the ceiling from offering a full replay.

“Judging by the muttering I overheard, Agent Barton appeared to believe they might have been meant as a bribe to someone.”

“Who the hell would I bribe around here with baked goods?”

“I’m sure I don’t know, sir,” JARVIS says primly, and alright, Brock doesn’t care for being in a fishbowl but he’s had worse jailors than someone actually willing to converse once in a while.

“What’d he do next?”

“Inquired as to whether or not the tarts had been adulterated with any known harmful substance. I reassured him that they lacked any uncommon additives.”

“Didn’t give away my recipe, didja?”

“Of course not.” If an AI can sound reproachful, then this is that.

When Brock gets the all-clear that Barton has departed and the common floor is clear, he heads back up to the kitchen, to see what damage has been done.

There’s a little spill of icing on the counter, and three of the tarts are missing, leaving only purple smears behind on the parchment paper.

The next day it’s corn muffins.

(JARVIS later reports that Tony Stark had done a double-take when he’d passed them by on the counter, comparing it to “and I quote- “a literal tribble-load of baked goods, JARVIS-!” – unquote.”)

That makes Brock laugh, at least. James is a little confused at the reference, but they get in a nice, quiet hour in the living room, rocking Ben between them as onscreen, the good captain is inundated
with purring fuzzballs.

James snorts softly to himself. “Arm of Chem and Biochem,” is the only thing he’ll say on the matter. And Brock knows just enough about the kind of messes that have needed cleaning up after to think *fuck those guys.*

Chapter End Notes

Bofurrific and Andartha, always, the heart and the bones. Without the bones there is no structure, without the heart absolutely nothing gets done. Lights of my life.

Thank you all for reading, your comments make my day^^

Tumblr gonna Tumbly! Further art and meta and general nonsense under the tag 'fic: Fools Rush In' Otherwise, it's just cats and 2AM weirdness.
Chapter 47

Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve has about two million things he needs to be doing, seriously this itinerary could be about as crowded as the old USO days except that travel's much faster, so now he’s got even more spots packed into the same time-frame- but this is not something he can skip out on, even if he wanted to.

Sharon’s got the same take-charge attitude that Peggy did, when she’s not playing neighborly. Her arms are crossed, her eyes are tired and understanding, but they glint something fierce when he approaches her for a talk. She’s a female omega to her grandmother’s beta, faces similar prejudices in a different era, but she’s made a name for herself, and no one dares to give her shit for it around here. Steve can appreciate that the brass has been passed down through the generations.

“So are you going to ask me to go easy on him, or back off completely?” she says.

“Neither,” Steve replies, giving her the best smile he’s able to conjure up. “In this- I know I’m compromised. I can’t not be. And I need- I can’t just…” millions of dollars’ worth of wild science and electricity and you still can’t talk to women for shit, Rogers.

Sharon doesn’t interrupt, just lets him work through it with a faint twist to her mouth, half amusement and half bitter sympathy.

“I’m their alpha. Bucky’s and Brock’s. Until there’s a damn good reason, until any of us are healthy enough to even consider separation- we have to stabilize each other. Not just them,” he says, admitting to her something he can barely admit to himself. National heroes don’t get bond-withdrawal, can’t be hurting inside, can’t feel like their hearts were ripped out and left them floating adrift in alien lands. Can’t be torn and unsure.

The price of being the strongest is having to be strong.

“And that’s why I need you. You have to be my eyes in this, because I can’t- see clearly, where I’m at. I believe I can trust you to be the professional in this, while I handle the personal.“

“I won’t let you down.” Sharon’s got a simmer of her own, but she holds it down, smoldering in the pit of her belly. “I won’t let anything get past me. Not again.”

“Thank you,” he says, meaning it sincerely, and Sharon’s grip is firm and reassuring as he shakes her hand.

Right, Steve thinks later that afternoon, waiting anxiously for Bucky to be done with his interviews for the day. We can do this.

There’s a dozen different departments waiting for deposition, both in and outside of the new and much-shrunken intelligence organization Maria is quietly running. Most of them are only going to get their chance with Bucky second-hand, Q&A vetted through those that can be trusted- up to a point-to have Buck’s best interests at heart; but that doesn’t stop them from clamoring for a chance to debrief not just Sergeant Barnes, returned hero vet, but the Winter Soldier, terror of the espionage
world. Hill herself is conducting the first several sessions, switching off with Natasha, whom he’s entrusted with making sure they don’t treat Bucky like- like a dangerous animal about to explode, or a thing they can use to their advantage.

Steve trusts Hill, but he trusts Nat even more.

It’s December fourth. He is ten days a father, just barely reunited with his mate(s), and sitting on top of a whole heap of trouble. Said trouble is currently in interview himself, and if the pattern of the last couple days holds true, will leave under escort until he’s back in home territory, cook up a storm, and then hole up in the nursery with their baby boy- avoiding anything like conversation (yesterday’s tv-watching with Bucky, which Steve had been loath to interrupt, was a wild departure from the norm), and completely failing to acknowledge the increasing number of treat-like things accumulating in the fridge and pantry. Both in their own kitchen and on the communal floor.

(Steve’s not the only one to notice- Clint swears he was checking for poison. He’d given the archer a stern look, and plucked the remaining chocolate-chip cookie from the archer’s hand.)

(It was a very good cookie.)

It can’t go on like this. For what Brock did (lies and betrayal, mayhem, callous murder many times over in the name of HYDRA’s hunger-) Rumlow would ordinarily belong in a jail cell with the key thrown away- and if it had been anyone but Brock, if it had been some faceless HYDRA agent not mated to the both of them, if there had been no baby-

Met on the battlefield, Steve would have taken Rumlow out without a second thought. The reports in Rumlow’s file- the things he’s done, the knowledge that he’d known what would happen and still tried to go through with it- they will never not make Steve feel sick to his stomach.

But condemnation is easy to pass out on the battlefield. After… after is another, more complicated story.

Bonds, motherhood, they don’t exempt anyone from facing justice- and Steve’s personal and very muddled feelings certainly don’t- but hopefully, justice can be served in more than one way. Especially when the delinquent in charge is helping to undo some of the damage he’s caused.

The thing is, with Rumlow spilling his guts to Kruger each day, giving up secrets he would have died to protect not long ago- even if it’s not yet clear how much he’s reneged on his beliefs, his loyalties to HYDRA, and Sharon will be leading the charge on that front- Steve is free to face his obligations as an alpha. And like hell will he let the omega who bore him a child hide away completely, like a wounded animal ready to let its hurts fester instead of facing the light of day.

Whether or not he’s comfortable with having a (possibly former) HYDRA agent in his home, they’ve all ended up here, and for better or worse- Rumlow is his bondmate. And caring for a newborn baby, their baby, is leaving Brock stressed and snappish, for all he’s trying to put up a brave front. If Steve’s reading him right, Brock’s even more distressed by this turn of events than he is, and in dire need of soothing whether or not he’ll admit it. It’s a bad sign that the conditional freedom he’s been given is mostly being used to stay away from where he likely feels unwelcome.

It doesn’t help that every instinct Steve has is running sharp and raw, provoked by his search for Bucky but honed by the need to see both his mates safe and happy, taken care of, no matter what else he’s feeling. The tight knot of it sits in the pit of his stomach like a lead weight, chews on the back of his mind and the edge of his senses- the wrongness of it pulls at his heart, seeing either of his mates in the stressed state they’re in.
Watching Rumlow slink through the apartment into his room each day, shoulders hunched, head ducked, has him more on edge than he’d like. It’s such a contrast to the belligerent confidence he’d projected before, the wicked grin and sharp eyes that had sparked desire Steve hadn’t known he could still feel. The rough beauty he remembers, laughed off as a luxury military men couldn’t afford, is still there, buried though it is under scars and neglect. Changed, by his experiences- Brock’s gone mother-shaped, and it won’t let old thoughts stay buried, the old, rude-alpha ones that he knows are no good but that used to needle him with the notion of what would he look like if someone actually took care of him…?

A little more flesh… a chance to go just a little bit soft and sweet at the edges, contrast to the bitter and hard-won muscle that Brock took such pride in. A chance to show the heart he liked to pretend he didn’t have- Rumlow had always been a mama-bear to his team, ruled the roost with an iron fist but if you looked, it was easy to see the love there, driving them in the gym and on the range. It’s what made him want to bend the older man over and kiss him breathless in the first place, watching him go to the mat over people he cared about-

Pipe dreams, Steve thinks, shaking his head- and none of his say. Just those stray thoughts that leave the mouth dry and the heart regretting. (He feels like a grade-A heel, to even think of nosing after either of them right now. No matter how delicious the mother-scent is on Brock and the sympathetic blush of it on Bucky is, they’re none of them in the place to even consider it.)

And under all of that- there’s still the fact that despite what instinct and libido and what little sense of justice he can find in this situation are telling him, he’s still simmeringly angry at Brock’s cold-hearted betrayal, and deeply uneasy about the question of his present allegiance. The whole jumbled, ugly mess of it all is stretching him thinner by the day, and Buck’s not feeling too hot either, though whether that’s the thing with Brock or- everything else, is up for question. As for how this state of affairs could affect their son as he gets older… Things can’t stay like they are, they really have to settle it, one way or another.

Time to soldier up.

Steve is still lost in his thoughts, the first outlines of a strategy coming together, when the doors open up- and he gets a sharp reminder that Brock isn’t his only problem, no matter how heavily it weighs on his mind.

A little hunched, a little pale, James Buchanan Barnes steps out into the hall and gives Steve a faint, pinch-browed smile- only hesitates a moment before stepping into his arms. It’s a disturbing sort of stillness, like Steve’s hugging- not a corpse not an automaton just a very still being-

Brock’s changed, yes, but so has Bucky- and the scary thing is, if he thinks back to the bad old days, just after the rescue of the 107th?

It’s not that strange at all.

One deep breath in- it holds- and then Bucky sighs into his chest, just leaning his face against Steve’s neck and sending a flood of nearly-relaxed scent his way. Not enough. Not nearly enough. But better than a moment ago.

It used to be so easy, calming Bucky when he was on edge- back when his grandmother died when they were kids, or the evening before he’d left for Basic; even before the proper bond, they’d known each other past the skin. And after the serum had fixed him up, made it so they could bond proper… it sure as hell wasn’t easy, but it was easier, to be the rock for a soldier long out of the world, pulled out of Zola’s torture chamber in the factory at the last moment, with Steve’s scent and touch helping to ease hurts a thousand times worse than any alley-fought scrapes.
He remembers waking up to find Buck sitting up through the middle of the night, one hand clenched white around his faithful on his rifle and watching for the dawn with warry eyes, his grip slowly relaxing as Steve wrapped his arms around him, whispering the right words and, for the first time in his life, exuding all the right scents, the right signals.

If only that could fix everything, the way it did in novels.

“You okay?”

“I’m good,” Bucky says, and his eyes say he’s lying. His eyes, his muscles, the sickly scent of barely-contained terror… “There’s- a lot to cover.”

“You know you don’t have to,” Steve is quick to say. Deal or no deal, he’ll break anyone that so much as breathes on Bucky wrong- “If you don’t want to, say the word, I’ll-“

“No,” Buck says, shaking his head, eyes squinted just a little bit against old ghosts, trying not to flinch at the remembered sounds of gunshots. “I do.” I can do this! “I need to do this.”

“Why?”

Paying Rumlow’s way again. Protecting his handler, protecting his partner from the long hidden months where they’d lived cheek by jowl, with no one but each other. And- more than that. Trying to make up for deeds he never wanted to do, things they’d had to hollow him out to make happen-

The spike that puts in Steve’s heart rate gets a soft, keen sound out of his mate, and he bites it back, holding on tight.

Buck’s curled under his chin, breathing deep- Steve just stops and concentrates on holding him close, trying to exude protection. God, he wants to be able to comfort him properly, not just grope around the edges of wounds he can’t even see.

“Could be worse. They could want me in the field again-” –oh and doesn’t that just sound like the sort of thing SHIELD would want, their own private Asset, held by strings of guilt and the product of all the research too unethical to claim themselves- “-and I’ll go, Steve, it’s what I’m best at, but not yet, okay, not yet-“

“No, no no, baby,” he says, and he remembers this feeling from before the serum, of a dance just slightly out of step; the right place, the right partner, but the beat’s all wrong and his footfalls are thick and clumsy. Bucky just hunches his shoulders again, and Steve wants to hold tighter, wants to press healing into his very skin. “Never again. No one’s going to make you do that.”

Buck makes a low, annoyed sound in his throat, but only shakes his head, unable to summon up the right words. He starts to pull away, but hesitates, and gets in one last quick nuzzle under Steve’s chin before jerking his head toward the door.

“Let’s get outta here, punk.”
Boffurific and Andartha, heart and bones. And you, dear readers, who brighten my day with comments^^ Love and thanks.
Ben is an absolute dream of a baby, but even he cries, and Brock tries not to cry with him (hormones don’t quit just because the kid’s out of you, it looks like he’s just going to be fucking watery for the next little while.) There’s a feeding, a change, and then a desperately needed nap that somehow turns out to be for both of them.

No dreams. Blessed be whoever makes these decisions- no dreams.

The next thing he knows, Brock is jerking out of a sound sleep with a snort (sloppy, sloppy-) at the trailing sound of the AI’s voice.

“-ister Rumlow, Captain Rogers and Sergeant Barnes have arrived.” When? A short time ago. Where? The living room. Brock lets the AI’s voice wash over him, looking blearily over at the wall he’s designated his talking-spot for the room, because it makes him feel less ridiculous to have one. Also it’s where the projector tends to hit.

JARVIS is silent for a moment, then speaks up again.

“Sergeant Barnes appears to be in some small amount of distress, Mister Rumlow.”

“What,” Brock groans, glowering into the abyss behind his eyelids before he pushes himself upright, rolling his eyes at the world, at his own lazy ass, who knows. “Jesus, what? Hasn’t he got Rogers with him?”

“Captain Rogers appears to be having difficulty attending to the Sergeant’s needs, sir.”

“...shit.”

Brock unwraps himself from the blankets, takes a sec to get a quick look at Ben, still sleeping like… well, a baby- and lurches to the door. He’s got a queasy feeling, a tingle down his spine- if James was okay, even if he was just in mission-mode, he’d have come into the nest, at least to check.

The door opens a crack, enough that he can catch a glimpse of his partner, standing by the window, wrapped in the arms of their- no, of Barnes’s alpha. And for all they looks fairy-tale just-right, all wrapped up in each other- for anyone that knows the Soldier, hell, for anyone who knows Rogers- it’s still all wrong. He can smell the stress wafting off of both of them, see the rising alarm hissing off of Steve like steam from a kettle. Hear the little whimpers Buck makes in response, like a dog trying not to show its hurt.

Oh fuck this, Brock thinks, and straightens up. He pulls the door open with a deliberate creak, makes his footfalls clear as he makes his way in, not like they couldn’t hear him anyway. Damn super-ears.

“Brock-“ Steve says with a start, turning to look up from the tangle he and Bucky are making. Buck looks up too, lifting his head from Rogers’ chest to look over with red-rimmed eyes.

“Hey, sugar,” Bucky says softly, attempting to fake okay when to Brock, he clearly isn’t. And maybe that’s not the worst thing in the world, as fucked up as it feels to see him try and fail- because
the Soldier had no false layers other than a blank mask, but James, part of what he’s recovered is the ability- and necessity- to lie.

It’s not difficult to guess what’s putting the younger omega in such a state. What the hell are they asking him, Brock wonders, and barely suppresses a growl. He’s the criminal on sufferance, here, not James.

“We didn’t mean to wake you,” says Rogers, starting to let up and ease apart, ever the gentleman, and Brock’s hard-pressed not to snarl at him. And what the hell are you doing, letting them at him like that?

“I was already up.” Calmly- put it away. Fret and fuss and they’ll never take you seriously.

The best way to handle the Soldier was always to stay calm, like this was just another shit job, even when he was covered in blood (his, someone else’s, didn’t matter) and the whole mission had gone to hell. The best way to handle James is almost the same, he does not take orders but he’ll accept being bossed a little when it’s clear that someone’s in charge and can at least fake like they know what they’re doing.

Maybe it was the suits that got James in a spin, but Rogers isn’t helping him break out of it. The alpha’s got his mate coiled like a spring in his arms, holding tight and making helpless soothing noises but giving no direction, no push. And after his time under HYDRA’s command… he needs it, if only to push back against. Rogers wants to give James everything he’s missed and nothing like what he’s had, and it’s like giving candy to a starved person- a kindness, but likely to make them sick.

Brock goes for broke and reaches out past Rogers’ shoulder, ignoring the alpha’s startled jerk to touch along his partner’s jaw and tilt his face up for a proper assessment. Pale, sweaty, with just a hint of grey. Pulse is fine, eyes are normal but white-ringed. Something he had to go over today has got Barnes spooked.

“Hey, Barnes,” he asks softly, low and steady. They all know he’s the interloper, and the alpha’s watching him like a goddamn hawk, with a set to his mouth that cuts like a knife, eyes narrowing dangerously at this intrusion. “Those guys in the suits giving you trouble?”

The chin comes up, and the corners of Buck’s mouth tighten, something like a smile but not reaching his eyes.

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

“Bullshit,” says Brock, evenly. “You look like hell, kid. Go sit down on the couch, and you’ll tell me what’s up.”

“What do you think you’re-“ Steve starts.

Brock gathers his stones (omegas have plenty of balls, he’s said, they’re just internal) and turns to glower at their big blond alpha, because this is one thing he knows better. Eyes to eyes, challenging for the lead- no ducking his head like some little coquette.

They both want the best for James. Brock’s just making sure he gets what he needs.

“Believe it or not, Rogers, I’m trying to help. Follow, or get out of the way.” The stunned look that gets out of the big guy would be hilarious any other time. Maybe Rogers wasn’t expecting him to be this brazen- maybe he’s supposed to be humble and contrite. Maybe some other time, when James isn’t wound like a string about to snap.
Steve looks into Brock’s face long enough that the hairs on the back of his neck start to rise, and Brock glares right back.

Buck’s already easing himself away from Rogers and down onto the couch, like he’s being pulled down by the weight of the world or his arm or just steel-clad bones. His gaze flicks between them, fingers starting to grip into the leather of the cushions.

Rogers breaks the stare-down between them, looking aside to where his mate’s settled. Buck looks back at him, guilt and quiet desperation on his face.

“Hey, eyes on me- eyes on me,” Brock says, and he’s crouching in front of Barnes, addressing him like the old days. When James’ eyes snap to, following the sharp gesture of Brock’s hand, the spiel continues.

“You’ve done good. All of today’s objectives are met- you just sit here and let me do my job, okay? That’s it, that’s good…” Brock doesn’t break eye-contact, gives Buck a faint little smirk as he keeps on talking.

“Rogers, please go get me the comb. Behind the mirror, middle shelf left. We got some work to do.”

It’s been a good long while since he’s seen James slump forward like this, looking up through his hair like he’s in a room full of techs, just waiting to be seen to.

It must have been bad.

He hears Rogers approach, doesn’t move, just opens his hand flat and feels the plastic comb slap into his palm.

“Here we go- you stay there, you-“ Brock orders, gesturing to Steve like he’s a fellow agent, just here to attend to the Soldier’s maintenance. “Sit there. Got knots all through here, gonna need to work it out.”

Brock settles in on James’ left side, edging in behind him so he can get a good start in on brushing that hair. Rogers sits gracefully to their right, keeping one hand on James’s flesh shoulder and keeping a watchful, wary eye on the proceedings. On Brock, and what he’s doing.

If Bucky has any feelings about suddenly being a bone pulled between them, he doesn’t say- just kind of sinks in on himself with a shaky sigh as the comb starts to whisk through his hair. Brock keeps his head down, muttering to himself as he works from the ends up, like it’s just his luck someone’s gone and tangled up the talent’s hair, and he is not the kind who just goes about grooming other people for no good reason, other than it’s got to be done and done right.

Doesn’t seem to matter the reason, because James knows he’s in good hands.

The younger omega’s breathing seems to even out, slow down- he’s deep on the inhale, likes the scents he’s got around him. Steve over there is putting out enough alpha to fill the room, all hot and protective without a proper challenger to be seen- but the only visible sign is the hand he keeps on Bucky, and the gaze he finally keeps on him after several minutes of Brock just combing, and nothing else. James at least seems to be relaxing into his touch, the tension melting out of his neck millimeter by millimeter as Rogers gently circles his fingers over the skin.

“So, you wanna tell me what all that was about?” Brock finally says, the cadence from long years of working the same ops, the expectation of a response from their time together in the cabin.

“…Sarajevo, ‘92. And- Maguidanao.”
Brock hisses quietly, but his hands don’t stop moving, pinching off a hank of hair to tease at a knot as carefully as possible without yanking.

Rogers watches it all with his mouth set in a line, like he’s watching a show he don’t like. But he keeps quiet. It’s almost- *if Brock ignores his nose, and his eyes, and the feeling at the base of his spine-* like he isn’t there.

Bucky is quiet a few moments more, but Brock’s expectant look and brief pause finally prompts him to speak up again.

“They want to know… a lot.” He’ll just bet they do, and James is not the Soldier, bound to obey, but he’s *James*, and eager to fucking *please*.

“Did you tell ‘em to go to hell?”

“You know I can’t do that.”

And Brock snorts as he shoves in properly behind him, the better to comb the other side. Rogers moves easily to accommodate, still silent and intent, a big blonde glower-y rock exuding heat and judgement.

“Can’t, won’t, no difference. Got no call to be putting yourself through hell.” *Certainly not on my account.*

There’s a faint snort and a shake of the head he’s trying to comb, which Brock supposes is better than just silence and acceptance. James has got that much defiance left in him.

“I mean it. You let ‘em push you past the edge, be no use to anybody. This ain’t the time to get all-sacrificial. You’re *better* than that.” *Better than me. Worth saving.*

Buck makes that low, annoyed grumble in his throat again, but it stutters to a halt when Brock hits scalp. Rogers gets a quick glance and a jerk of the head by way of warning, before the rounded nubs of the comb are allowed to travel *slowly* over James’ scalp, and he-

*melts.*

The grumble turns into a soft moan, and as Brock expected, James leans heavily to the right, mostly into Rogers, the mellow scent of cross-eyed *pleasure* coming off him in *waves*. The scent, the contact takes Rogers by surprise as he has to make a grab for Buck to hold him in place and keep him from flopping forward.

“That’s it, that’s good…” Brock says, helping reel their boy back in.

He glances over to Rogers, who’s now sporting a dazed but almost happy look, like someone’s hit him between the eyes with a very soft two-by-four. Good ol’ *bliss*-scent, and Brock knows, with a pang, that he’s witnessing something tested and true, the kind of thing that has *let no man tear asunder* attached to it.

Just need a little help over the hump, there.

And if he warms himself by the glow a little, lets it curl soft and warm like smoke under his ribs, well, who’s to say.
A pang hits him, for the last time he’d ever felt something like this, before the cabin, before the Triskellion, in the way back time before it had all gone to shit. Jack- they were never mates, but they were about as close to bonded as you could get and still keep your pants on. Brothers in all but blood. Jack would have known what was coming, wouldn’t have needed a signal like a damn rookie-

No, they wouldn’t have. Not Jack, not his whole team. But they would have been maintenance on a valuable machine. They wouldn’t have been a tired man’s mate.

“Don’t sss-stop,” Buck says, and his right arm’s slipped around Rogers’ waist, pulling him in closer. “Either of you. Need you to… ri’ now…”

Brock looks up, meeting Rogers’ eyes. He gets a little nod to go with the not-quite-as-cold-anymore blue, and the alpha opens his mouth.

“What do you need from us, Bucky?” Steve asks, warm and rich with concern.

“This. Brock, with the comb. You- you keep goin’ with m’ good shoulder, like that, just like that, Stevie. And then…” Buck trails off as Steve starts slowly work his fingers over his mate’s skin. Just barely digging in, and he hisses quietly, able to feel the muscle-tension lurking just below, boulders waiting to wreck the unwary.

“Oh, Buck-“ But he stops, because his mate tenses at the sound of pity, and Brock very deliberately looks away from where Rogers’ face is falling, where it picks back up in a determined frown as he starts carefully working into the muscles again. Barnes begins making soft little sounds, the ones that mean that the pain is good, the release after worth the digging now, and Brock keeps slowly working the teeth through sleek brown hair while their alpha’s strong fingers tackle the rock-hard neck tendons below.

Cap’s got the massage, he’s got the comb, and James is slowly, slowly, starting to come apart in their hands.

There’s little shifts as Brock and Steve both begin working on neighboring areas, applying gentle pressure and working through sore spots, with Bucky slumping over and down, bit by bit, until things go from a tightly-knit, almost formal little arrangement of subject and masseurs to a sloppy sprawl of the two of them, alpha and omega, sitting side-by-side on a man-eating couch with their mutual supersoldier lying face-down across both their laps. James’ shirt has come off, his hair is well-combed but floofed over his face in a careless tousle, and he’s as heavy as a dog that’s decided you are not going to move from his comfy spot.

When Steve reaches over, his fingers cautious as he tries to work gently into the other side of Bucky’s back, Buck is the one who stops him.

“No. Let Brock show you-“ he murmurs, and Rogers looks up. So does Brock.

Brock swallows.

“The, uh-“ he starts. Jesus fuck, Rumlow, get it together.

“The arm…” Steve prompts, and has the gall to look amused.

His face is heating up, right across the bridge of the nose and cheeks, but this is important and Rogers is, in this instant, any other dumb recruit who may think he knows what’s what but has never worked with the Soldier or his various quirks before.
Come on, his eyes glint. Show me.

All fucking right.

Brock sets a hand down in the middle of Bucky’s back, right between the shoulder blades. Reaching out and over with the other hand, he picks up his partner’s metal arm and, with a puff of air, lifts it up to show to Rogers like he was displaying a bird’s wing.

He edits the lecture on the fly, scooping out the bits about the glory of HYDRA and fists of domination and the very, very obvious fact that whoever installed the damn thing had never even heard of such a thing as ethical oversight committees.

“This is a piece of tech the likes of you and I will never know. On the surface, it looks to be an advanced prosthetic arm, but it’s a hell of a lot more—sophisticated—involved than just that. You’ll see the ridge of scar tissue where it looks like the metal stops— but that’s not where it ends. Scapula, collarbone— those have been replaced. There are reinforcements that run through the ribcage and into the spinal column. Healthy muscle-tissue covers most of the back, ribs, and pecs, but the connections to the artificial cables are here, here, here, and here—“ he says, touching point after point where, under the skin, Bucky is borged up and in need of special consideration.

Self-same cyborg is limp like a noodle and heavy like Jack Rollins’ lasagna, and if Brock isn’t completely off his rocker, he may be very faintly purring.

“Gimme your hand,” Brock says, and Steve breaks off from the distant, horrified look that’s been starting to grow, and puts his fingers on the back of the man sprawled across them. “This is important. “

He guides Steve’s fingertips, directing them up the line of the trapezius. The rumble gets momentarily louder, then subsides.

“This is where— feel that difference?”

“Yes,” Rogers says, with a short, sharp nod. If he’s taking notes for later use or just horrified at the extent— the sheer fucking magnitude of what was done to his mate’s body— he’s at least paying attention.

“Good— yeah, there? That’s where the artificial joins up with the regular muscle. It’s done at varying lengths along here, so it’s not just a short, sharp stop of real and fake— the cables are shot all through this spot. What that means for you— when you’re massaging, go slow, work your way in so you’re not just kneading metal and meat together. Damage will heal, but it’s still damage—’unnecessary and inefficient’— and it’s better to work out the knots without causin’ more tangles.”

Naptime wasn’t quite over when this all happened, but Brock’s still got some things to say, even if he’s doing it between yawns.

“Now you’re gonna remember tomorrow, right? Don’t let’em push you so far,” he murmurs, and Buck’s acknowledgement is a faint twitch of his right hand, the metal one carefully balanced over Rogers’ knees.

Good man. ‘Cause Brock’s in no position to bite at anyone who gives his partner shit, much as he wants to, and Barnes is going to have to— stand- up for…

The thought manages to amble off as Brock gets stuck in a yawn. By the time he surfaces, James
seems to be fast asleep across his and Rogers’ knees, and Steve’s the only one of them alert enough to be keeping watch.

Should he say something?

Nah. The soft glide of Rogers’ hand over the sleek black of James’ hair is enough to be worth sitting here for. Unless Ben kicks up a fuss, he can stretch this small, safe moment for as long as it’ll hold.

Brock settles back, lets his eyes get heavy, because it feels safe. He can practically hear all three of them breathing in unison, and their alpha is relaxed at his side, radiating nothing but sweet content, untainted by worry or anger or sorrow. Rogers is- he’s in deep smit, is what he is, just watching Bucky sleep tight like it’s the greatest thing that’s ever been accomplished, and he’s humbled to be a witness.

_Hell of a feeling, making Bucky Barnes happy. Good luck, Cap, hope you feel it a lot more often._

Brock is drifting, almost completely asleep again, when he swears he could feel a hand stroking over his hair, too.

Chapter End Notes

And we are officially caught up with the kink-meme fill, which means from now on updates will be even between the two. I wanted to get this up here, and concentrate on the next chapter after the current work-week craziness is done.

Thank you, readers, for enjoying and commenting, and always, thanks to Bofurrific and Andartha, the heart and the bones.

Tumblr gonna Tumbl!

His muscles aren’t screaming, his *fellas* are with him, and the usual medley of shouted-down chaos and electric white noise in his head has settled down to a low roar.

James thinks he could get used to this.

Brock’s out cold, the dark circles under his eyes betraying how much he needs the rest and the calm, right now probably more than any of them. Sleep leaves him slumping against Steve’s shoulder, and the alpha reaches an arm around to gently stroke Brock’s hair, just like he does Bucky’s, who’s still lying over both of his mates’ laps and purring contentedly.

Just about the point things should be starting to go pleasantly numb under his weight, Bucky pointedly nuzzles at Steve’s leg, before sliding off like a cat and reaching for the big plaid spread that’s lying on the arm-rest one couch over. He makes a soft nudging motion with his head in the direction of their deep-sleeping ex-agent (*you can run for love or money or freedom, but it gets down into your bones, you’ll never be purely not again*) drooling on Steve’s shirt, and rubs the blanket behind his ears and the sides of his neck before offering up a corner to his alpha mate.

Gently disentangling himself from the older omega, rumbling in a soft haze, Steve nods softly as he rises, and sets about making sure that the blanket smells of *him*, too. Between them, Rumlow’s gently shifted to be laying down, and then the plaid gets tucked in around him, mate-scent to wake up to.

They stumble dreamily into the next room, Bucky’s mostly-unused space, already kissing, stroking each others’ skin, hands fumbling under shirts and groping at buttons. But then the softness starts to go out of Steve, the fuzzy bliss of *truebond* leaving his eyes, and it’s like when he was coming off of a jag, way back when, when Buck would get him the real stuff for when his asthma cigarettes ran out or just weren’t strong enough to do him good.

“That…”

That was wonderful. That felt right. Things Bucky wants to say, but can’t voice yet voice aloud, with the lingering whisper of *tools don’t feel* in his ear- but he’s *brimming* with it, almost overflowing, because that- that was being *in synch* and well taken-care of. This is what *bond* is supposed to feel like, all together and none left to mourn, calm and happy and fully connected. And Buck knows Steve must have needed it just as much, must be relieved the same as him, because Lord knows even with all his physical ailments gone- Stevie still carries pain with him long after the causes have left. Sometimes you gotta sweep him off his feet and nuzzle him senseless before he’ll even realize his bones are tired.

God, he’d *missed* this. And Brock- the junior omega who’d grown older as James had slumbered the years away- he fits right in, the one piece by happenstance that fills out all the little hollows and empty spaces left by seventy years of brutal separation.

*Salvage.* Grab what you could and run, only this time, it had *worked.*
“Buck… oh god, I’m sorry. That was wrong. That was SO wrong.”

There’s a pained, choked undertone in Steve’s voice that registers even before the words do, and Bucky’s train of thought- not the smoothest ride at the best of times, clickety-clacking and empty hay-cars hooked up to sleek black bods full of deadly cargo, all behind some hodge-podge wired-together locomotive that leaks and hisses and sometimes threatens explosions that could send debris for miles- comes to a screeching halt.

“S…Steve?” His words these days don’t always come easy- certainly not as easy as they used to. Actions, he’s had those trained into him since before he’d ever set eyes on that filthy little Swissman, draw, point, click, move under cover, always never where they saw you last- but he’s working on making his communication a work of lips and tongue these days, and less of hands and bullets. Hard to do when ninety percent of your vocabulary’s been in violence and you really can’t fall back on your current primary reference for a situation.

It’s a work in progress, awright?

His alpha is about to go on a bluster of apologizing and worrying, he thinks, staring into Steve’s face. Steve’s hand on his bad shoulder is hesitant, his mouth set like he’s swallowing something foul, and Bucky can feel the cold creep back into his bones.

“That- what he was saying, about- God, it was like you were some gadget at Stark Expo, showing off how it works like it was something to be proud of-“

It takes a few seconds for James to rally himself. When the words come out, having turned and spun in his head, they’re hard and flat.

“Rogers. You didn’t know how to handle the situation. He taught you what you needed to know.” Here it comes, the biting rats in the back of his brain whisper, here it comes, just what you never wanted to hear-

“Buck- he used you. Tuned you for them like a goddamn machine, or, or an animal-“

And there it is. Bile floods into his throat, and his flesh-hand shakes.

“Guess what, Stevie- there were times and parts of me that were.” His blood is rushing in his ears now, the bliss of only a moment ago evaporated like water on a hot iron stove. His voice comes out in a hiss, and he hates, hates seeing what this does to Steve, the quickly-swallowed horror and grief that play out on his face. But Steve’s got to understand this- things that Bucky has only come to understand in the last months, when it all came back. Sometimes in whispers, sometimes in a torrent, but if he looks, almost all of it’s there. A lot of it cold and factual, a reel of tape he can pull out frame by frame- some of it bright and colorful as fucking day.

Some things he’d really rather not look at.

But it’s there.

“Yeah, it’s fucked up, Stevie, but I’m kinda fucked up too. And pretending I’m not? Ain’t gonna work.”

He drops his eyes, doesn’t want Steve to see- sometimes he thinks it must be plain as day, easy as looking in a mirror, to know what they did to him, how they made him usable for their purposes, and doesn’t want Steve to see, didn’t want him in the goddamn war in the first place- didn’t want him knowing the bullets he’d put to use, the things he’d seen, and the things he’d had to keep doing. Stevie wouldn’t turn away- he was fuckin’ stubborn like that. But that doesn’t mean Bucky wants to
show him, and to see the look in his eyes when he finally understands.

The next breath he draws is harsh and shuddering, like battlefield smoke and poison gas, like now he’s the one with the old affliction of the lungs, and he wishes he could rest his head on his alpha’s chest.

“I really- I really wish I could wave my hand and undo it, Stevie, but I can’t. It’s what I need right now. I had seventy years of it, that doesn’t go away in a snap. Someone who knows what’s up and can walk in and take command- gimme the routine maintenance without a fuss. Sometimes I really need that. Rumlow knows what’s up, because he was there with me through the last years of it. And before you go talking about how wrong this is- lemme tell you, the really fucked up shit? Way back when, where I was up and walking around and thought I was doing the right thing? That was way before his time.”

He knows, he knows he sounds like a bruised-up housewife, putting up for the husband that knocked her down and he wants to scream in frustration, because it’s not that at all. How can he explain about what he’s trying to do, the blocks he’s working around, what he’s trying to make up for?

That Brock might be part of the chain that HYDRA had bound him with- but the Soldier had helped forge the links. The harrowing, the winnowing- breaking those who could be broken, boy and girl alike in their separate classes, and pointing out to his superiors who to drag away and mend, suitable for further instruction?

His soldiers. His spiderlings. And how many had he had to hunt down, when they were foolish enough to run? When his plans he’d concocted in his few lucid moments weren’t enough to get them free and clear?

He grits his teeth though his knees feel weak, and he looks Steve straight in the eye, a challenge where other omegas, other alphas would have rolled over and showed belly. Where the Soldier would have been struck down. And if he has to blink a few times, well- he’s still standing, isn’t he?

“You think it’s because I’m a little lost lamb and I don’t know what I’ve been doing the last seventy years and you’re wrong, Stevie, you’re wrong.” He can sense his alpha tensing, smell the heart-ache and grief held rigidly in check, sour-sick, and knows the fists are balled and shoulders tight, but he has to keep going. When the words come in a flood- they empty him. It’s now or never, and ‘never’ isn’t an option because they’re neither of them any good with lies between them.

“I have it almost all back. Sometimes… sometimes I wish someone would come take it away from me again,” he says, voice going quiet and chin lowering, as he looks this way and that for some kind of relief from the tears that prick his eyes.

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“There’s so much, Stevie. So much I wish I didn’t fucking know. I got my name back- but I also have a man’s tongue for trying to sell our existence to the feds. Massacres and mom’s pudding. I can remember my sisters grinnin’ like fools when we snuck’em into a movie Ma didn’t deem fit for young ladies- and a dozen young recruits just their ages, that I killed with my bare hands because they weren’t loyal. Others who tried to get away, because they thought they could get a better deal elsewhere or they couldn’t stomach the whole setup anymore. I wasn’t called the Fist of HYDRA for nothing.”

(He’s gotta be disgusted, he’s gotta be sick to his stomach with this-) a poisonous voice he doesn’t have the energy to subdue hisses in the back of his head, and he doesn’t dare look at Steve, doesn’t dare because he’s afraid if he sees the expression on Steve’s face he’ll lose it completely. Won’t snap and kill anyone, just- collapse, be no use to anyone, himself or his boys. So James (my name is James) bulls on through like a run-away train.
“And now… now I got you back, baby. I got you,” he says, breath huffing chopply. “And I got twenty some-odd years of thinking, with only a little fog, that I was still fightin’ the good fight. Like you woulda wanted me to.

“Special mission. Lone agent. Do the dirty work that Cap never could, just like always- only when I come home, there’s no Jim, no Gabe, no Dum-Dum- just more labcoats and uniforms. Plain ones- have to pass, inside and out. You’re doing good, they said, and when I was even awake enough to ask about my superior officers, where are my orders coming from- they’d have me talk to the man with the gold ring. And I wouldn’t ask again, until the next time, the next moment when somebody pleaded or I would blink and realize day was night.”

Breathe in. Breathe out. Try not to hear that steam-whistle scream on the edge of it. Look down, look down- don’t get caught in the glimmer again.

“It all ran together. I don’t think I really slept for a long, long time. Thaw me out, run me until the programming broke, then put me down hard and pop me in cryo and wake me up again- your mission is this, you got hurt on your last one, you must carry on. You’re doing good. You’ll get to rest soon.”

“Nineteen forty-five. The war ended in the year our Lord nineteen forty-five, Steve, and I didn’t know that for decades.” He snorts, softly, can barely muster the dark chuckle that wants to burble up from tarry depths in him. “And after a while, it didn’t really matter.” War doesn’t end.

“Starve me, beat me, muddy up my head with pretty little lies and hand me to a man who can talk you back to anyplace he wants you to go. Put a gun in my hand, point me at a target, don’t even bother telling me I’m doing the right thing anymore, just that I’ll get to rest- and I was putty. And when I wouldn’t believe that anymore- when they couldn’t put me under again, the drugs stopped working so good and the man with the gold ring was old and grey- they started taking away what was left of who I was, filled me up with somethin’ new. Thought I was a loyal hero to the Soviets for a while, and they started leavin’ me on ice for longer. Started really working the you are nothing angle, when they thawed me out. Had to scoop out everything just to make me behave, ‘cause I didn’t know up from down, it was all just a wild jumble- but sooner or later I’d realize something was wrong. And when I knew that, they’d scramble it all up until right and wrong didn’t matter, but what was asked of me did.”

Anger makes his alpha smell like acid smoke, sharp and burning. But when James looks up- he can’t not, not with the hitch of breath he hears- Steve looks like he’s about to cry.

I didn’t wanna tell you. I didn’t want you to see, he thinks, anguished. And this isn’t even the important part.

James swallows, reaches out, takes his mate’s hands (shaking, both of them are shaking) in his own. Watches those big, tight shoulders (still so strange, but he’ll take his Stevie any way he can get) slump as their fingers intertwine, skin to skin and metal to callus.

“Bucky- Buck, I-“ Steve’s voice cracks, and James shakes his head sharply, squinting his eyes against the smart and burn.

“Don’t, don’t do that, you’ll get me started- and I gotta finish, babe, you gotta let me. Please lemme tell you my side.”

Steve can only nod, swallowing tightly and holding on even tighter. Bucky wants to kiss away the tremble from his mouth- but first he has to know.
“One story stopped working, they started a new one. And when that would break down- back to the chair again. Clean slate. Before and after cryo. Only thing was, when I didn’t have something, a companion or a group to teach- I’d start questioning. Or I’d get violent. Or I’d just get real quiet and start obeying to the lowest standard I could get away with.

“They figured out me having students helped.”

“Helped,” he repeats, voice going raw and angry, “because really, what it did was keep me occupied- and when I started thinking of ways to break free, they’d put me in the Chair real quick, the program would be scrapped, and anyone I’d injected with independent thought eliminated. Sometimes they made me do it myself, fresh out of memory-wipe and knowing only that there was an order, when Orders where all I had. Then they’d haul me back to Cryo.

“That’s why they never bred me, I think. Care too much, and it breaks down your primary loyalties. Grown protégés- easier to take them away than pups. Most of the time.

“Brock- he was in one of the last of my classes. Young, cocky… scared shitless and so fuckin’ broken. Lot of ‘em were, one way or another- but there was something in him, even then. Worth polishing. Worth tryin’ to keep alive. Maybe ‘cause he was like me, omega in the alphas’ club. Maybe ‘cause he chased after bein’ the best with his hands and nails and teeth. He just fit.

“I made sure he was loyal. Made damn sure he was a good little drone- no reason to cull him from the herd. He and the class of ’91 went on to their assignments, and I didn’t see them again.” Students come, students go- faces change and blur, young then scarred then old, and names are in the file. Analysis is the work of the moment- it is not his place to remember and record the assessment, only to make it.

Favorites are right out.

“After that, they sent me to a little program in Russia proper- and you know my prize girl from there,” he spits out, bitter like venom.

“After that one… when the Red Room burned, I thought this time, they might actually kill me.” He stares at the way Steve’s hands flex in his, feels them warm and strong- the serum only filled in the bony knuckles, they were always big and art-stained, and prone to creak when they held his.

“Part of me- part a’ me even wanted it. Because there wasn’t enough left of me to hang onto. But they sent me back to the States, to Pierce. They could tell I was fallin’ apart. Could hardly keep me awake a week without going so off-script they had to wipe me again. So they decided to try something different- try an omega as a handler, see if a sister-bond would keep me stable. And it worked.

“They picked him as a potential because he was good, because he had a history with me, and because on the surface, he was loyal- red-dead HYDRA, body and soul. But I could still smell him stressing every time my primary handlers got real rough with me- and the ones that tried anything further? Didn’t live real long. Had ‘accidents’. Took a couple demotions because they couldn’t prove enough to kill him, just that he hadn’t tried hard enough to save his superiors in a firefight. Shoulda tried harder? Yeah. Maybe. But in HYDRA, you don’t get to belong to yourself- you learn real fast how to hide everything, because it’s not just the outsiders who can’t see that you’re HYDRA- your superiors can’t see that you aren’t free of weakness and 100% theirs. I taught him that. And no banding together- if your friends, your subordinates don’t practice weak-link protocol with a vengeance, then the big, bad, Winter Soldier’ll come and wipe out everyone in your department who doesn’t toe the line.
“We stole each other. Just a little bit. As much as we could afford to. One-sided both ways, but we each had a reason to hang on again, when we coulda just let the tide roll over and wash it all away. That’s how I lasted this long, Stevie. Why I wasn’t just eliminated ten years ago as a liability, just in time to miss you comin’ back. If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t be here… and if it weren’t for me, he wouldn’t be here either.”

“And so I went looking for him, after the tower fell, because even with all the other shit, even without smelling the pup on him- I needed someone who understood. And he does, even if he doesn’t realize it. How it gets into you, stains you, becomes part of you- how they get you to help make your own chains.”

Their fingers are locked together, tight enough to hurt, and Bucky risks a look up at Steve again. His alpha’s breathing in, mouth locked tight- slow and careful, and out again the same way, the kind of I am handling this, I am handling this, look at me handle pattern when you cannot understand but you must accept.

“The Soldier’s part of who I am. Brock knows how to handle it, handle me when I get like that- and without the kid gloves. Doesn’t make me feel like-" he already knows he’s a monster, but with Brock he doesn’t feel out of control- “Please. Please give this a chance. I’m not deluded. I’m not under a spell.”

“Do you trust him?” Steve’s face is hard, his jaw set- but the pull in his mouth says it’s a jagged, bitter thing to swallow.

“If I didn’t think I could, Steve- he’d be dead.”

And Bucky feels his words run out, just like that, just- clamps his mouth shut, biting his lips as he steps closer and buries his face in the crook of Steve’s neck, breathing deep. He needs- he needs his alpha, right now. Just that.

“It’s not your responsibility to-“

A metal fingertip reaches up and presses to his Stevie’s lips, and the most James can muster is a wordless grumble to try and encapsulate you’re one to talk about takin’ the weight of the world and I want to and we can none of us go back.

His throat feels dry and raspy, and when he reaches for the words anyway, tries to summon something up, nope, that’s done it- the well’s gone dry. It’s gonna be fun in Interview tomorrow. But his mate seems to get it, enough for now at least, and wraps James up warm in his arms. And the heart in his chest, the pulse in his throat beats home, home, home.

Chapter End Notes

To Bofurrific and Andartha, heart and bones. Sorry for the long interval, folks, RL got a wee bit busy- but now Bucky gets his big chance in the spotlight!

Thank you all for continuing to read, enjoy, and comment, you all make my day.
Tumblr gonna tumbl - now with more art! Just look under the tag 'fic: Fools Rush In'
They’re still cuddled up on Steve’s bed when JARVIS gives the discreet word, even as Bucky’s ears prick up when Ben’s soft fussing starts. Bucky pulls away and heads for the room he shares with Brock, giving his still-sleeping omega sister a quick glance as he passes through the living room on his way to the nursery. The fact that the ex-agent hasn’t woken up yet at Ben’s little distressed noises speaks to the bone-deep weariness that’s been eating away at him.

Steve follows. Watches in wonder as Bucky pulls aside his layers, and lets Ben latch on after a quick check of the diaper.

Ben- tiny little handful of person that he is- settles into Bucky’s arms and gets on with the important business of feeding himself. Bucky cradles the back of his head, metal fingers covered with a pulled-down sleeve, and looks up at Steve with a tired smile after he tries to hum and only comes up with a few rasped sounds.

You don’t have to apologize, Steve thinks, and carefully closes in. Leans his forehead on Bucky’s, smells his mate and his infant son. Feels just a little bit of that sweet rush from earlier wash over him again, the feeling of being home with his bonded, and he thinks his heart’s swollen in his chest, blocking his throat.

This place smells of Brock as well, smokey apple blending with Bucky’s wool-tobacco-gunpowder to paint some kind of idealistic scent-portrait of fall, and it’s never felt so right before.

If he could, he’d grab onto this moment and hold it forever, find a way to show it clear as a bell and picture-perfect, even if no one ever saw it but them. The argument has already started in his head- charcoal’s too bleak, maybe watercolor in blues and greys to capture the cool light, but there has to be warmth in it as well-

- but he can feel it die away, the image shifting again as Bucky looks up at him, eyes expectant. All he can do is swallow, throat tight, and steady himself like a tight-rope walker on a windy day.

“What do you need me to do?”

“…bond. You’n’him,” Bucky whispers, glancing past the nursery door, before looking down and licking his lips after. He starts to gesture with his free hand briefly, a C like when Clint has his aids out and is spelling, then lowers it with a frown. Not enough hands. But he switches, holding his fingers upright and spread and taps against his chin- then hurries into another sign, hand squared off like an unclosed fist at chest-height, pressing it outward like a little push-broom.

Talk. Communicate, something. Try to get along, move forward.

James grimaces when he’s finished, curls both arms around Ben, embarrassed at his stumbling. Who knows when or how he learned this language, it might all be out of date, but it’s the best he’s got right now. JARVIS holds his tongue, but Steve’s watching, frowning, putting it together. And as the penny drops, Buck watches as Steve breathes in, slowly, and lets it go the same way. Sees his eyes go soft, chin go determined.
“I will,” he says, and Bucky smiles.

Another mission gone perfectly right, Brock thinks, and can’t understand why he’s nauseous.

“You’ve done good. Relax, it’s gonna be okay,” he whispers against the Soldier’s cold and sweaty temple, before pulling away as the big machine whirs to life. Metal clamps down, and ozone fills the air as tendons stand out all over the Asset’s body, back arching in a silent, buzzing scream.

The one eye left exposed rattles and rolls in the Soldier’s head- before narrowing straight at him, wide and bright and accusing, making bile rise in his throat.

There’s tears running from under the machine’s half-mask, and he can see Jamie in the way the exposed eye clenches up with despair, the brow tilting high in disbelief.

Brock feels sickly hollow inside, like someone’s come and scooped out everything that matters, and the headache that’s springing up behind his eyes echoes menacingly in the abyss that’s already there, waiting to swallow him whole.

There’s no answer for the Soldier in that void, in him.

One of the techs turns and looks at him, nasty speculation springing up in the man’s eyes, and cold creeps along his skin. Handler or no, Brock’s been lingering too long already. As he turns and walks, the usual thin, high wail starts up, the one that makes his heart beat faster, the keen that’s not even a proper scream just tired and pain and grief until it suddenly cuts off-

Darkness. Disorientation. Shifting fog that roils like a jungle mist, until it settles once more.

The last STRIKE mission was tough as nails in the planning, but went butter-smooth in the execution and he and his whole team are catching some well-deserved R&R. Whelan and Asena have gone scuba-diving, Delgado’s trying to catch up with every art exhibit at the Mall in DC, and Hayes has gone to visit his sister and her brood. Jack’s having one of his rare indulgences with a cute red-headed escort (easier, safer, he says) at his apartment, while Callahan’s parents have badgered him into going and playing golf with them.

As for Brock- he’s feeling great, the best that he has in ages. Date night, not that he’ll ever admit to thinking of it that way, is going fine. Steve laughs, loud and genuine, and the beer is cold, the chips crunchy and fresh as they burn through another few episodes of old-school Trek. Steve’s arm is heavy around his shoulders and Brock elbows him to make room on the couch, and they end up wrestling for it, Kirk and Bones and Spock forgotten on the screen.

It feels like he’s twelve and giddy with it, a grown-ass soldier trying not to come off like he’s writing endless loops of ‘Brock Rogers’ in his diary at night. Steve just laughs at his bluster, nuzzles the stubble on his face and they have to declare an armistice with the tickling, because seriously, no, they are neither of them explaining to Nick Fury why the good captain’s expense account is buying Brock a new couch, again…

Hands slide down backs, oh god, oh GOD, and it’s hot, burning in the night, sweet and real and perfect. Maybe they don’t break the furniture this time- but he’s flying nonetheless.

Afterwards, he comes down from the high, eyes closed, and Steve is still above him- and it should be reassuring, the lingering warmth of alpha still wrapped around him like a blanket, but the flesh he’s
touching is suddenly clammy, cooling like a fresh corpse. The sticky wetness between them smells of copper rot, not musk.

He can’t open his eyes, doesn’t want to, and with frantic hands tries to shake Steve awake, but his… his… Steve’s not moving, the comforting presence turned into a dead weight pinning Brock in place. His fingers fly, trying to find out if Steve’s still breathing, find a pulse, the kiss he presses desperately to Steve’s temple tastes of blood and there’s nothing, nothing, Steve’s GONE-

Brock wakes with a startled yell dying stifled in his throat, arching half-way off the couch, cheeks wet with tears and covered in cold sweat. He’s bound in cloth, fights it off until he’s standing, panting- only to bend down and claw it back again once he catches the waft of mates woven into the cloth, and he heaves in the scent as his gaze rattles around the darkened room, bouncing from corner to corner.

The kitchen corner with the breakfast table, with Ben’s mobile crib on the side.

The coffee table, with Steve’s sketch-pad and the old, chipped mug with his pencils sitting in the middle of it.

Outside the window, the panoramic view of New York, hard edges snow-softened and the lights blinking like little stars in the night.

Quiet. No danger.

No threat.

Bullshit, he thinks, and his pulse is still racing wild because he knows this isn’t over yet.

The rocking chair’s a cozy place to rest, even if you can’t sleep. Steve’s finding that out as he carefully watches Bucky and Ben in the nesting bed, the two of them having fallen asleep right after nursing. The faint creak doesn’t seem to disturb them, and he can only wish for all such nights to be as peaceful.

Then the muffled cry coming from the living room reaches his ears, and a faint reek of distress spills through the open door. Not so peaceful as he’d thought, then.

Steve gets up and quietly slips into the living room, where he finds the older omega standing beside the couch, body tense, braced for fight or flight. He hasn’t made any great effort to muffle his footsteps on the carpet and Brock turns toward the sound, letting Steve catch sight of the omega’s panic-filled eyes.

Brock flinches as Steve steps closer, and so he holds still. For a moment the room is perfectly quiet, save for Brock’s harsh breathing.

In the end, it’s Steve who breaks the silence, voice whisper-soft.

“Hey,” he says, every movement painfully gentle. “What’s up?”

Brock takes in a shuddering breath, averts his eyes, only to look up again, body gone motionless and voice hoarse.
“I… there was…” And that’s as much as makes it out before he breaks off, switching gears and gathering himself up, shoulders tight. Whatever else he was going to say- it’s been stowed away now.

Honesty is still not the best policy, it seems.

“Ben? Is he-? …I… it’s gotten so late, he needs… I shoulda-”

Brock is stammering and Steve feels like a rug’s been pulled out beneath him, like he ought to start checking the mirrors for goatees and eyepatches, like this is some science-fiction show parallel universe.

The Brock he knows is a cocky bastard, truly believing that he’s unstoppable and always coming up swinging no matter how bad things get, wearing a trademark shit-eating grin. (If he had weaknesses, he’d kept them securely locked away. At best, Steve would get a few minutes of Brock curling into his touch, allowing Steve to be his comfort, but only when no one was watching. The need to be taken care of, solidly partnered and gently reassured? Not something the CO of a STRIKE unit could admit to wanting, even after the storm had passed.)

Don’t gotta worry about me, Cap, I’m no sofie.

But now?

The omega in front of him has been leaking grey distress and bone-deep worry and grief, bravado cracking like concrete walks over tree-roots ever since they’d brought him and Bucky back in. And it’s never been more evident than here and now, as Brock’s arms grasp around the empty space in them, his eyes red and wet and wide. White-ringed.

(Like an old horse tangled in its reigns, stuck to a plow that had been left in the field when the people ran. They’d had to shoot it, damn thing had broken its leg in its struggles- Farnsworth had done the deed, whispering in the old gelding’s ears before the crack of the pistol shot. He had the experience for the job, he’d said- fox-hunting was dangerous business. A young, and foolish, man’s game.)

To see Brock like this… it’s a harsh juxtaposition to the man Steve thought he knew, and it leaves him reeling, trying to get his bearings in a dozen different ways, big and small. He has to clamp down on the urge, the desperate need to clasp the omega close.

He’s not my mate. Not really. Not where it matters.

Doesn’t change the too-familiar pull of comfortuzzlePROTECT- jerking at his guts like an impatient puppet-master, threatening to tear him up. Like when he and Bucky were fresh out of the horror that was Zola’s lab, and the dreams had preyed silently on Buck until he was sullen and grey, holding himself together until he could collapse in his alpha’s arms- and Steve could barely resist the urge to pick him up over his shoulders, carry him off to some quiet place where they could just be.

But he has long-standing practice, not giving in to the constraints and demands his body tries to impose on him, and biology isn’t destiny, it would be a sin to force it falsely. Bond, Buck had asked, come to an understanding, but this is too far, too fast- a precipice he can’t let himself fall down or he’ll never climb back up.

And yet-

I will not let this stand. The misery, the fear-

Not a true mate… but still mine. My responsibility.
Scenting the blankets had been a good start, but it clearly wasn’t enough to calm Brock when he woke up alone, struggling out of the hold of sleep. Maybe he and Buck should have moved him into the bedroom- Steve files it away for future reference, but no help now. Just have to roll with the punches and reassure his not-quite-bondmate, awakened from nightmares and worried for their child, the best he can.

“Bucky fed him. They’re both asleep now.”

For a moment- nothing.

Stillness, and then- just a lick of the lips, a very small nod that’s more a jerk of the head. Brock’s not coming out of whatever shook him up easy, and just like that. He’s got that frozen-deer stillness, Steve’s seen it too often. Sometimes in the mirror.

The things you can’t let out, the blood you can’t let spill onto other people. But here and now is one of the between-times, the cracks between night and morning when the mask got left on your bedside and all the worldly, weary things leak out.

*He’s just as bad off as any other soldier, who’s seen and heard and done too much.*

Don’t crowd. Don’t startle.

*Don’t*, for the love of all that’s holy- don’t growl at enemies that aren’t there.

Alpha still says to snatch him up in a warm embrace, ease the fear from his eyes, kiss the breath back into him. Experience, and the bitter knowledge that what his arms ache to do would be feeding into an unwanted bond, says to ease him back to the here and now.

Steve inches closer, crouches some, so that they’re mostly eye to eye.

“Easy there. Everything’s all clear. Ben and Bucky are in bed, in your room. Do you want to go to bed too?”

It takes Brock almost a minute to answer.

“…yeah. Yeah, I’d like that,” Brock whispers, but just stands there, like he’s waiting for permission, and since when did Brock Rumlow, an omega who’d worked his way up against all odds to command one of the most elite military teams of alphas and betas on the planet, ask for permission in his life?

Steve steps back, giving him some more room, and Brock hesitantly takes the first few steps, with Steve providing escort- picking up the trailing end of the plaid blanket that Brock has pulled around his shoulders, doesn’t say anything when the other man wraps it protectively around himself like a shawl. Not even when he buries his face in the folds for a few seconds, inhaling deeply like a suffocating man who’s just found air again.

The way is short, the walk to the destination slow- but once they reach the bed, where Bucky and Ben are breathing quietly and peacefully as they sleep, Steve steps over, pulls back the edge of the covers, and tilts his head in question.

Brock stares a moment more, like he’s trying to figure out this new trick, and then just shakes his head as if trying to tell himself to stop being ridiculous. He slips in, curling up on the outer edge, away from Bucky and from Ben in his little balcony bed. The sight of it gives Steve the jitters, like
silence on the coms when someone should be responding.

He has to bite his tongue to keep from commenting. Not his place to ask, and there might be a good reason. Nightmares could leave Rumlow wanting to stay away—not wanting to flail out in his sleep and hurt someone. Another thing Steve knows too well, though it hadn’t come up much in the last few years. His mind is always more focused in the field—and back when he’d stayed the night with Brock…

Well, it’s amazing what a good orgasm will do to shut up your hind-brain. A dose of mate-bond, knowing or not, only enhances it, especially if you’re oblivious to both the connection and the side-order of treason that’s about to be served soon after.

*Understanding is becoming- possible. Forgiveness is a long way off.*)

Steve is about to turn to leave, certain he’d not be welcome if he tried for a sleep-well cuddle, hell, not sure if he should, and on top of that needing those last few hours of sleep himself, when Rumlow speaks up.

“Rogers.”

He glances back, and Brock is blinking, looking more awake than he has since the couch. The scarred man clears his throat, eyes bright in the dark.

“He- look,” Brock says, glancing at Bucky’s sleeping form, then back to Steve. He looks small, bundled into the plaid and a body’s width away from his sister-mate and his infant.

“In the woods, he could always just… walk away. When he didn’t- feel up to being human. Just walk miles and miles without seeing a soul. He can’t do that here.” Trapped. “I know it’s not real likely that Stark can grow an entire forest on the roof, but- is there something,” he says, gesturing fruitlessly. “A conservatory, a- a big-ass aquarium even? Someplace quiet, with living things that aren’t targets.”

Steve pauses at the door, thinks- resolves to find exactly that for Bucky. He could use that rest.

They could all use it.

“I can find out.”

Stark Tower, it turns out, has both. Large enough for each to have their own dedicated curators, in fact. On Tony’s hearing about it, the atrium turns out to be off-limits to visitors four days out of the week, just so happening to start today.

The windows are tall and gleaming, morning-bright with a brief break of sunlight through the winter clouds as Steve holds open the door, and the sun-imitating bulbs make up for the lack when they close again. With a wordless kiss, Bucky disappears into the thick display of trees, sheltering in the shadows they cast.

The sandwiches that Brock set out before heading to his own interview go with him.

Chapter End Notes
To Bofurrific and Andartha, heart and bones. And thank you to everyone who reads, likes, and especially comments - you all make my day.

Tumblr gonna tumbl- in general you'll find cat gifs and 2AM ramblings, but under tags 'fic: fools rush in' and 'company of fools' you'll find sketches, discussion, meta and apocrypha.

In other art news! Art of Fools Rush In has been added to the series Company Of Fools, and will contain drawings and sketches relevant to this fic! Check it out!

Next up: a brief interlude with someone we haven't seen in a while...
In a hole in the wall, there lives a giant.

‘Lives’ is a strong word, Jack thinks, sipping piss-cheap bourbon from a chipped glass and grimacing- more like sitting around, waiting for intel and trying to process what you’ve already got, just what he needed. And hole in the wall might be pushing it for class. There’s a subtle difference between a local watering-hole and a local dive, and Jack’s not certain his dipshit of a contact- who picked this place and is actually running late- understands it. The lighting is low, the drinks are shit, and the men’s room smells nastier than some cells he’s been in.

But it’s as good a place as any to collect your thoughts. At this hour, late-noon on a work-day, it’s mainly a few hardcore drinkers manning their stools at the bar and a few of the tables. Anyone here is working on quietly destroying their livers, one glass of cheap drink at a time- nobody bothers anybody, with the rare and unwelcome exception of a tipsy, white-haired farmer complaining loudly to the bored-looking bartender about his project-truck getting stolen last spring.

“Wife won’t let me hear the end of it- ‘ten years you leave that thing sit, and finally, when someone does us the favor of getting’ that eye-sore off our property, then you get all fired up about it-!’”

Usually the middle-aged and gum-chewing waitress (Doris, there’s almost always a Doris for some reason) would come by and ask people if they’d like another one, but Jack wants peace and quiet to sort his own thoughts- so he doesn’t bother to keep a lid on the silent rage rolling off his shoulders, the kind that can clear a space around you for a table’s length or more without a single word. Nobody, not even the waitress, wants to be around that much murder-minded alpha, sitting around and sipping their way through a bottle of Wild Turkey- and he is that.

The a torn-up note that brought him here is sitting deep in one of his pockets (can’t leave evidence lying around) but he’s been more than ready to rip someone a new one ever since he got it five hours ago. Shame that’d attract unwanted attention, since there’s still an APB out for him dyed hair and altered features or no- so Wild Turkey it is instead.

Damn you, Taggert. For knowing, for not telling us, and for sending us anyway. And damn you too, Steve Rogers, he thinks, and knocks back the rest.

It’s been over half a year, and instead of resolving itself the crap they’re in only seems to get deeper and deeper. And things hadn’t even looked that bad at the beginning. But looking back… fuck if there hadn’t been a million little things that should have tipped him off that it was all about to go FUBAR in a hurry.

……

“You okay?” His CO’s been twitchy the last couple days- well who wouldn’t be? They’re about to change the goddamn world.

“I’m fine.”

“You sure?”
“For fuck’s sake, Rollins!” Brock barks. He’s wringing a towel between his hands, twisting it in his fists just to keep his fingers occupied. “I’m not some sitcom omega on the rag, I’m perfectly fucking clear-headed!”

Jack hunches his shoulders, knowing he’s overstepped. Brock’s one of the very few omegas on a STRIKE team, and just about the only one to make it up to commander instead of being the Team’s medic. It’s real hard to argue with rank, but there’s still some assholes out there dumb enough to try, certain that a ‘lower’ designation couldn’t possibly keep up.

Once upon a time, he’d been that idiot, and Brock had had to set him to rights. His thumb rubs over the scar at his chin as he searches for the words, the always elusive words that’ll make things right between them, again.

“Sorry, boss,” he says. “Antsy, is all. Doesn’t get any better when I see my CO sweat, too.” A moment’s pause, and he adds-

“Pretty sure that towel is well and truly strangled by now.”

Brock throws it at the overflowing locker-room hamper, standing up as he sees it bounce off onto the floor and finally waving a hand dismissively as he sits back down again. His eyes are narrowed and his brow pinched like he’s coming onto one of his headaches, and Jack makes note to keep the aspirin handy.

“Quit bein’ a worry-wart. We got this, Jack… we got this.”

At that last bit Brock’s voice fades into a harsh whisper, and Jack really has to tamp down on the snarl building deep in his chest.

Like fuck we do.

It’s that fucking Rogers. Jack was- as okay with the man as one could get, knowing he was a target and a mission and nothing more. But in the last year he’d watched Brock get so fucking gone over the guy that he’d wanted to snap the other alpha’s neck. Make it look like an accident, maybe- the rest of the Team would’ve helped out in a heartbeat. Brothers looked out for sisters, and Brock was THEIRS. Nevermind that he’d for certain already had enough trouble from oblivious blonde alphas in his life, and every time Jack’d seen his CO getting giddy over date-night he’d been tempted to call in the rest of the unit and just grab their omega off to one of the safe-houses (HYDRA, not SHIELD) that their Team used to den in after the really bad missions.

But he can’t do that. Rogers has an interest, and Brock has precisely no chill when it comes to a bunch of alphas trying to protect him or tell him what to do, and they all know the higher-ups approve of this whole… thing, with Brock and Steve. Jack’s asking to get reamed if he fucks it up. As long as at least a part of Rogers’ attention is focused on the dark-haired firecracker he’s working with, happy or not, he’s less likely to focus on- other things.

And it’s not like Rogers’ll even be around for much longer.

He’s a target. He’s a dead man walking. And as long as Brock is still with the program on that…

(Don’t get caught up, bro, don’t lose your head. For therein lies the road to damnation…)

…..

STRIKE Unit Alpha already had plenty of rep- when you’re the best of the best of the normies (oh if only they knew), nobody asks questions when they see the guys pulling an all-nighter, poker or pool
or taking the pre-dawn shift in the gym. And if these happened to coincide with those nights when their CO was off making up to Captain Spangles… well, who was to say. They still got the job done.

At the time, he’d just blamed it on being worried, on being quietly afraid that Brock was wavering. And who wouldn’t worry about that? Weak-link protocol… the last time Alpha had had to run it on one of their own had been almost a decade ago, but they drill it into your head, hammer it into your bones. Always, you watch for the one most likely to break.

(Sanchez had been a good kid. A little too good- and not far-sighted enough to work out in the long run. Garrett had congratulated them on their performance at the funeral, and one doesn’t contradict the greatest recruiter in HYDRA history with genuine tearful questions of ‘why did he have to go’. Whelan still kept Sanchez’s favorite book squirreled away in the depths of his trunk, and thank God that could be passed off as a trophy.)

But if it hadn’t been that…

Brock was religious with the neutralizer, they all were- eat lightly, sleep when you can, always wrap it up and don’t leave a trail if you can help it, these are the things you learn in this life. But you work with someone that closely, there’s going to be some leak-through. And Jack can remember the way his dad and his uncle would hover around his aunt when she was newly pregnant; they’d snarl at anything and anyone that seemed like a threat or a bother to her, even before she’d thumped both their ears and made the big announcement once and for all.

(There’s a little part of him that whispers, no wonder they were all up in arms. No wonder, no fucking wonder.)

There’d been high-fives and grins traded behind Rogers’ back when Brock had finally broken it off, even though Rumlow got snarly when he caught them at it. Back then seeing Rogers’ miserable expression as his lost-puppy eyes trailed after their CO, seemingly unfazed and cocky as ever, had been enough to make their whole day. No weak link here, they’d been able to report with straight faces, not when Brock had been itching-ready to throw the first punch in the elevator and only Jack stepping in had prevented him from taking that honor. No subversive activity, when Jack had watched Brock stroke the Asset’s hair after, muttering soothing words through bruised lips because it was acting up and nobody else could make it behave. “Three holes, start digging,” and Jack had been SURE he was going to see another day with his brother at his side.

But then the Triskellion had fallen and they’d been separated in the chaos, forced to go on the run-not their first rodeo on separate paths, but certainly their longest and worst… and then the whispers had started up. Rumors that the higher-ups wanted to get ahold of Rumlow real bad, and not just because he was one of their finest and they needed the manpower.

SOP said they should’ve sent Brock’s Team after him if it was a regular retrieval… but they hadn’t.

The grapevine had all kinds of Teams going after Rumlow- but they left STRIKE Alpha to cool their heels, doing anything and everything from babysitting a high-ranking Russian HYDRA oligarch’s teenage son to a near-suicide mission in Borneo, stealing some new wonder-drug from a bunch of AIM scientists and their bodyguards.

STRIKE Alpha’s members all still had a few favors here and there- couple twisted arms, a little bribery. They’d wanted to know why the higher-ups had sent out teams, but not Rumlow’s own right off the bat.

No dice.
Whatever was going on, it was Top Secret, the kind where gossiping about it to anyone who wasn’t cleared could get you a one-way ticket to the Research Centers, maybe even the Pit itself. There weren’t enough bribes in the world to get someone in the know to risk that.

Without word from their CO, not even through one of their dead drops or hidden channels nobody but them knew about, and no proper intel from the higher-ups, the Team was antsy and adrift. On edge didn’t begin to describe it. Asena had given Whelan a shiner five months back; Hayes had broken his knuckles punching at a wall in frustration only three weeks ago. They were dedicated, highly-trained professionals, not moody fucking amateurs—this wasn’t them.

When they’d finally, finally gotten their marching orders on Monday, the whole team had been almost ready to kiss Taggert. They’d split up, following old and new leads that others had sniffed out but hadn’t been able to follow up on.

His part led him here, looking for a Team that disappeared around about the time Brock would have been through, if he’d taken this route. The results of his research have left him sitting in a bar, having tracked in grave-dirt from an un-marked, hastily re-filled site that was home to seven months-old corpses, their broken HYDRA trackers and not much else.

Not much else tangible, anyway- but once he’d identified the agents, he’d done a quick check of the data they’d had in the secure HYDRA cloud. And now he’s knocking back bourbon like it’s going out of style, because in the last forty-eight hours before they’d been slaughtered, four of the seven had been bookmarking pages about omega nesting behavior, pregnancy, and neonatal care.

Christ All-fuckin’-mighty.

No. Fucking. Wonder.

It’s been seven months since Insight failed, and at least eight since the break-up. When STRIKE catches up with Brock- and they will, because they’re HYDRA’s fucking elite and not just their status but their lives depend on it… Brock could be heavily pregnant. He could have already whelped, be carting around a pup or two.

No chance. Easy target. For anyone.

And their new CO, Taggert, could have informed them of this precious bit of intel during the briefing. Brock would’ve done so— he believes in giving his team what they need to succeed and to survive while doing it, to the very edge of what he was allowed and sometimes just the barest hint beyond it. Taggert, on the other hand, is of the school that treating them like mushrooms and keeping them in the dark will get better results. Asshole has a rep for thinking that keeping a Team on their toes at all times and worrying they might be on the chopping block is the best motivation for them to make the grade.

Despite how much this all sucks— the thought that Brock might have a bun in the oven is something like a relief. It’s the perfect explanation for why he didn’t contact them; he’s just laying low somewhere, like a good little agent, trying to keep his head down until the dust settles and the contacts come up out of their holes again. It’s a notion Jack could get comfy with.

If the evidence is pointing true north, and Brock really is carrying such valuable cargo… that’s not something you give anyone but a firmly established Head access to. Instituting new leadership after an upheaval like this can be… bumpy… and you don’t want to end up reduced to someone’s bargaining chip. Especially not if they’re on a losing side.

Another explanation, Jack chews over as he reaches the bottom and pours a new glass, could be that
Brock’s been captured. And if that’s the case, and he’s not dead- like a good little agent should be- it’s because he knows he’s got something valuable that HYDRA will want.

Jack snorts and takes a long, long swallow of bourbon, and it burns its way all the way down to his gut, like swallowing bleach. Valuable. Fuck.

You don’t get to have hard limits- says so right in the oath, anything and everything may be asked of me. But they do tend to try and use an individual’s flaws to best advantage. Jack knows how valuable family is to Brock, knows about the little girl he’d lost, not even baptized with a name, the secret thing he tells no one.

Jack could live with this being Brock’s weakness, so long as it wasn’t a fatal one. Hell, he’d had jack-all for family past a certain point growing up, and the kids still never sat right with him or the others either.

There haven’t been many, but in a life-long career of doing the dark, dirty work- it comes up. Child soldiers. Dumb kids looking to protect their parents when they crossed the wrong org and can’t even protect themselves. A hostage. An asset to be acquired, with genes that could be useful.

But orders are orders. They all knew sacrifices needed to be made, and everybody’s lives were on the line in the fight for a better future, willing or no. It shouldn’t- it doesn’t matter that this is Brock’s kid.

Doesn’t matter that this is practically Jack’s niece or nephew.

A kid.

Definitely, more to worry about than Brock’s temporary crush on Cap.

Good tacticians, successful strategists don’t lie to themselves- that gets people killed. So even if he doesn’t want it to be true, he has to admit that the Team’s faced with nothing but shitty outcomes.

Brock being dead.

Brock being a traitor, throwing aside everything they’ve worked and bled and died for in the last few decades- and them having to bring him down as a matter of honor.

And no matter which way the wind blows- if Brock’s pulling a long game before coming back with a bounty in arms or has thrown them over for whatever the fates hold outside- if there is a kid, it will end with them handing over their STRIKE-brother’s, their omega-sister’s child to their bosses. At best, to be raised as a pet soldier. Most likely, to be taken apart, searching for a way to turn the results into a weapon that will help them win the war and finally, finally bring an end to this.

And the shameful thing, the thing no one else within HYDRA can know- is that in his heart of hearts, Jack doesn’t know which is worse. A loyal Team wouldn’t care much one way or the other- but they do.

It doesn’t matter. They know what they have to do- it’s Brock that’s the wild card here, out of touch and out of bounds.

Please, please don’t have done anything stupid, Jack prays between gritted teeth, pressing the glass to his forehead, not even sure what exactly “stupid” is at the moment, but knowing that it’s completely out of his hands. Chances are… no. Just no.

And that’s not even the worst of it. Under the rest of the whole heaping shit-pile that’s about to come barreling down, there’s… something else.
Even at full strength, Brock would have had a hard time taking on a full Team, one on seven- and the bodies Jack had found, with knife-marks down to the bone, rib-cages shattered like they’d been kicked by a bionic mule… Jack’s seen corpses like these, and they spell ‘Asset.’

And if the Soldier is with Brock-

Winter’s got no reason to be happy with his handler, special connection be damned. He’s bound to be off his rocker, angry about what he’s done under HYDRA’s command and what’s been done to him- and there’s not a single reason on this earth to stop him from taking that out on Brock, fat up and helpless with a baby that should have been Barnes’s…

(The change in media restrictions, not even a whisper of Cap’s reemergence from the ice to be allowed around the Asset, had been what finally confirmed that little tidbit. The length of his history with HYDRA and the similarity to certain text-book pictures were enough for hushed murmurs and speculation around the privileged few that knew his face- but it was just one of the many, many things you Did Not Talk About. In the days before Insight, Whelan’d made some comment, “ironic, huh,” and Brock had just nodded, eyes not really seeing. “Yep.”)

-and there’s no reason not to think it was Rogers’ get, not with the way Brock had been, loveydovey over Captain Fucking America. The team had noticed, the subtle signs of ‘undue attachment’ causing uncomfortable ribbing and a few real, worried looks. Their superiors had noticed, which is why Brock had put the kibosh on it.

Jack has a hard time breathing when he imagines the Soldier, angry and unstable, catching up with his former CO and the most familiar face from his days as HYDRA’s pet strategic nuke- only to find that he’s knocked up and reeking of his mate. With said CO probably in no condition to fight, either-on a good day, Brock or one of the other Enhanced could spar with him, but-

There’s a serious possibility the Asset might hurt Brock. No reason to think that he wouldn’t- that the overclocked omega couldn’t just keep Brock locked in a bunker somewhere, alone and unarmed, and when the time came, take the kid by force.

Jack’s seen those knife-skills up close. He doesn’t want to see them again.

…

The bottle’s half-empty when he resurfaces again, and his stomach is burning almost as bad as his eyes. The old man at the bar has found a few of his friends, and they’re all commiserating, thrifty wives being the bane of a man and his messy projects since the dawn of time. As Jack wearily checks his watch, they start in a round of ‘must’ve been someone moving through, Ol’ Bobby’s truck turned up missing a-’ at the same time.

Jack’s head whips around at that.

Chapter End Notes

My thanks to Bofurrific and Andartha, the heart and the bones. Whoo- sorry for the long intervals, folks, RL is being fun and exciting and omgwtfery abounds. Thank you all to those who read, enjoy, and especially comment- you all make my day.

Edit- Andartha is now credited as co-author, because her insight, editing and plotting
skills have gotten this story far beyond where it first began and the strength to carry on toward its fullest conclusion.

Tumblr gonna tumbl- catch me here for cat gifs and 2AM ramblings. Also art.
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Tower is full of bad dreamers and poor sleepers. Out of all them, Steve thinks Sam and Nat might be the closest to normal, and that’s because they both work at it, going to bed early and rising with the birds. After a night of tossing and turning, brief spates of sleep interrupted by visions that leave him sitting up, covered in cold sweat and dry-heaving-

(Brock side by side with Rollins, closing in on him, weapons held at the ready, bright red HYDRA logos visible on their suits, Bucky falling and screaming, Brock kneeling on the carpet in the living room, eyes wide and scared, cradling a ripped-open belly that drips blood on the sand-colored carpet- usually his brain doesn’t make things up, he just relives, but tonight he reenvisions-)

-he finds himself slinking up to the door of Nat’s suite, where Sam is also most likely to be, at 5 AM, hoping to catch the two of them on their way to their morning exercise routines.

Steve’s still cautious as he knocks. This thing that the two of them have, it’s a delicate dance of meet and part and meet again, and the last thing he wants to do is intrude on one of those moments, for Nat or Sam. The ones where there’s something keen and electric in the air, and you think you might have just stepped in a fairy-ring, watching something that wasn’t meant for your eyes.

And sometimes you simply don’t want to interrupt two friends having a good time.

Sam pulls open the door, looking Steve over. He’s in sweats, looking just sleepy enough to be starting the day and not ending the night.

“The new World Security Council gets up before noon now? Or is Barnes-”

“No. I need to talk to someone about Rumlow.”

Sam winces, and glances over his shoulder where Nat’s tousled head has popped up. She’s equally just-woken-up, but she reaches around Sam (he slides expertly to the left) and pokes at Steve’s bicep.

“About time. Come on, losers,” she says. “We’re going jogging.”

……..

Sam fiddles with the settings on his Fitbit, shooting Steve a glance from the side.

“So- Rumlow’s not dealing well. And he’s not coming to you about it, and even when you notice on your own, he’s not exactly comfortable with you taking care of him.” So far, nothing too unexpected, given Steve’s secondary status as one of Rumlow’s jailors.

“And you wouldn’t think that would be a problem, considering he tried to kill us all and officially forfeited his right to anything but four walls, three squares, medical and an hour of exercise a day.” The humane basics, by a certain definition. “He’s alive, which is a lot more than most people would say he’s owed. But you not being able to take care of him is getting under your skin, to the point
where you’re having nightmares.”

Steve nods, restless. The indoor track provides for those who don’t want to face New York slush, but he’s down to about half his usual laps and is now fidgeting with the new set of resistance bands Tony wanted him to test, not wanting to wear out his friends before he can talk to them. Sam motions for him to keep talking as he stretches, while Nat grabs water from the cooler.

“I just don’t know what to do anymore, much less what to believe,” Steve says. “I tell myself I don’t need to do anything about it, that this is just new-mother stuff, not- not too out of the ordinary, especially since I’m not- a full mate to him, the way I should be.” Not out of the ordinary at all. Omega moms, deep in feral-mode, could act pretty strange when they felt like they had to protect their children- and without being able to fully rely on his alpha and HYDRA still out there, Rumlow certainly could have reason to feel that way.

“Now if you really thought that, you wouldn’t be up here.”

“Oh, can’t I just visit a friend?” Steve starts to snark, and it falls about flat as a pancake. But Sam is one of the few who gets to see behind the shield, and he just looks expectantly until the other alpha crumbles, just that last little bit, and starts talking.

“Just… I didn’t quite expect him to have nightmares. The kind that leave you shaking and heartsick and crying. And I can’t just believe that he’s faking them- but what I can’t figure out is the WHY of it. I’m pretty sure this isn’t a problem the Red Skull ever dealt with- or Zola, or Pierce. Pretty sure it’s not something one of HYDRA’s finest should be struggling with.”

“Does it matter?” Sam’s real good at the soldier-to-soldier advice- and if he says so himself, decent at the alpha-to-alpha stuff too. This? This is a little further afield than he’s used to, and sometimes you have to tease the answers out of Rogers like burrs out of your hiking boots. So of course, that’s the crux of what needs doing. *Come on, man, tell me what’s really bugging you.*

“It- does. It kinda really does.”

Active listening is a great thing to practice while you’re working the hamstrings.

“Is it because we stopped HYDRA, when they were playing for keeps and lost? Is it because a building dropped on him? Or because he had to go on the run from his own while pregnant, and betraying them is what’s eating at him? Is he just that scared for his kid? I want to believe it’s because he’s starting to regret what he did-” and this is the part that seems to make Rogers have to swallow down bile, “…but what if every worst-case scenario we’ve painted is right- and he’s trying to get me to lower my guard? So he can stab us in the back later? I was the one who initiated, but everything after-”

Nat’s listening intently. That kind of enthusiasm can be faked- but for most people that sort of chameleoning is hard.

Sam breathes his way through a stretch, coming up out of it before sighing and rubbing a hand over his face.

“Based on what I’m seeing and what you’re telling me, and without knowing any more- the best answer I can give you is ‘maybe?’”

Rogers looks pained, heaves a deep sigh that has Sam wincing in sympathy, the blonde alpha’s eyes lowered to the ground.

“Steve- you’re mated to the man. So it’s to be expected you’d be sensitive when he’s in distress,
but…”

He shoots Nat a glance, thinks of the little talk they’ve had, the key she’d handed him. The nights when she feels safer, feels like he’s safer, when she’s cuffed to a bedpost. Red Room training does not make for a fun bedtime story.

“…nightmares and trauma and regret don’t necessarily mean that he’s one of the good guys now. It sounds like classic PTSD- maybe some post-partum depression.” He won’t dismiss the shit a man’s gone through- but what he’s done doesn’t disappear overnight. Even with a cute little critter in arms. “So Rumlow’s caused hell and havoc, and gone through it. Lost people he knew, even if they weren’t worth spit. And with a new baby to look after- there’s not gonna be a whole lot of restful nights for a while, so not a lot of room to process.

“What I’m seeing here- as your friend- is an enemy defector in your house, a haywire bond, and baby drama. What I’m not seeing is your obligation to be the one to fix things for him. If I was to tell you the sensible way to go about things, it would be to get the guy therapy, remove yourself and Barnes from this increasingly sticky situation as soon as possible, and don’t let your knot overrule your head when it comes to dangerous people.”

“You think bringing in a therapist is going to help?” Steve comes from the days of repressing your problems until a sanitorium looks like a good option, and Sam knows, he knows how it can be easier to try and live around it, adapt to new times and new tech rather than talk about it. But this is not the old days.

“SOP. It’s clear that he needs it, and it’s been on the list from day one anyway. And since Tony’s footing the bill for everything around here, I figure it’s not a matter of finding someone in-network. Look, Steve- he can talk with someone neutral, maybe work some shit out. It doesn’t have to be you.”

Rogers is creaking the exercise bands to their limit like some folks would fiddle with a coin or a card to work out their nerves. Sam works it around in his head a bit, decides to push a little bit more.

“I’m serious, Steve- the research says scent therapy should be enough to help him stay healthy for his kid, and for what he’s said he wants to do. Your instincts are telling you that he’s in a rough spot and that you, as his alpha, need to DO something about it- but instinct’s not reliable here. He doesn’t necessarily need it to be you taking care of him, beyond the basics. They’ve got separation therapies now, Steve- for real, the bond could be dissolved and it would be a lot less trouble for both of you. No one would blame you if you eased yourself out of this mess, washed your hands of him. You owe this guy nothing, and neither does Barnes.”

The band creaks dangerously, and Steve turns his head to the bank of windows, looking like he’s been slapped. It takes him a full minute to turn back to Sam, and, not unexpectedly, there’s pain in his eyes.

“Bucky- he asked me to bond with him…”

“-but Bucky’s not exactly objective about this. And the moment he asks for something, neither are you.”

“And neither am I,” Steve says, tight and bitter. Because he can’t be. Because when it’s down to his own choices, with no one else caught in the crossfire- or at least very few, if you consider the kid, and Rumlow so far is all about protecting that kid- he’s an alpha in the throes of bond withdrawal, and more, because beyond the shield, he’s Steve. Who has to take care of his people, and when he can’t, it’s slowly killing him.
Nat speaks up at last, looking at Steve softly. “With some of the therapies out there, you could both learn to live without Rumlow. It might even be better for all of you in the long run, not depending on the presence of a former handler- or asset- anymore.”

The smile Steve gives her is a sad, twisted affair, flat as a bad joke at a funeral. And yes, on his end, it makes it a little easier to breathe, knowing that he has them both at his back, doing their damnedest to give him an out. But at the same time, there’s that sinking feeling in his stomach- because this is beyond duty. It’s not just alpha and omega, or because Bucky asked.

Because despite the horrible, horrible sense of what Nat and Sam are saying- it’s still there. That desperate, pulsing need, and he can’t bring himself to tear it out by the roots completely.

Steve’s not one given to visions, has never really, truly believed in the power to see the future- but what comes to him, clear as a bell, clear as memory, is the sort of thing that takes you by the throat and demands that you look.

- the sympathy for a national hero trapped in misbonded hell is deep, but it has its limits. The legal system favors restorative justice- but compassionate sentencing is for those deemed good candidates. A lone omega, whose bonds are near-severed and whose remorse is judged insufficient and false in comparison to the horror of his attempted crimes, does not qualify. The debate does not last long. Steve is not pleased once he learns about the prison, one of those secrets tucked away that nobody wants but everybody knows exists- but in some ways, it’s the safest place for Rumlow. He holds their son, promises to care for him- and watches as the door slides shut, sealing the omega away.

Ben calls Bucky ‘mama’. Steve teaches him to walk, to run, to stand up. For himself, and others. Bucky teaches him to smile, and it hurts and trembles, waiting to be echoed in a face that’s not there.

So much seems to happen around the space that’s not there.

They’re together, a couple tried and true- but it’s like they’re clinging together like two trees that have half-collapsed against each other, their bases rotted away. Something’s missing, and when he turns to his left, there’s Bucky- but when he turns to his right, there’s an empty space where something ought to be.

And Rumlow? Who knows how he is. Steve lost that right to be concerned the minute he broke the bond, took the child that was his tether.

-I can’t do that. Not unless there’s no other choice.

Rumlow had stabbed him in the back. But before he’d done that- he’d carved out a place at his side that feels achingly impossible to fill. And Steve can’t abandon that without knowing there’s nothing left to salvage.

……

“Thank you,” Steve starts, voice creaking just a little around the lump that imagining brings. “For pointing out what I don’t want to see. Bucky wants him, but that’s not enough. There’s no good reason I should build that bond up with Rumlow again, and a thousand reasons why I shouldn’t.
But…”

Sam raises an eyebrow at him.

_Come on, buddy. I can’t say it for you._

Steve swallows, hard.

“-but that’s not good enough for me.”

Sam lets out the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. With those few words, Steve’s blown open Pandora’s box.

“You want to give him a chance. Of course you do.”

“I think I can’t throw him away- even knowing what I do- without knowing more. I can’t- I think it genuinely might kill him.”

“You know we’re gonna be here for you, man- if that’s what you want to try. But Steve- you’ve got to think about this. You’ve got to figure out if you really want this fight, to keep him around you. Alpha to alpha- I know you’re hurting and you want to make it right, because he’s hurting too. But man, I have _never_ seen you let someone walk on you- or give them your back after they drove a knife in it. And no, Barnes doesn’t count.”

Steve nods, and seems to gather in on himself.

“You’re right. And- thank you, both of you- for being my good sense.”

God love the man, but Sam can see that stubborn-little-shit expression coming a mile away.

“But you’re still going to try.”

Steve doesn’t even have the grace to look all that sorry.

“Yes.”

“Buddy, good luck,” Sam says, and he means it. Because he’s going to _need_ it. “But before you make that decision, you better find out for sure if you think this is someone that can be salvaged. You have a mate, a kid, and _yourself_ to protect. If you think he’s worth the trying- you better make sure he’s not playing first.”

“I know that. I can’t go through with this without- finding some way to trust him. But after everything-” and now he looks to Natasha, who is starting into a bend that could make a pretzel envious.

“-how can I ever _do_ that again?”

“With great difficulty.” Nat replies, looking up at him from upside down. “Consider that he already managed to fool- _all_ of us- pretty thoroughly before. For years on end,” she frowns, maybe-sorta a tiny bit sour- her rep as all-knowing is about as wide as Fury’s used to be all-seeing, and she’s not happy to have been blindsided. “Though he did have a much bigger network supporting the lie, before.”

Steve looks like he’s bitten into a lemon, and it’s Nat’s turn to sigh, flipping upright again.

“James said that he trained him- he also trained _me_, Steve. That’s a red flag right there,” Nat says,
pausing as Sam gently cups her shoulder, and the look she gives him is equal parts sweet and exasperated. “If the roles were reversed? I’d be biding my time, playing nice. Getting people to cut me slack- and keeping all my options open, seeing who’s ready to cut me the best deal. Reparative justice is all fine and good- but it’s important to know what you’re really dealing with,” she continues, and accepts the little comforting squeeze Sam gives.

“Then tell me how to get to the truth. Without torturing anybody.”

Sam can see it in his eyes. Steve wants to dig to the depths and see if he can, once more, come up with gold. Or at least find out for sure if he needs to pull the plug and save himself.

They don't teach a whole lot of sympathy for the devil in the US Armed Forces- but there's a line from an old comic-book, one that Sam's never quite sure how applicable it really is because plenty of people, too many people leave devastation without a second thought and go right on living, but it's ringing in his ears right now. To cause suffering is to know suffering. ‘Order through pain’ is one hell of a mantra to live your life by, there is one fuck-awful story there he’s sure- but if there’s anything left of a man inside the HYDRA agent, Steve might be the one to find it.

It’s a long shot. Not one he’d have taken- hell, he’d been pretty clear on Barnes-as-threat when bullets were flying and the sky was falling down, and Rumlow’s little speech made him fairly solid as collaborator, not casualty. But Steve’s pulled off crazier stunts with less- and just this far, Sam’s willing to trust that he needs to find out for himself.

Still- he’s going to have other people with clearer, un-hormone-laden heads backing him up on this one.

Chapter End Notes

I know. I know. It's been six months. I lost my stride, and I started up a crafting business. My head was not in it, and this needed to be Done Right. I'm hoping you all are still enjoying, and thank you all for your comments, kudos, and joy in this. We're not done by a long shot.

Tumblr gonna Tumbl.

-and because this is so important not to forget- thank you, always, to Bofurrific and to Andartha. The heart and the bones. Ya'll make my life richer.
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Part 1 of The Talk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

One more dawn. One more day.

Bucky leaves just before sunrise, a soft kiss in the dark before ghosting away with the first rays of daylight. Brock can’t blame him. His charges are safe and he can rest- just like at the cabin when it was all too much, he’ll be scarce for a little while, spending the off-time putting his pieces back together and charging up for the next long series of days.

Brock’s not up to facing anyone else today- does what he has to during his interview with Kruger, then sacks out with Ben on the couch after the restless energy that produces lunch and dinner and another couple loaves of bread is spent. He feels like he’s wasting the day, but it’s not exactly like he’s got big plans right this second.

(Every moment that his son is with him, though, tiny hand wrapped around his fingertip- that is precious.)

Things are briefly exciting when Ben loses his cord stump- it’s been mummifying for a while now, but it’s still startling when the little blackened twist, like a used-up match stick, falls off while Brock’s changing his diaper. There’s a bead of blood, a momentary heart-attack, and a swift distraction in his son’s giggly nature- but soon enough Ben’s all wrapped up again and happy as a clam.

“Well hey- you’re a real boy, now, aren’t you?” Brock coos, and Benji’s laughter calms his too-fast heart, God he is such a worry-wart but can you really fucking blame him. “No substitutions, exchanges or refunds- the tag’s off, now we’re stuck with you.”

He thinks if there were the barest possibility of there being a friend on the common floor, he’d be up there right now, bragging about what precisely he doesn’t know, but he’d be doing it. Let Benji soak up the accolades for having accomplished the very tough job of being ten days old, from the Widow and Wilson and hell, even Barton has a soft spot for kids, whatever his other issues.

The image of Jack bouncing Benji in his arms, big stony face split in a grin and cooing at what’s basically his little nephew flits across Brock’s mind, but he pushes it away quick and hard. As well to imagine his grandfather back from the dead, white mustache bristling as he rumbles his way through a lullaby, or Pop, clean and sober for once, or Rogers greeting him with a smile. No. He doesn’t dare lose himself in daydreams of what he’d like reality to be.

False hope is a chink in the armor he and his have exploited more than once, and if he ever faces the Team again- a second’s hesitation because of daydreams could cost him everything.

Whatever it takes to get the mission done.
Gull a lover. A quick bullet to a brother’s head, and a comfort to know it was done fast and proper, and that you could expect the same.

Nothing and no one is allowed to stand in the way of their goals. Weak-link protocol for those who didn’t get the memo.

…I maybe tomorrow he’ll go out to the main floor. Courtesy dictates they all stay out of the nest barring emergency, but he’s too deep in his own head lately. And if he’s going to be confined here for the next little while, depending on Steve Rogers and Stark Tower and SHIELD for protection which is about the long and short of what’s happened despite his best efforts he’s going to have to work with these people. Might as well see if Benji opens a few doors so he can at least have the option.

Bucky shows up for afternoon nap, however briefly, and Brock lifts up an arm for him to snuggle under. The former Soldier scuttles in, wrapping warm (and sleeve-shielded) hands around his former handler’s ribs, and lets out a sigh like an old, exhausted dog.

“…we’ve been ridin’ you pretty hard, huh.”

James had been months in pushing himself to be this solid, and going long weeks of being present and human so he could protect the sprog and the old traitor who’d carried it. And now he’s wearing himself even thinner, vomiting it all up for the protection of those who needed it and didn’t deserve it.

A wordless nod against his shoulder confirms it. Brock pulls himself in closer, rubs at Jamie’s back, the muscles still radically looser than they had been a day ago.

“…for what it’s worth. I’m sorry.” The words whisper against his partner’s dark hair, and James butts up against him like a cat, careful of the tit as he does.

You trust too easy, for someone who’s been through what you have. Being worthy of that trust…that, he can try to do, but aside from just trying to make sure that James doesn’t break himself-Brock’s not sure how.

Evening comes and Bucky’s off on retreat again, who the hell knows where, and Brock has finally gotten Ben settled into bed, after an afternoon spent sitting on a blanket in front of one of the large windows, playing with his son and watching life pass him by in the city below. Kid’s starting to sleep in longer increments now that he’s out in the world, especially at night, so hopefully this time around he’ll have at least a few hours.

He ends up sitting in the kitchen, resting his head against his palm, when Steve comes in. Instead of going about his business the alpha comes over, sits himself down close beside Brock, too close, and looks at him, making Brock feel like somebody’s got him in the sights of his scope.

“There’s some things we need to talk about.”

Brock lifts his head up wearily.
“Really? You want to have this talk right now?”

“When better?” Steve says, still watching him, cool blue eyes searching. “If not now, then tomorrow. Then next week. Then next month. And pretty soon, it’s about that time when little pitchers have big ears.” And they can’t have that, can they. No way in hell is Brock letting this spill out around Benji once he can understand it.

Finding himself unable to keep meeting his mate’s eyes, Brock drops his gaze. Steve won’t take blood from him, won’t take sweat and pain and pounding fists as a fair trade. No- he’s owed an explanation more than anything, and that’s the heart of it, isn’t it- he’s owed.

Even if the words keep getting murkier and harder to catch hold of, when Brock looks for them.

“JARVIS, how long’s it take for caffeine to work out of the body?”

“A half-life of two to five hours, sir, with all traces leaving the body within approximately twenty-four-“

“Tell Barnes he’s on nursing for the next day, I’m not doing this without coffee.”

“Sir, studies show that minimal effect-“

“Tell. James.” Brock doesn’t know where the cameras are and he doesn’t feel like cranking his head back to glare at the ceiling, so he just glares at where Rogers- was…

Shit, he’s losing track of things too easily. He’s in enemy territory. Should never lose sight like that, but he’s also fed and relatively safe and it just keeps clouding his judgement.

Behind his back and a bit to the right, the coffee machine whirs to life, just soft enough that he doesn’t startle, and he turns to find himself staring at Steve’s back as he’s trying to work the thing with a minimum of swearing. It’s still a little bit of a wrestling match, though, because the thing’s practically non-Euclidian, and by the time a steaming, foaming cup is set down in front of him with all the delicacy of an egg-shell, Brock’s had a fine show.

God, that ass. God, that everything.

Strong hands, a delicate mouth that smiled just so, and felt so good on the back of your neck… If he was ever awake enough to care again, this’d be what he’d want. To be held again, like he’s something precious…

Get your head on straight, soldier. Damnit.

Lazy mornings when Steve was bright and chipper, making his not-boyfriend coffee while the whole rest of the world fell away- that’s. That’s not a thing, anymore. Not even to imagine. And sorrow over it only leads to want.

He hasn’t got the right.

“I’m already getting it from Kruger half the day, Rogers,” Brock grumbles, stretching out the moment before he takes his first sip of delicious, forbidden coffee. “What else could you possibly want to know?”

Brock doesn’t know what he was expecting Steve to ask, but what he gets is a surprise right off the bat.
"What was it like?"

"What was what like? Being in HYDRA? Betraying your everything?"

"Having the baby."

Chapter End Notes

Hey! This one is going to be split up a bit, because it got wayyy long. Hope you all are still having fun, and your comments are a joy to read every time. With thanks to Bofuriflic and Andartha, the heart and the bones.

Tumblr gonna tumbl- come by for cat gifs, 2AM ramblings, and nowadays a whole lot of cursing about foam swords.
Chapter 54

Chapter by Weirdlet

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Brock blinks, looks up from the cup he was about to bury himself in.

"What do you mean? It hurt, you saw-"

"I mean," Steve says quietly, "what was it like, having Ben. Trying to get ready for a baby on the run. I wasn't there for that. For either of you. I want to know what I've missed."

He looks up at Brock from across the table, eyes weary and a tad wistful.

"Just- tell me about this right now. Not the missions, not the party line. This is what I want from you."

And the part of Brock that was prized by Garrett, that's always on the lookout, will always be on the lookout for every loophole and every weakness even if he doesn't intend to exploit it, hears just what hunger lies under Steve's words. He knows it because it echoes in him.

Family. The young alpha wants just a little of the family experience that was stolen from him.

I can't make it real for you, Brock thinks, aching with a small, guilty hunger for the same false thing. But I can talk.

He owes Steve this.

"Where do you want me to start?"

"I want to know- no."

Rogers lifts his head, narrows his eyes.

"You and Bucky both went through this alone, and you wouldn't have- I would have been there if I hadn't ignored all of your messages. So- before you start... I owe you an explanation too."

The challenge in his gaze wears off, and a half-sad, half self-deprecating smile flickers across Rogers' face, there and gone like summer.

"I wanted to write it off. I wanted to be able to dismiss everything you said as a lie- because it felt like everything, everything we'd had together was. And that hurt. That hurt so bad, you don't even-" Steve pauses, looking away sharply with lips compressed. His breath huffs out before he turns those baby-blues back on like a laser, catching and pinning Brock where he sits.

"I should have returned the calls. Even before you said you were pregnant. If only to find out if you were trying to play me or not, I didn't know if anything you said could be true, and if it was... I didn't know if you were dead or alive. And when you said that you were pregnant- I wanted to come. I tried. But I was stuck in Romania, cleaning out a base- there were too many lives at stake. I couldn't just leave."

And if it's the base Brock is thinking of, the little surprises entrenched in the area probably account
for just how long it took him to get free of it-

*Finish the mission.*

Brock knows that directive as well, better than the back of his own hand.

“The minute I could be, I was back state-side to look for you- but you were nowhere to be found. Searched all the hospitals in DC, had Tony add a few more parameters to the searches JARVIS was running… beyond that, I had no clue where to start looking save for hunting down HYDRA bases. Even then, I didn’t know if I’d find you living it up in the officer’s’ quarters, or- or hooked up to machines in some dungeon-“

Steve’s voice has been steadily rising over the last sentence- his Irish is up, or his alpha, and the flush that travels along Steve’s neck is accompanied by the scent of someone heated near to *challenge*.

**Over him?**

The anger rolls off Rogers in waves. Or fear, or worry, Brock’s not certain which, it’s hard to tell, but then Steve just snuffs it out, tamps it down and puts it away within a few heartbeats so he can continue to talk calmly and that’s just -

That’s Cap all over, down from the old posters and tv specials of his childhood days. Shame curdles a little in Brock’s mouth because *you are not being the person Captain Rogers believed you could be.*

Steve takes a deep breath, inhales, exhales. “You called. You asked for my *help,* and I should have tried harder to find out if you were being sincere. And then I should have helped you, protected you, baby or no. I *should* have looked for you earlier.”

Brock wants to laugh, bitter and low, but more, he wants the growing ache in his chest and the pit of his stomach to go away. And it slips out, the lean and vicious thing, the hook of a question.

“Would you have?”

“Yes.” Steve says flatly. “I would have been angry. I’m still angry *now.* But I wouldn’t have left you to flounder around in the woods, looking over your shoulder and fighting to survive.” He swallows, and glances back in the direction of the nursery, where Ben is asleep with JARVIS’s all-seeing sensors to watch over him. “And I damn well wouldn’t have left you tryin’ to have a baby without a doctor.”

“I didn’t have a choice-!”

“Not sayin’ I left you with much a’one. Bein’ on the run- that sure would cut down the choices available. But my ma was a public health nurse, you think I don’ know how fuckin’ *dangerous* that was?”

And now the Brooklyn comes out, just like James when he’s in a mood, when he’s in a *mode.* For Barnes, it’s when he’s sweet on you, protective, gentling like you do a wild animal. For Steve? It slips out when he’s angry- when he’s *scared.*

Brock hunches his shoulders a little deeper, grips the handle of his coffee-cup like a lifeline. The last time he remembers Steve being pissed enough for it to roll out that thick was- Mali. Angry at the idiots who’d torpedoed negotiations, turned it into a firefight that had cost them the op, civilians and any kind of good-will that had been building in the area up ‘til then- and angry at himself, for not being a little quicker, for not keeping his men, for not keeping *Brock* safe.
Rogers keeps his temper on a leash, would probably cut off his own hand before paying Brock in the kind he deserves- but that knowledge doesn’t keep what feels like a cannon-ball from crushing his chest, sick with himself. *Does he know, does he know?* Mali was one of those where the ultimate goal had been HYDRA’s- would Rogers be so protective, so broken up if he knew just what his SIC had been up to when he’d gotten shot under his command?

(It’s not real romantic getting shot, but Brock has to wonder- is there even one moment between them, untainted by what he’d been doing in his spare time?)

*If he doesn’t know now, he’ll learn it soon enough.* Brock has to keep himself from sliding out of his chair, from telling Rogers he’s changed his mind, he can’t do this, from slinking away to squeeze his eyes shut and hoard his miseries, but Rogers asked, he has the right.

*You got through Basic, you passed Garrett’s tests, you survived thirty years at war and torture and childbirth, you miserable bastard- you will do this.*

So he doesn’t move, just grips his cup a little tighter, the ceramic hard and grounding beneath his fingertips.

Mali’s one more thing between them, one more memory, one more regret, but it’s not what Steve asked him for. And if Rogers won’t take blood, he’ll take the answers, ask the questions that *make* you bleed.

And so what if it does? So what if it opens him up like a filleted fish to recount all the ways he’d stumbled, he’d failed, the ways he’d almost gotten himself and his baby killed? It’s the right thing. Best to let Rogers know *ALL.*

Brock swallows against the bowling-ball that’s settled somewhere around his diaphragm. A sip of coffee doesn’t really ease it, but it sees him remembering the zip of a duffle-bag filled with unripe apples and the smell of cash and gun-oil. A pile of fake IDs, a brick of a book he’d shoved under a wobbly table-leg because he was too *shit-scared* to open it again and read all the ways he’d been doing it wrong, and the taste of bad vodka and worse memories.

Nothing he can shove under a chair-leg this time. Brock swallows hard, makes sure his voice doesn’t wobble as he speaks. This isn’t about him; this is about owing Benji’s dad the whole truth. Don’t waver, don’t try to *play* it- and he can see half a dozen different ways to because like it or not *this was his area of expertise- just speak.*

“There was a team sent after me. HYDRA, not SHIELD. At least one, possibly more. The – the *Soldier,*” he pauses, not looking up, because his eyes sting again and he’s not about to let Rogers know what’s up, keep steady, “took care of them before I even knew they were on my tail. Made sure the trail was muddy enough too that we didn’t see another one. I *did* think about bringing in a doctor, a midwife maybe, depending on what we could find- but we couldn’t afford to leave a trail. Not after that. You know how easy it is to find something out of place, follow the thread:“

*Get back on topic, Rumlow- he could meander for days, if he let himself avoid what was coming up.*

“But- he took care of it. And- he took care of me;” he says, still amazed that it had gone that way. “And for a while, it was okay.”

Now- Brock isn’t a tracker. That’s specialized training and only if you’re one of the poor bastards in, like, forty thousand who’s got some extraordinary sensory gift in the nostrils department. But there are times when you’re so *familiar,* or so *sensitized,* that the shifts in intensity will hit like a hammer. So when Steve’s scent turns acrid-sour, he keeps his eyes down, breathes slowly through
his mouth, and they sit at strained opposite ends of the table.

“Then it wasn’t.”

Cap still has the bones of an athletic young man with all his cartilage instead of the brittle arthritic ones his nonagenarian status should have bestowed on him, but they still creak somethin’ fierce when his hand tightens in on itself.

“Think you mighta overheard. Had a scare, around seven months- seems to be the unlucky number with me. Almost lost Benji- started having contractions, still don’t know what brought them on, but it was- it was too much, too early, and I thought- I knew if it went on, I wasn’t- there wouldn’t have been anything I could do for my boy.”

There’s a kind of hiss to the breath, a chalky smell that’s Steve’s version of fear, when he’s not covering up with an angry bravado that’s kindly described as vinegar. It’s that blank hush that gets Brock to look up, to swallow past the knot and try to get that look out of Steve’s eye, the dead-white wash from his skin.

“They stopped. Jamie- he got me through, got me to rest, and they stopped.”

His reassurances aside, the memory is there, vivid as the day it happened, and he knows to his bones he cannot forgive himself.

*I did this. I fucked up, if I hadn’t, if I- if…*

Benji would never have been in that kind of danger, if he’d chosen different, if he’d done *something else*. He can’t look Rogers in the eye, sips coffee out of his half-empty cup instead, trying to hide how bad his hand is shaking so it doesn’t slop. *First rule of leadership, princess*, he knows, because when people get dead and the mission goes to shit it’s your hand on the body, your word on the Bible, your head on the block. *First rule, everything is your fault.*

Suck it up and take it.

“Toward the end, we were trying to get him to turn. Well- ‘him’, I swore up and down I was having a girl, and James would just look at me, like I was the crazy one- and it ends up with me sitting in a frickin’ *ice-water* bath, practically froze my absent balls off…” And the smile twists over his face before he can stop it, still facing down, looking away. “Jamie had to bribe me to get that far, before he could hold me in place- burger and fries, everything on it; think he woulda got me a milkshake too if they’d been makin’em that late in the year…”

Brock risks a look up, the table’s woodgrain unable to hold him any longer, and it looks like the wry amusement is contagious because Steve seems unable to decide between laughing or crying. His hand flexes against the table, a nervous squeeze, and Brock can feel the warmth of his alpha’s skin where it’s balled against the surface, near enough to his to reach out and touch. If that were a thing they did.

Not anymore. It’s a long time since helping to tie on gloves in the gym, clapping shoulders after he and the unit had first seen what Rogers could do to a reinforced heavy-bag.

Brock presses on, because there’s more to go and it’s like that last little bit of a splinter in your skin- you have to keep nipping at it until it’s all out.

“I swear,” Brock says, watching where their hands are almost close enough to touch, feeling the heat coming off Rogers’ skin. “I swear to you- I made him promise too- that if I didn’t make it, he would get Ben out and take him. Get him to you.”
Rogers gives him a long, hard look, face inscrutable like some steely-eyed statue, and Brock has to fight not to squirm like a worm being eyed by a bird.

There’s a moment of silence, with Brock unsure how to continue, what else to tell Steve about being pregnant with their child, when Steve speaks up again, a curveball that comes out of left field, his voice flat enough to be almost casual, so that it takes a moment to feel the sting of the slap.

“Did it ever occur t’you, that that wouldn’t be enough?”

Something in Brock freezes, like a rabbit cornered by a snake, because he knows Steve, knows almost always when he’s getting back into Cap mode. There’s a straightening of his back, an invisible war-cloak that settles round his shoulders, and, as it does now, the Brooklyn bleeds out of his voice again as Captain America takes back the helm. And Cap does not let things go- once he gets his teeth in, Cap will hound you to hell and back.

Brock’s mouth is dry, his stomach in a queasy churn. His hands curl tight in on themselves, and he thinks if he could sink through the floor, he would.

There’s no escaping it though as Steve goes on, voice turning from casual to icy.

“I fucked up when I didn’t return your calls. But that doesn’t even hold a candle to the way you played it fast and loose with Ben’s and Bucky’s lives. And all that talk about being willing to die, have Bucky cut you open…?

"I’m not buyin’ that.

"See, you’re ruthless enough for it. I’ll give you that. But that’s not where I’m seeing your priorities at. In fact, what I AM seeing here is a whole lotta you keeping your options open.

"If you had lost the baby and been done with it at seven months, you just woulda had yourself and Bucky to worry about….with Buck being all outta sorts over it and easily led down whichever path you picked.

"Trade the baby’s body over to HYDRA and get back in their good graces real quick, with all that super-soldier DNA. Even more so if you brought the Soldier along, turned him back over to them.

"Or you coulda sold the remains to some other powerful buyer, got enough cash and resources to get a new identity, throw everybody off your trail, turn merc- either with or without Buck.

"If you carried the kid to term… well, if the birth went well, you’d still have all your options open.

"If things went wrong like they did, even in the field, a cesarean is survivable. Certainly given good aftercare- and the fact that even under fire, Buck’s good at what he does. An’ people’ve been doing cesareans for centuries. So… risky…but not that risky. Ben might’ve even survived too. Leavin’ you, once again, free to decide on a course of action that was best for you.

"So whatever the outcome… main gain was always that you were free and able to pick and choose as you pleased and damn the risks to Buck and Ben.

"Any fucking chance, if it meant you could get off scot-free.

"An’ if the birth went south and Bucky decided not to follow your orders, like he did? Because he decided he didn’t want to risk the life of his fuckin’ bond-sister? You knew he had the number to call. So even your worst case scenario woulda seen you alive, albeit behind bars. But a highly-trained operative with useful intel? You never know what opportunities might open up in the future.”
"Bond with me caught you by surprise, didn’t it? Figure it’s kinda inconvenient for you, but damn if it didn’t get you an even better deal. And now Buck is pushing for me to give this bond a try, make it real, he’s still trying to protect you, so if you’re patient and play this right? It could still take you all kinds of nice places, open up doors, offer you… possibilities."

The scheming rat on the inside of Brock’s head that made him leader of one of Hydra’s finest teams is listening to what Rogers is saying and going fuck, fuck, I should have thought of that-, making the accusations that Rogers just threw at him painfully real.

He has to jerk himself away from the part of him that instinctively starts checking those scenarios over, nodding yes, because that’s not what happened and it doesn’t matter. Because Ben is here, alive and safe, and James is in the heart of his family once more.

None because of any good thing I contributed, aside from staying alive for nine months and running scared like an idiot, sneers a mocking voice at the back of his head, and if you hadn’t been stupid enough to fall for tall, blond and gorgeous, we would never have gotten into this mess in the first place.

Hard on the heels of that thought comes the dawning realization that he’s let himself be drawn in like a love-lost fool, starting to hope against all odds that this was for him to heal too. But it’s not. It is a fucking interrogation, with Rogers mercilessly pushing him when he’s already off his game and off kilter and it’s like a red-hot stab to the chest.

"Fuck. You."

Playing nice- that’s just gone out the fucking window. Standing there and taking his licks- that had been on offer, right up until Rogers threw Benji in the mix, until he’d made it seem like it was about being family, pulling on the one string that would make Brock come apart.

"Fuck you, you know that? You don’t know. I have spent every goddamn minute of my life trying to avoid another goddamn bond to spin my head and trip me up and rip my guts out. And then you come along. You-" Brock breaks off, mouth open and head turning this way and that in sheer rage, hunting for the next words like he’s got to bite them out of the air.

"You. With your words and your hands and your goddamn white knight bullshit. You weren’t supposed to be an assignment- and you weren’t supposed to be a distraction. And Benji- fuck you. Fuck you, you don’t know. He wasn’t supposed to happen. Even if I wasn’t too old for honeytraps, we were all supposed to get dropped in the meat-grinder come Launch Day, I wouldn’t have wanted to get pulled away from my team for a baby. But then everything went to shit, and even if I didn’t want it, there suddenly was a goddamn light at the end of the tunnel- and I thought- maybe, just maybe, I got a reason to stay alive and pull myself out of the gutter. Maybe this one’s gonna be okay. But for damn sure, if I stayed where I was like a sitting duck, no one who would come for me was going to do me or my kid any good."

It leaves him winded, gasping for breath, but there’s still so much more, and it’s well past the boiling point, couldn’t keep it from exploding out of him if he tried.

"Believe you me, buddy, if this was an op, it wouldn’t have been nearly this big of a clusterfuck. Yeah, we were roughing it. But I thought WE WERE DOING OKAY. We had a plan. And I’m still mad that I’m here, because here is a goddamn mess. You know what I wanted? I wanted out! I didn’t sign up for this! I wanted to get away from you, from him, from HYDRA and SHIELD and every goddamn person that had a good reason to take my head off! I wanted to have my baby, in
peace, and be on my own! But I was lucky when Barnes showed up. You know what? I kept thinking, this is gonna be the day. This is the day I turn around and I'm looking in his eyes and he breaks my goddamn neck. For standing aside and letting them do what they liked with him. Like I was assigned. Like I was supposed to. Like I knew was the worst goddamn thing I coulda done to him.

"And if he decided to, there wasn't a goddamn thing I could do. For me or my kid. But he didn’t, he was there for me and my kid when you weren’t. So I let it go, because it's not like I don't live on the fucking knife's edge every goddamn day."

The acrid, bitter, scorched earth scent of righteous fury rolls off Brock in waves, mixed in with the cold, wet iron tang of grief, filling the room, and for a heartbeat, he desperately wishes for some of that really strong scent neutralizer like the rookies in the business use, because damnit, one way or the other, you keep yourself in check, you don’t let your opponent scent the blood in the water. But the days where he could lay on the slick charm to cover up what’s underneath so nobody, least of all Rogers, would suspect a thing, seem to have slipped away from him when he wasn’t looking.

His skin runs hot and cold as he waits for the other shoe to drop, the most absurd scenario running through his head about how, if this was one of the more popular soap-operas that are the daily staple of housewives everywhere, or hell, just a normal, real bond- it would be heart-wrenchingly painful for an alpha to feel his omega bleeding distress like this. How his dad’s smile would go soft and watery at the inevitable tenderly tearful reconciliation scene and then he’d reach for the bottle until there wasn’t a drop left and he’d be snoring on the couch.

When instead of at least backing off, Rogers pushes himself up, towers above Brock, knuckled fists pressing into the table’s hardwood and face twisted in an angry snarl, Brock feels a watery weakness hollow his bones.

“Even assuming, Rumlow, that you really mean it, and that you honestly thought the worst that could happen was Bucky cutting Ben out of you, leaving you dead…..damn your eyes, you knew he had a bond with you-“

Brock flinches as if struck. No, no, I didn’t try, I didn’t want him there-

“-and he was just barely fighting his way out of the hell you helped keep him in. Think he could’ve ever just brushed it off, cutting open his bond-sister?”

Bloody, bloody work- the ground covered in red, viscera lying exposed to the sky, waiting for the buzzards to come- and Brock knows what a person looks like inside and out, yes he does. Brock’s seen it too many times, he can guess how it might feel if you knew the face above the mess.

“No” is the only possible answer, but it’s not one Brock can bring himself to say. Growling “it’s not the worst thing I’ve asked of him” doesn’t even start, no matter how equally true.

What is he supposed to say?

That in the long term, he thought they would have been better off? Because even if that’s true, if James and Benji would have lived and gotten on without the burden of a burned agent and his collective enemies- would it have been worth it in the short term? The bloody hands and the spark dying in Jamie’s eyes, holding onto a bereft, crying baby as the snow piled high outside- picking around a cooling body as he tries to get ready to run-

Brock clamps his mouth shut against the words, the image. His breath hisses out his nose, shaky and sullen.
Rogers laughs, a short, bitter sound.

“Yeah, thought as much. But then- wouldn’t have been the first time you put your idea of how things should be above his wellbeing. Well, congratulation, you made it. You’re safe. Even if your good work has dearly cost others, people who didn’t get to keep their mates, their children, their loved ones and families, because of choices you made.”

For a short moment, Brock thinks about hurling his coffee cup against the wall, wants to see something break and shatter- for letting himself believe even for one second that this was supposed to be about family, about paying back the debt he owes Rogers for having saved Benji, for letting him stay close to his son for just a little longer… But of course it’s going to be fucked up and vicious. It’s all tangled, because loyalty to a cause doesn’t excuse anything, now does it? Not when he’s found himself, shown himself to be a hypocrite of the highest order. And if this is the only punishment he gets, then he’s got off lightly.

It still stings like salt in a wound when he looks up at Rogers, only to find his Alpha’s eyes hard as flint and full of condemnation.

“That’s what you always do Brock, isn’t it? The world doesn’t go the way you’d like it to, so you do whatever dirty deed is necessary to bend it to your will and screw everybody else. You were willing to see me die- to help murder millions of people. And even before that, you were murdering people left and right, torturing and killing children if necessary. You were going to let HYDRA use Bucky as their murder-tool right up until they used him up. Got anything to say for yourself?”

“-what do you even want from me?” Brock finally grits out, after sitting there and gaping like a fish. “You think I deserve to die for it? I know I do. You think I don’t know what happens when fucks like me reach the end of the line? Jail at best. The big bad monster strung up on strings. You think I don’t know where I’m supposed to be?” He was SHIELD. He’d put away equally nasty things as himself as a part of his cover, as a part of HYDRA knowing where all the little pieces were and having a nice solid handle over them.

A tight, hard-lipped smile curls Rogers’ mouth.

“Die? Or go to jail? Y’think those are the only options? Y’really think you’re going to get off that easy? Oh no, Rumlow. I want answers. I want to know WHY.

"And I’m going to keep digging until I find out.

"You’ve done things that make me sick to the pit of my stomach. And yet, for some reason that I cannot fucking fathom- you seem to believe that they were worth doing. So yeah, your choices and why you made them…? That’s what we’re gonna talk about. And I suspect we’re gonna be at it for a good, long while.”

Brock was ready to jump to his feet, hands gripping at the table’s edge with white knuckles. Now? He slumps from that ready position, exhaustion mixed with annoyance on a fundamental level.

“I’m in interview half the day. I’m a tracker-cuffed prisoner in the most secure facility in the world that lets you actually see daylight. You’ve got me by the throat, by the balls, and by my kid, Rogers. I’m giving you everything I got that isn’t blood, everything that you’ll take.”

“It’s not about blood,” Steve says.
Then what *is* it about?

Flesh? He can’t whore his way out of this one.

Secrets? Take’em. Anything to be done with this, to be elsewhere than here and now.

Rogers leans back, arms crossed, examines Brock from head to toe with the narrow-eyed stare of a law-firm associate scrutinizing a scruffy-looking would-be intern asking for a job.

“I’m mated to you, Rumlow- and where I come from, a bond *means something*. There’s just one problem- I have no fuckin’ clue who the *hell* you really are. Everythin’ I thought I knew turned out to be smoke and mirrors. It almost got me killed. Hell, it DID get other people killed, *innocent* people, and I’m not sure if I ever can unsee the footage of you pulling the trigger on them. You endangered my son and my mate, your bond-sister. So this is me, asking- who the *hell* ARE you? And why did you *ever* think that working for Hydra- being *loyal* to them- was a good idea?”

“...what the hell does it even *matter* who I am?”

It doesn’t. It can’t. There’s no coming back from this. The only way it worked was by not looking too hard. It was only ever a fool’s hope, this working.

“And-* why* are you asking questions you know you won’t like the answers to? You said yourself- you can’t unsee it. I can’t undo it. *I did it.* You have me here because James *asked* you to- and me not being a *complete* idiot, I’m behaving because I don’t have a choice *not* to.” That’s what you do when you know you’re in the shit- you keep your head down and just try not to remind them you even exist.

The sound coming from Rogers is more of a dry bark than a laugh.

“Any of those files that Hydra had on me ever give you the impression that I run and hide when I come across something I don’t like? And why so shy about your loyalties all of a sudden? I’ve seen cats that were supposed to take a bath scramble for cover with less tenacity than *you* do when asked about your motives.”

He leans forward, both hands flat on the table, fingers splayed wide and shoulders flexing, suddenly far too near even though he’s still more than an arm’s length away.

“And don’t make me that crap about not being *able* to undo things, Rumlow, when so far, it’s up in the air if you’d even *want* to. Because up ‘til now, you’ve seemed pretty comfortable with HYDRA’s plans for, oh, establishing a totalitarian state through genocide and torture.

“It was *not* genocide, it was-” no fucking better, but it had the chance to create true, lasting peace. Suffering was *everywhere*, always- why not make it fucking *mean something*?

Brock gathers himself, for the pitch he never thought he’d have to make, to the man he’d never thought to make it to.

“People die, every day,” he spits out, low and vicious. *Men die, cattle die, kindred die. Bloody sand and empty cradles.* “People *suffer,* every fucking day. Because it’s the price of doing business. Because someone wants something, or because there’s just not enough. What if you could stop all that? What if you could fuckin’ well *end war?* What if no one was ever on the wrong side of a conflict again, because there was *none*?”

No flinch. No accusations, no cut-downs. Just that hard, blue stare. And Brock digs deeper, because the more he chips at it, the farther and more twisted the roots go.
“I had a poster of you when I was a kid, you know that? Heard all the stories, thought you were fucking amazing. But it’s fucking bandaids on bullet holes- there’s always another war, always another fucking jackass who wants his little scrap of turf. You think I got into this just because I liked killing? You think I didn’t wanna be a hero?”

Heroes are honest, brave and true. One out of three ain’t bad- but if he calls himself cowardly for how he handled the rest, well, he wouldn’t be wrong, would he. Zero fucking sum.

“You wanted to fight the Good Fight. I wanted to fight the one that would end all of them. No more pain. One more bad day- and then no more bad days.” And he deflates, after that. Because back when he was a kid, when he was young and thought he could do and be something better- he had wanted to be a hero.

Some hero.

The big alpha straightens up, sighs deeply, shoulders dropping, and rubs his face before looking back up at Brock.

“Way back when, we, I did- some pretty nasty stuff. Because it was necessary. Because in a war, you make compromises. Sometimes in ways that give you nightmares. But you always- always- weigh the good against the bad. Every time. You keep making sure you’re still standing up for what’s right.

Did you ask yourself that each time?”

Another sigh and the alpha steps back, leans against the kitchen counter, arms crossed, looking at Brock, but seeing right past him, eyes far away.

“When the hell was I supposed to ask?” Brock says slowly, a sick tremble in his stomach. He’s weirded out by the look in Steve’s eyes. The things Cap’s saying are about what he’d expect from him, but soft enough that Brock mistrusts it. These are the words of a righteous speech, but where’s the brimstone gone? Or is this just the despair of having looked into the depths and seen what he always should have?

In for a dime, in for a fucking dollar. He asked.

“They pulled me out of a jail cell and told me they could make me worth something. They could help me, and I could help fix the world. The dirty, nasty, stupid goddamn world. Gave me a purpose, gave me a life. Helped me see why things were as bad as they were.”

When was I supposed to ask?!

“People can be nice- but get’em in a group and they never make good choices. No one can fucking see what they do to everyone else. Selfish. Foolish. Disorganized. So it takes dedication, to one cause, to make things right again. To make it so the absolute fucking minimum of shit happens to people, and when it does happen, that it’s worth it. No matter what, someone’s gonna get it- why not make sure that it contributes to something worthwhile?”

No seriously, when was he supposed to ask? When he was one of Garret’s little woodscolts, punching trees to grieve and moaning to himself in fear at night in a stolen tent, scared that he wasn’t strong enough to make it? When he was fucking his way through anyone and everyone in order to earn that little bit of praise, that extra bit of credit to his name, shame turned into defiant pride?

Seeing the secret signs everywhere, knowing he was part of the inside club anywhere he went, feeling he was part of a bigger, better whole? When he’d first slit a throat and known holy shit, this
is really real- or the tenth time, when it was routine?

The first time he’d enacted weak-link protocol, and known that if it wasn’t them it was going to be him- and that the death he dealt was necessary, because the Cause could not be allowed to fall because of the weakness of one?

His line of thought is interrupted when a sardonic twist curls the edge of Steve’s mouth and the alpha makes a derisive little snort.

“When weren’t you supposed to ask?”

"You say you dream of a war to end all wars. The one that means that no one has to die anymore. And you know what? I’ve seen a country almost get there. All unified, under one leadership, no flags. And all it takes is a few little freedoms done away with. The right wrong people being tidied away. I’ve seen it over and over, but the closer it gets to a reality? The more you realize that it doesn’t work that way. The killing, the suffering? It’s just swept under the rug, out of the public eye. Or- and this oughta sound real familiar- it’s done right there in the streets. Death from above. Keeps the public eye clouded, the public mind real clear on what happens if you step out of line. Efficient, precise- and less and less hope of anyone ever escaping.

"If you really wanna know that something’s going to be worthwhile, and not just take things on other peoples’ say-so, look at the stuff that those very same people are doing now. Because if you dangle a carrot in front of its nose, even a mule will get going, if it’s hungry enough.

"And you’re right- the system is flawed. It’s full of risk and weaknesses that can be abused. People still get hurt. But it also means they have a voice, agency. They get to decide when and how to change. Take that away, and you get people too scared to be anything but mindless drones.

"Look at what people have accomplished,” he says earnestly, the war-bond speech selling bandages and bullets with a fervency that aches. “Look at how far we’ve come, Rumlow- when I went down in the ice, I’d never seen cooperation like we have now. Keeping peace, keeping each other honest, fighting diseases that had killed millions in the past, setting goals for human rights and making treaties to enforce them, bit by bit -

"Imagine how much further along we’d be if Hydra hadn’t been around fueling conflict, sabotaging our peace efforts.”

And suddenly Brock is laughing, as dark and bitter as anything Rogers has let out.

“Your peace efforts?” Brock suddenly snorts. There’s a shaking under his skin, an acid heat in his stomach.

“You are full of shit, Rogers, you and what you’re backing. It ain’t about peace, it’s about control- and you can wrap it up in any flag you like, ‘cause it’s always been about that.

"You ever been on a black site, Cap?" Brock asks when Steve doesn’t immediately answer, wanting to let the slow, thick burn of anger bubble up like tar. “You ever ask SHIELD about the Fridge? About some of the work we did, making sure the ‘dangerous’ people didn’t get a leg up? The wrong kind of people, from the wrong kind of countries? That wasn’t all HYDRA. Wasn’t nearly. You wanna talk hypocrisy, let’s talk hypocrisy- putting in every effort that HYDRA did, and still daring to call themselves a free world. When you can live and die and never have a chance, that ain’t no freedom. Freedom costs, Rogers. Sometimes it costs a whole lot more than you’d like. What good’s freedom when you’re hungry? When you’re scared? When you don’t know what’s gonna happen tomorrow?”
"You really think they would have let me anywhere near something like that?" Rogers says, tilting his head like an offended cat. "I would have broken it open the first chance I got. *You saw what I did to HYDRA- and to SHIELD.* Why would you think I wouldn’t do the same if I saw that happening elsewhere?"

"Because it’s your own."

"A bully is a bully," Steve insists. "’My country, right or wrong. If right, to be kept right. If wrong, to be set right.’ When I saw that things were wrong- I stood up. I fought back. And yes, people got hurt- people always get hurt, when someone else is trying to make a point. But you try and make sure you’re not hurting them ‘for their own good’- and you make sure it’s not in vain. Didn’t you ever notice when things went wrong?"

"There’s a big damn difference between things going wrong and sacrifices needing to be made, Rogers. That’s the whole goddamn point- none of it was supposed to be ‘in vain’! Not what we did to others, not all that we were ready to give ourselves. We take *oaths*- ‘Do not ask anything of others you would not do yourself’ and ‘Peace through Order.’ And if it comes through pain- if it comes through pain, then that’s the price we pay. Me and everybody in my org were ready to *die* to make a better world-!"

"But you didn’t die. You ran. Remember?"

He hadn’t. He couldn’t. Not after.

Not with Ben. Not with Jamie, either.

*Oh just fucking stab me in the chest, Rogers, it’ll feel better- and be over quicker.*

Because he’s right. Because Brock wasn’t willing, in the end. Not for anyone else’s benefit, not because he’d ‘woken up’ to someone else’s ideals. But because he found some selfish little shard of light, he’d turned his back on everything he’d held dear.

The face he turns on Steve has more to do with a grimace than a smile, and he thinks if he were to show his teeth they’d be bloodied.

"And just look at me now. Twice-turned traitor, and all that fucking blood worth *nothing*. I coulda stayed my course, done the right thing- but I didn’t."

Selfish. Wasteful. Putting himself before the rest, right at the moment it mattered most.

And how fucked is it, that he could possibly regret Ben’s life? Just how *fucked* is it that he could be gung-ho about all of it, right up to the point where one tiny sliver of light pulled him away from the dark, righteous path he’d held himself to for so many years?

"Almost thirty years of my life down the drain. You think I don’t know I’m weak? You think I don’t know how much of a *hypocrite* I am? I could do it for anyone else, *everyone* else- my life, my work, everything for HYDRA- but I *choked* at the last second. *Because I was weak.*"

Because you cared.

Because I was weak.

And in this moment he knows he’s fucked himself before the review board, he’s just shown Steve the rotten fucking core of himself. His fundamental flaw.
Shoulders hunched, eyes unseeing and stinging, fixed to the table, he waits for the axe to fall, for Rogers to wash his hands of him like he should. But after a moment of silence, all there is is a soft sigh.

“You wanted to know when you should have asked if what you did was right. When you were supposed to question the intents and methods of your leaders. The thing is, that train left the station a long time ago.

"But if you want to catch up, if you still want to get anywhere… now? Might be a good time to start asking.”

And see. See. This is why Cap is so goddamn dangerous. Why Steve is the siren’s lure, beyond his pretty face and soldier’s body. He fuckin’ burns with it, a righteous glow that draws you in, never knowing you can’t reach above the crab-pot pit of sinners and turncoats.

(Hope is cruel.)

Pretty lights, out in the mist. Ain’t just the Irish have will o’ the wisps.

“What good does it do me now?” Brock finally asks, fighting to keep a tremor out of his voice and failing. He looks up at Steve, wondering how he can get through to him, if he should even try. Hah-seduce Captain America to the dark side. A day late and a whole lotta dollars short, if he were to receive that order now. That impenetrable light is blinding.

How does a man like that understand a man like him?

“Ben is safe. James is where he ought to be- where people can help him. Where you can have him. And I’m- where I can’t hurt anyone else. Everybody’s happy.” Everyone who matters.

He knows. He knows, okay? He’s lucky. He doesn’t deserve what he has. Can’t he just accept that and live under the sword, without having to cut into the rotten parts of himself?

Not like he hasn’t done that before.

“You really believe that? That it doesn’t matter what you do now, besides keep out of the way?”

“Have to. Only way it ever makes sense.”

The alpha goes quiet, watching him just like James does.

This wasn’t even the conversation they’d meant to have. Brock crosses his arms, chafing against his biceps to try and ward off the chill running through him. Steve isn’t looking much happier- probably swiftly reconsidering what concessions he’s made for sake of an inconvenient, unwanted mate, forced on him by a whim of biology and whose only redeeming quality is that he’s a goddamned snitch.

Rogers pushes away from the counter he’s leaning against with a sigh, stepping over to the table. Brock braces for the words that come next. For the blow that hasn’t come yet, but that he knows he deserves.

“You are a goddamn mess, Rumlow.”
Rogers uncrosses his arms, reaches out across no-man’s-land-and gently ruffles Brock’s hair.

This nets him a surprised squawk from the omega, before he turns and heads for the door, stopping as he reaches it to look back over his shoulder at Brock.

“They called me in a few hours ago. No rush, but…I’m going to be out on assignments for a while. Starts with the conference on accountability in the military, and goes from there. No idea if I’ll be back by Christmas- it could be a bit, I owe a lot of favors.”

Brock’s arms drop from around himself. Before the Triskellion, you’d’ve had a hard time dragging Cap to such a blatant publicity stunt with a crowbar and a team of wild horses. Hell, Delgado’d taken snapshots of generals and lobbyists storming out of meetings with Steve- they’d gone up on STRIKE’s intraweb, where contorted old-man faces in various levels of disgust and dismay could be laughed at with impunity. At least- certain old-man faces.

Looks like things have changed since then.

“So you’re gladhanding again, after you told ‘em to go fuck themselves?”

Steve snorts softly, like it’s a joke that’s not even funny.

“I have people to protect,” he says. “Sometimes that means compromising. Even for the ones who don’t understand the kind of compromises you should make, and the ones you shouldn’t.”

Lingering at the door, he looks at Brock with an unreadable expression, not stone, not smiling, but not grim death either.

“I’ll be couriering in scent-packages, for the bond-withdrawal treatment. If you need anything else, let Bucky or Jarvis know. They’ll pass it along.”

And with just a few steps more, while Brock still sits dumbfounded, Steve is gone.

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“What.”

That- that can’t be it. Steve comes in here, makes him think he’s about to get his guts ripped out by snapping dogs, then just- lets the pus boil up and then leaves?

Brock’s left with the whiff of alpha and his own thoughts, a quiet empty kitchen and the dark of the windows. He looks at his half-empty coffee cup, sitting there cold and unbroken. As he picks the damn thing up, dumps out the remaining coffee in the sink, his brain whirls around a thought, halfway tripping over the empty spaces where he had no good answers to the questions he was asked.

Was this a test?
Hey all- yes, once again it's been half a year but I can explain! A) real life B) my brain is not working the way I want it to and C) this one had a lot of things to accomplish in a small space, which was hard to keep up with at the same time as A and B. Thank you, Andartha, for sticking with me and helping make this thing shine.

Hope you all are still enjoying, and please leave commentary below^^ As always, thanks to Bofurrific and Andartha, for the heart and the bones and the joy of making this story.

Tumblr gonna tumbl- 2AM ramblings and cat gifs a given.
Steve steps into the elevator, hits the button that will take him up to the level with the command center and the conference rooms and lets himself sag against the chrome-paneled wall for just one moment.

His head, thrown back, rests against the wall and he takes a deep breath, shivering.

“JARVIS… how is Brock doing?”

“Agent Rumlow appears calm. He just poured away his cold coffee and is now standing at the sink, seemingly lost in thought.”

Steve takes another deep breath, which comes out as a sigh.

“I guess that’s good.”

The door opens with a ding and he pulls it together, hurries down the empty corridor to the small briefing room at the bottom right, that’s been serving as headquarters for this op. He gets the tremble under control, pushes it down, one foot after the other. That’s normal, he tells himself.

The conference-room door is one of those flimsy looking affairs that hide a ton of anti-espionage tech and Sam opens immediately, because of course there’s also enough tech for them to know that he’s coming, even without asking Jarvis. He steps inside and Sam shuts the door firmly behind him.

Nat is sitting in front of a monitor that is silently replaying Steve and Brock’s earlier interaction, fingers steepled in front of her and her eyes focused on the scene with the intensity of a cat watching a mouse-hole.

He looks to them, his friends, his partners on the field- the people who’d helped him tear off the mask HYDRA had been wearing for seventy years and scatter them under the light- and he feels a lot lighter. Sam, who runs toward the fire, jumps through it to save others; and Nat, forged in it, who knows what it is to remake herself from someone else’s tool. If he can trust anybody when he’s not sure, it’s them- just like it was back with the Howlies.

“So, I know what I think after that. But you guys are here to keep me honest- what do you make of him?”

Sam lets himself drop into one of the cushily padded office-chairs, scooting the thing backwards until he’s level with Nat, legs stretched out and his eyes finding hers as she’s turned around to look at him.

For a moment, wordless communication flashes between them as Steve stands there, near to fidgeting like a schoolboy who’s been called in to the principal’s, and then Sam nods and Nat looks up at Steve.

“We have some definite ideas, but we’re still missing a puzzle piece. What was his scent like?”
His scent?

“Milk and- medicine, still, a little.” It’s only been ten days, the dressings are still on. “And- smoke. Bitter-smoky, like when you’ve left things too long and all the subtle tastes are charred. He was not happy, during that- and it got worse when I started laying into him. Was surprised he didn’t snap back right away when I- when I brought up our son.”

Attack an omega right where it hurts- their pup. Hell of a way to go about things, Rogers.

But if it’s the only way to shock past the possible layers of lies Brock has got built up-

Needs must.

Saying ‘this hurts me more than it hurts you’ still feels like a cop-out, though.

There’s another one of those shared glances between Sam and Nat, and Sam leans forward with a small huff.

“That fits with all the rest. Since you came to us, Nat’s been going over older footage from Rumlow. Reports he’s made, testimonies he’s given, silly office videos. Whatever we could get our hands on. Talked to a few people that knew him from before too.”

Natasha’s nose crinkles a bit with indignation.

“Matter of pride. Hydra got the better of me. Not gonna let that happen again. Soo… Rumlow’s good. Excellent even. But I’m pretty sure I know what his tells are by now.”

Sam flashes her a quick smile, the kind a kid might give their best friend as they plot revenge against an underhanded rival, and then turns back to Steve.

“That fits with all the rest. Since you came to us, Nat’s been going over older footage from Rumlow. Reports he’s made, testimonies he’s given, silly office videos. Whatever we could get our hands on. Talked to a few people that knew him from before too.”

Sam flashes her a quick smile, the kind a kid might give their best friend as they plot revenge against an underhanded rival, and then turns back to Steve.

―Long story short- we don’t think he’s lying to you. And he’s definitely starting to crack.” Sam gestures to the screen. “When I first looked at STRIKE’s files after Insight, I thought HYDRA sounded like some kind of- fucked up love-child between a cartel and a doomsday cult. And if anything, that little talk you just had confirms that Rumlow wasn’t in it for fame and fortune- guy’s a fanatic. But a fanatic who just broke with some of his fundamental beliefs, for the sake of his kid.”

It’s been a long time since Steve felt like he couldn’t breathe, but that first rush of real air after- that’s a taste you never forget.

“So you think he’s genuine. At least about Ben.” He believed in what he’d done- Steve’s not sure if that’s worse or better, but it at least gives them a starting point. A place from which to unspool all of the little threads that make up Brock the HYDRA agent, and- maybe- find a way to spin them back into something, someone-

Someone they could be with, that treacherous little voice of hope whispers in his ear.

Or at least someone who could live with himself, while going against what he’d sworn himself to until death.

Sam gives him a reluctant nod. “Yeah, he’s genuine. For someone so obsessed with order, he’s turned unexpectedly chaotic. An unpredictable element.”

And that brings out Nat’s frown, a tiny furrow between her brows that could mean anything between a mild inconvenience to a country on fire.
“That unpredictability? Not necessarily a good thing. In a way, it makes him more dangerous, not less. If *he* doesn’t know which way he’ll end up jumping, neither do I. Or anybody else.”

A puff of laughter escapes Sam, despite the gravity of it all, and he shakes his head.

“You know what I think the main problem with him is? He’s too much like you, Rogers. He doesn’t do things for personal gain or because someone pressured him, oh no. He has to believe in what he’s doing.”

Nat glances at him, a careful blankness turning her eyes into inscrutable mirrors for a heartbeat, then she turns to Steve, eyes narrowed.

“And he could still be a loose cannon. Having a pup was enough to paralyze him into indecision, and he’s shown himself willing to die for Ben, but beyond that? He’s not going to put himself behind any kind of cause without being convinced it’s the right thing to do. And you’re both true believers, even if you’re on different teams, so neither one of you is likely to be willing to let the other really close, as long as you’re still fundamentally different on what’s wrong and what’s right.”

“But he has a sense of it- even if it’s skewed five ways to Sunday,” Steve says, and that- that is something like a relief. For the money, or for the hell of it- for the sick thrill of bringing the world to heel. That, he couldn’t work with. He’s seen it, knows how it works, has no hesitation about stomping it into the ground and salting the ashes.

Treating people like things- that’s where sin begins. No matter the doctrine, no matter the leader. And soldiers don’t get to be saints, but- you have to find your lines.

“Where do we go from here?” he asks, hoping to find that next step.

“Tough call,” Sam says, hands spread wide. “You’re asking him to come back from the edge and act like a human being again- when he’s done everything to be a monster. Now he can’t be the HYDRA boogeyman anymore- so he’s gotta figure out how to work his way back.”

“And I want to make that-” easy? Nothing about this is easy. “-possible, for him.”

Sam’s eyes catch onto his, and he nods, slowly.

“Spoke to a few friends of mine, plus some experts Stark provided who work in rehab for criminals- exit groups for cultists and people working on getting people to leave extremist groups of all flavors. Consensus is, can’t really change someone by main force, can’t walk their path for them- you can only try to show them the way out. And you’re about as far from where he’s at as you can be and still be in the same building.”

“I suppose I’m the best model we have, for prisoner reform of this nature,” Natasha says, looking first at Steve, then down and away for a moment, examining her nails. “And I don’t think- you’d enjoy the way my path back started either. Sometimes, you have to be rough to break through when someone’s been trained to only respect strength.”

He’d done quite a bit of that just now, and his stomach is still aching with the smell of Brock’s distress.

“I really don’t wanna do this again. Especially not since I’m his alpha.”

“Don’t think we’d be friends if you did,” Sam says, and looks over with concern as Nat rests her hand on his shoulder. *Sh*, her lips say, as she turns eyes on Steve.
“I’m not saying he needs more tough talk, any more than I’m saying he needs coddling. He’d probably know what to do with rough treatment, he’s expecting to be converted by force or dropped as useless. Dangled by the big obvious handle he’s got sleeping in the next room. That’s how this usually works in this business,” she says, an expert witness in the rarified world of spy versus spy and agency versus agent. “And that’s what’s terrifying to him. Forgiveness of things like this? Either your friends have bailed you out and are expecting you back in the fold, or here comes the new boss, same as the old boss. Kindness comes with a price, and you’ve offered him just enough that he’s hungry, but knows he can’t afford the meal.”

“That- sounds absolutely horrifying,” Steve says.

“It is. Because a real exit strategy, a real treatment plan? The kind that means you’re a person again, and not just another asset? They’re for the sheep and the small fry. Not for anybody you can still use.”

“I won’t have him by coercion.” Containment is one thing. Making a bond work for real is another, he won’t-

“Don’t worry. I know the game, but I’m not suggesting we play. This is not about blackmail. It’s about showing him a way forward,” Nat says, and the smile that sits on her lips is wistful and wry. “Subtle difference, but I trust I can keep us on the side of the angels.”

“I didn’t have a child or a partner to consider like Rumlow, but just like him, I didn’t attach to people or things. We both learned the hard way to see that as a weakness to exploit. But it also hollows you out. Clint got to me because in the end, because being the Red Room’s best killer wasn’t enough to live for. I knew that in the world’s eyes, I’d earned death in every way. Accepted it as the way my story would end.

“But Clint wasn’t having any of that. Took me to task for what I’d done, while also offering me a way out. It was a huge upset in my world. I thought it was just a new trick, bait that I took because I was weak. So I kept looking for strings.

“Some I found- of course there were some, it was SHIELD and I was dangerous. Others I made up for myself, in order to try and make sense of it all. Because allowing yourself to be a person again? Scary. It means all your debts come due- and you can rack up a hell of a balance in this line of work. Even before you take secret loyalties into account,” Natasha says, wrinkling her nose.

“Coulson was really good at that part. Made sure you knew what your debts were, and that there would be consequences if you reneged on them. But also made sure you knew when you were doing a good job of repaying them. He could let go of the anger at what you’d done, who you’d been- or at the very least, put it away- and make sure you knew that there was a reward to being the kind of person he’d trust. You weren’t off the hook. It was never going to be that easy. But you could make the choices to figure out the maze, and know that someone wasn’t going to knife you over having been wrong.”

“How do I show him that way out, then?”

“Some of it’s not for you to show. Some of it’s for him to want to change.” Olive branches can look like switches out of the corner of your eye. “Changes like that can be transformative. Explosive, even,” she says. “He could still be a loose cannon, Steve.”

“Then- what else can I do for him? Aside from making sure the bond-strain doesn’t make him sicker?”
“Crazy thought,” Sam says, like rehabilitating an ex-HYDRA agent is at all normal. “Rumlow’s- if he’s not bullshitting completely- basing his loyalties off of wanting to make the world better. Tall order. Personally, I wouldn’t have joined a fascist cult to do it,” he says, and there’s a dark glimmer of humor in that, bitter oil on water. “But… when he’s not shouting about ‘order through pain’, I can see where he’s- maybe got a nugget of something. ‘System’s broken beyond repair- better to burn it down and start fresh, than let it keep on grinding’.

“Either he believes that, or someone sold him real hard on it. Righteous words to make the rest go down easy. Suppose we could try taking some of the bite out of them- poison goes where poison’s wanted, but HYDRA seems real careful about encouraging plenty of cracks for that shit to grow in. Now- we run from emergency to emergency. Saving the world from the Big Bads, we handle what no one else can. But I think maybe we gotta up our game on the homefront- take some of the wind out of those ‘burn it down’ sails.”

A tight smile curves the edge of Steve’s lips. “Then I suppose it’s a good thing that I’m going to be meeting up with a LOT of politicians and other major players in the next months.”

A smile, perfectly mirroring Steve’s, flicks across Nat’s face.

“We should ask Pepper, she’s good with this kind of thing. And Tony hates politics even more than you do, but he knows how to play the game.”

Her eyes return to the screen beside her, where Rumlow still sits frozen at the kitchen table.

“He’ll jump to our side, if we can convince him it’s worth it. But he thinks he doesn’t deserve happiness for betraying what he believes in, baby or no- and if he switches, he won’t feel like he deserves happiness for having been wrong. He’s not going to allow himself to really be with either you or Barnes. Not of his own accord.”

At his heart- despite the wear and weariness, despite time telling him that in his bones he is old- Steve is still the guy too poor to finish his art degree, and who faked several backgrounds, trying to join the army because there were things he would not let stand. Who got beat up in alleyways after starting fights he knew he could not win, but who fought them anyway, because the world was not the way it should be.

The filthy, rotten thing is- that some of what Brock says is naggingly, horribly right, even though the way he tried to fix it is the wrongest possible thing. For all the posturing about human rights and nations united for the common good, about having somehow moved on from where they were when Steve went into the ice- there are still too many pockets where cruelty reigns, cowardice rules, and there’s a million and one curses laid upon the common man that he not only accepts as normal, but passes on to his fellows in the hopes that they will leave him be. And people are feeling it. That there’s a quick and easy solution… It’s that kind of quicksilver lie that goes before every big push like HYDRA’s, the one that spreads so far and fast because it is true, in some way- that everything is wrong, and that if only someone could just forcibly make it better-

If only.

Well.

If Steve’s going to be forcibly cheek by jowl with the movers and shakers that let the conditions HYDRA flourished in thrive, then it’s the perfect chance to take the whole thing by the scruff and shake it. Let them know that Captain America, plastered poster-child of their varied and sundry campaigns, has a voice of his own and he is not happy.
If it will also double as bower-building and nest-feathering, then it’s just the kind of thing that fits all three of them, with the kind of extremes they go to on a daily basis.

“We’re gonna have to work on that,” Steve says, because the world needs fixing, and all the better if it goes hand in hand with fixing this strange and delicate thing, between him, Brock and Bucky. And maybe the world at large might be happier if he took care of the debts Brock has incurred by by throwing him into the deepest darkest pits of the Justice Department- but since when did he care about making the world happy when he could make it right?

Looks like making Brock feel worthy is going to be another thing on his to-do list, and that might be even harder. Having your honor shattered at your feet, no matter how stained it is- that can destroy a soul.

Thank God, it’s not a task he’ll have to face all alone. Buck’s going to be more than happy to double-team their wayward mate.

Wouldn’t be the first time they brought someone around to their way of seeing things by coming at a problem from two sides either, the both of them running smoothly together. Worked when they wanted Ma Barnes to allow Bucky to join Steve as a newsie, worked when they had to convince Patton to allow both Jones and Morita to stay with the Howlies.

And damned if they’re not going to make this one work too.

(Brock’s never seen them work together when he and Buck really wanted something. He won’t even know what hit him.)

Steve can feel the start of a grin taking root, and there’s a giddy feeling at the pit of his stomach, that moment before a jump, right into the fray, pulse pounding in his ears.

“Ohhh no, I know that look,” Sam says, and Nat’s nose crinkles as she smiles, shooting Steve a look that sparkles with mischief.

“What, just because I’ve got a plan?” Steve says, but his grin falters, just a little, as he glances past them to the monitor. Brock’s put away his coffee cup, is heading out of the kitchen.

He’ll need comforting tonight.

“I know your plans. Call me when the explosions start,” Sam shakes his head. “Why do I get the feeling me and Col. Rhodes are going to end up commiserating over you and the swathe you leave?”

“Because it’s absolutely true,” Nat murmurs. “I’ll bring the good vodka.”

“Har har,” is Steve’s reply, but he couldn’t do this without them, could he? No. “I know it’s a rough job to ask, but- look out for him? While I’m away? Sharon and Kruger are going to push him hard in interrogation. With him being something between captured enemy agent and loose canon, it’s not something we can get around. Or should. But he’s going to need people holding the door out open for him, same as Clint and Coulson did for Natasha. ”

There’s a half-groan from Sam that might also qualify as a laugh, if one squinted hard enough.

“Wouldn’t want to miss out on the spectacle of you getting somebody other than me into trouble for all the money in the world. Especially not since you’re gonna be doin’ it from afar and probably teaming up with Barnes to do it.”

“Pretty sure a team of wild horses couldn’t keep Buck from getting involved once I tell him I want
to go ahead with this, and got a green light from the two of you.”

Nat grins.

“You sure can pick’em, Steve. If this works out, your mates are going to end up tag-teaming you when you try to do something really stupid, and they’re both just as stubborn as you are, you know that, right?”

“I’m looking forward to it,” Steve says with a grin, and he is, he truly is. This is a long shot. He knows it. But what worth doing, who worth holding, was ever easy?

It’s not just for the tiny son sleeping in his crib, not just for Bucky holding on with spit and vinegar and too much love to burn out of him completely. Not just for himself, wanting to hold on selfishly and hard to all three, hope turned into terrible vulnerability. Something brought Brock to where he is now, something slow and cracking and terrible that shaped his choices- and if he wants, genuinely wants to turn away from where he’s come to… what can Steve do, but try to help him?

“Guys, I gotta talk to Bucky after this. I think- I think this has a chance.”

Sam buries his face in his hands, groaning and Nat snickers.

“Well Rogers, what are you waiting for? We got this and we’ll keep you updated. Once you’re on the road, start setting something up with Tony where we can talk, throw a few ideas around.”

She closes the laptop she’s been working on and it closes with an almost silent snickt, disappearing into a slim office-bag as she tidies up the workplace and rises.

“And while you do, we’ll hold down the fort. And in that vein...I should go to bed. Meeting with Maria tomorrow morning and if you think that I keep ungodly hours…”

She kisses Sam’s brow, who takes her hand and squeezes it gently, and then she’s out the door.

Between that moment and the next, Steve is ready to make his good-byes too, but Sam catches him, face gone serious, and the giddy wind in Steve’s sails suddenly dies down.

“Not so fast, man. We talked about your mate, but... really, how are you holding? You’ve got big plans and that’s great and all, but you look like shit, Steve.”

“I just spend half an hour ganging up on my bonded mate until he nearly broke, Sam. I feel like shit. Dog shit.” Sick with himself and with the hurt in Brock’s eyes, the really real stuff, and holding the line against it because it had to be pressed. “I’m- alphas aren’t supposed to do that. Not good ones. And this- I know it’s needed. It still feels wrong.”

“Not gonna tell you that there’s nothing wrong. It’s fucked up, Steve, and I’m helping because after all that digging we did- I’m willing to admit there might be a chance. A slim one,” Sam emphasizes.

He pauses briefly, a wry smile sneaking onto his face as he continues.

“You wanna build that three-way into something real, start with what you got. You and Barnes wanna be rock solid once mister order-through-pain there starts to tilt your way.

“So- go get some snuggle-time with your other fella,” Sam says after a soft pause, waving him off. “And don’t go getting all guilty over it, you hear? You’re gonna need it, if that’s how this is rolling.”
It’s all the excuse Steve needs and just a few minutes later, he’s riding the elevator to the conservatory, where, according to Jarvis, “Agent Barnes has found himself a branch up on one of the higher trees, near the window, and is, I believe, star-gazing.”

It’s quiet as Steve knocks on the conservatory door, quietly lets himself inside. It’s an amazingly clear night for December, and Stark’s got something on the windows that does a decent job of filtering the city light, or maybe it’s just the height.

No wonder Bucky loves it.

He wanders through, letting his footfalls sound as he makes for the taller trees, hunting with his eyes for a shadow out of place, the gleam of starlight on metal as he approaches the enormous panes of glass.

“Hey, Buck.”

His feet have carried him to a mossy patch, right underneath a tall oak, where he spotted a glint of something, and where the silence and the quiet seem deeper than in the rest of the conservatory.

He stops, holds himself still, waiting. After a couple of heartbeats, there’s a soft, almost inaudible thump, even to his enhanced ears, as a large shadow drops to the ground in front of him.

Jarvis subtly turns up the light in their area, and in the soft glow, Bucky rights himself and takes a step towards Steve, eyes bright and head slightly cocked to one side, wordless questions written all over his face. There’s a tension to his frame, like a deer startled by a noise in the woods, unsure whether to return to grazing on the tender greens or bolt.

“I had the talk with Brock,” Steve starts. He sees Bucky’s eyes widen, the desperate perk of his head, and gives him the hint of a soft smile, the offer of his arms.

“I think- I think we got a shot at this, Buck. I really do.”

And Buck falls into his arms, presses his head against his alpha’s chest with a thump, dark hair ragged against his collar.

“Told ya. Told ya…” he whispers.

“I know…” Steve murmurs, holding him tighter, tight as can be. “I know. I had to see for myself.”

The tension bleeds from the omega’s shoulders as he leans into the hug, sighing with something that might be either relief or contentment. Maybe both.

“Course you had t’see for yourself, stubborn ol’ sap that you are. And... and I know you can’t trust me anymore, not like you usedta, because... because of what they did. Because of what I’ve become. But... I’m not wrong. Not about him.”

The Soldier’s scent had been practically doused with neutralizer, to the point where your nose told you there was nobody there, even though your eyes said different. When they brought Buck and Brock in, the burn of gunpowder had almost overpowered all other notes that spelled out “James Buchanan Barnes”.
But here and now, the gunpowder has faded into the background like it used to, when Bucky and him would lie side by side on the cramped little bed in Steve’s apartment, reading as the September rain drummed against the window.

Steve buries his nose in that sweet spot behind Buck’s ear, inhaling deeply, the long-lost notes of wool mingled with tobacco and crisp cold days, with maybe a hint of rain on the horizon filling his heart to the brim, so full it almost stumbles.

His breathy “...but I’m your stubborn ol’ sap…” is barely audible.

Buck makes an approving hum in his throat, and squeezes a little tighter. He nuzzles against Steve’s neck, returning the scent-seeking, and suddenly the desperation is back, this time fervent rather than fearful.

“D’you- really- have to go?” the omega murmurs, hands roaming over his mate’s back, soft lips backed by just the edge of teeth against the skin of Steve’s neck.

“You know I do-” he gasps, tilting his head to let Bucky at more of his skin. “I wouldn’t if I didn’t have to. Gotta keep you both s-safe-”

Bucky’s fingers tug at Steve’s shirt and his hands slip underneath it, seeking skin.

“...better make sure you have something to remember us by then, right?”

There’s a sharp intake of air and a gasp and Steve pulls back so that he can look his mate straight into the eye.

“You sure about this? You’re still trying to find your feet and… Buck. I love you. I want you. And we can take this as slow as you need to, because I will ALWAYS come back to you.”

Buck’s looking at him, eyes seeking something in his own, over his face. He apparently likes what he finds, because he smiles, soft like snow melting in the dawn.

“Wanna build up a good head a’ scent for you to leave behind- I’m not fragile, not about this. Want you, baby... and if I gotta tap, we’ll still have each other.”

A soft kiss lands on Bucky’s brow and then Steve takes a step away and lets himself fall backwards, hitting the soft, mossy ground with a soft laugh and an audible thump, arms wide spread.

“Bucky… Buck… you want me, you got me.”

His shirt is riding up, baring a wide strip of skin, a dusky silver in the moonlight and his teeth flash in a brief smile.

“Want my scent soaked deep into your skin- so deep it can’t wash out… oh, Buck, you’ve got me any way you want to.”

Steve takes a slow breath, shaky and uneven, rattling in his chest.

“And with me having to leave- even if it’s just for a few weeks… when I just got you back… Buck, I could really do with your scent being soaked into mine.”

“Yeah- yeah, you look like you need it, pal,” Buck murmurs, and he sinks down easy, no creak in his knees to match his ragged look. His good hand finds the skin Steve’s flashing, easing under the shirt’s hem and pressing warm against him.
“Too damn skinny, you know that? Who’s responsible for this, you need to keep up your strength,” he says, teasing up and down the alpha’s ribs, skimming over his belly and up to spread over one broad pec.

“You need the both of us lookin’ after you…”

“And I’m gonna let you. In every way you want to. As soon as I’ve made sure that the two of you are safe from the fallout. And after that… Brock. He’ll need to figure out a few things for himself.

“Where he really stands. What he wants. If he thinks he can give us a chance. And if he can forgive himself.”

Steve lays his hand on top of Bucks’ where it rests on Steves’ chest. Their fingers intertwine and Steve squeezes gently.

“Gonna need some help, convincing him. You game?”

“Baby…” Bucky grins, slow and wide and full of the first shine of happy tears. “Been wanting that for a while.” He leans down over Steve, covering the alpha with his own body and starting to purr softly. He wants all of the contact, the warm, sweet touch he’s been denying himself, cautious beyond telling.

“Wanna see you both light up- fall into each other, smell home on your skins-” he whispers, nuzzling against his mate’s shoulder, the cords of his neck, the shell of his ear and line of his jaw, rasping stubble on cloth. “Raise our babies together-”

Steve groans and arches beneath him, scent thickening into an intense cloud of sheer want, blood flooding his cock in such a heated rush, it leaves him aching and shuddering. Buck’s painting a pretty picture with his words, and Steve can’t help but spin the tale further, the way they used to-building a thousand happy endings for themselves, even when there were cannons bellowing in the distance.

“Yeah… make love to both of you, fall asleep after, all of us wrapped up in each other, one big pile…”

His hands, large and hot, find Bucky’s ass and squeeze gently, the shift that goes with it pressing the omega up against his alpha’s erection, which in the space of just a few heartbeats has grown to an impressive size.

“Gonna give you the babies you always wanted… the babies we planned on if we ever made it back home alive….’lil brothers ‘n sisters for baby Ben.”

It should feel- unlucky, to whisper these things aloud. Like they’re saying them too soon, wishes and might-be’s, barest possibilities that could evaporate like fairy gold in the light of day. The way they did the last time.

Instead, with his mate in his arms again- it feels like setting eyes on the horizon, and determining to take it.

Bucky looks down at him, mouth open in a soft pant. His eyes are livid and lust-dark, his lips soft and pink in a slowly blushing face.

“Gotta show him- gonna make a place for him-”

“I will. Soon as I can get back, I promise-” Buck rocks against him, rubbing the now damp spot of
his pants up and over Steve’s leaking hard-on and cutting off his breath in the same moment. “Fuck, baby-.”

The delicious friction leaves Steve panting and nearly incoherent. A pat of his hand on Bucky’s flank makes the omega sit back for a moment, with Steve reaching out to undo his lover’s pants. He pauses briefly before touching the buttons, his eyes finding Bucky’s, who smiles and nods, teeth flashing in the soft light.

The sound of the buttons coming undone seems loud in the suddenly hushed silence, and Bucky goes for Steve’s fly in turn, fingers shaking.

The familiarity of peeling each other out of their respective clothes, tugging at the cloth, hissing softly when the suddenly too tight garments no longer confine them…..each movement falling into place like knowing where to find your favourite book on the shelf….it all somewhat offsets the giddy nervousness of re-learning the steps to a melody they both thought they’d never dance to again.

A little shift and they lie side by side on the soft moss, shirts rucked up, hands gliding under and exploring warm skin. Bucky’s leg is curled over Steve’s, with the alpha’s large hand gently wrapping around both of their cocks, slowly jacking them off with. His fingertips find Bucky’s cunt on the downstrokes, fingering the folds, spreading the slick that gathers there like morning dew, making Buck moan with it.

Bucky’s skimming his fingers his alpha’s nipples, teasing the hardening nubs, drawing a series of soft growls from Steve and then silencing them into voiceless gasps as his lips hungrily capture his mate’s.

It fans the flames, kindles them into something more primal, and Steve lets go, rolls onto his back while pulling Bucky with him, giving his mate space to rut up against him as his hands grab Bucky’s ass, press him up tight against him. Buck’s hips jerk, their lengths squeezed together tight in the slick space between their bellies, with Steve providing a steadying hand, holding them at the perfect angle to get the electrifying friction just right when Bucky rolls his hips and his cunt presses up against Steve’s cock too.

Buck nips at Steve’s shoulder, moans as he shudders on top of him, and Steve can feel the clench of his mate’s opening, pressed down against the bulge of the his cock, spurting between them. Steve grips him close, buries his face in Bucky’s dark hair, and sobs for breath against him.

It’s been forever and it’s been a handful of years and it’s just- just damn right for a second. The burst of Bucky and musk and happy omega is like a shock via the nostrils right through to the brain, and starbursts are followed with soothing purring.

Each new breath he takes feels sweet and life-giving, a last-minute pardon after almost suffocating, not unsimilar to the respite of an asthma-attack passing, air entering his body once more after the fear and horror of his failing lungs threatening to condemn him to an early death.

Sighing deeply and contented, Steve nuzzles against that sweet spot behind Buck’s ear, his large hands stroking and petting Bucky, the rumble of his mate’s purr echoing in his own chest.

“Good things come to those that wait, your mom used to say, remember?”

“Usually when my kid sisters were pestering her for sweets,” Buck snorts softly.

“Yeah- and she’d hold me up as a shining example, and you’d roll your eyes where she couldn’t see? Because you knew maybe I didn’t care that much about sweets, but there were plenty of things
I’d get into a fight for. No patience to wait for things getting better on their own. Saved my ass often enough for you to know. This time round though? Gonna be slow going. And I hate that. But for once? I’m going to take your mom’s words to heart. If we take this slow and steady, good things will start happening. We just need to keep at it.”

“Not givin’ up on him,” Bucky breathes, a statement and a request for reassurance all in one.

“No. Not giving up at all,” Steve says. “Not him. Not you. Not us.” For a few minutes it’s just like that, laying warm and contented in the silence of the conservatory, smelling the tamed trees and listening to each others’ breathing.

“I went hard on him, Buck.,” Steve finally murmurs, stroking his hand through Bucky’s rough-cut hair, shaggy with a month’s growth but clean and soft beneath his fingers, against his chin. “He’s gonna be raw. And I’m hoping I got it right, between cracking the shell and- keepin’ him in one piece. But I’m dead scared that I went too far, that between our side and Hydra, he’s gonna break- so keep an extra sharp eye on him?”

“Whadda ya think I’ve been doing, babe?” Bucky rasps, amused, and snuggles under his alpha’s chin.

Steve chuckles and hugs his mate, because if he doesn’t hold on tight to something, he might just float away on the next cloud drifting by.

“I think you were doing the right thing, Buck, and it’s a good thing you did. Workin’ on saving both of your mates- stubborn asses that we are.”

They snuggle up against each other for a few minutes, then Bucky pulls back and sits up with a sigh.

“Gotta get back to our livin’ quarters, take care of our kid. Benji’s already good at sleepin’ for a bit, an’ I asked Jarvis to give me a holler if he wakes up- but even if he’s sound asleep now, he’ll probably wake up soon, and I’m the one who should be on duty now, so…..”

A wistful smile flicks over Steve’s face as he sits up too, starting to pull on the clothes he divested himself of earlier.

“And I have a Quinjet to catch, damnit.”

He leans in, even as Bucky leans over, towards him, and their lips find each other in a quick, almost desperate kiss, before they pull apart again.

Steve is the first to get up once they’re dressed and he offers his hand to his mate.

“I’ll be in touch frequently. I’ll text you, call you… send pics and postcards. Scent packages. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Buck squeezes his hand, pulls it up to press a kiss to his knuckles. His eyes are soft and contented above, like a cat’s that’s got the sunny spot.

“G’wan… get your errands done. We’ll be here when you get back…”
I know. Same excuse- work, brain, dissatisfaction. But I love this story and all of you, and I hope you're all still enjoying yourselves.

Boferrific and Andartha, heart and bones.
Sharon goes through the crate, picks up the strongbox Steve mentioned to her. It’s been opened and closed again, the contents well catalogued. An old, leather-bound book full of recipes, a St. Martin medal, three antique silver cups and an equally old pike’s-head.

If she had just uncovered a drug-runner’s load stuffed into a teddy-bear, her face couldn’t be grimmer, but the paper-work’s already all been filled out and so she stuffs the box into the bag destined to be dropped off at Stark Tower, where it will be stored with Steve’s other personal effects that he hasn’t had time yet to unpack.

*Rumlow certainly made sure to get his hook into Rogers’ right off the beat. Family is one of the weak spots Steve has, and thanks to these “heirlooms”, Rumlow couldn’t have painted a brighter picture of long-standing family connections if he’d tried. Pretty sure the bastard got all of these somewhere during a yard-sale on a dare while drunk or something, but it’s exactly the kind of yarn Rogers would fall for.

He’d want to fall for, anyway.

Kruger is handling the face-to-face- *she’s* handling the background research, cross-referencing and picking out all the little lies she can find, trying to find how Rumlow- and all his crew- had slipped in through the cracks, trying to find where it all went *wrong*.

Breath. Center.

She’d come to the physical evidence locker because her eyes had been blurring, going over report after report, endless reams of data from both in and out of SHIELD’s records. She’s been field ops for most of her time, but profiling is an important skill in an agent, and they’ve got few hands in the wake of everything coming down around their ears. They got blind-sided by Hydra, *she* got blind-sided by Hydra, and it’s *vital* that she not make the same mistakes twice.

Especially not now. It’s a delicate situation.

Steve’s an important asset and this could compromise him. More important, he’s grandma Peggy’s *friend*, the one she used to tell Sharon bedtime stories about and that brought a lively shine to Peggy’s eyes, made her sit straighter, no matter how worn and grey she looked during the fractious family dinners with Sharon’s parents.

Lips set into a tight line, she continues to rummage in the small crate marked “personnel effects” by some either spelling-impaired or badly sleep-deprived intern, promoted beyond their rank in a desperate attempt to fill the gaps torn by the fall of the Triskelion, and compares its’ contents to the packing list, eyeing the contents she unearths like a puzzle.

There’s no denying that there’s potential in the situation, too. Of the Hydra files that were spilled all over, many are still encoded, with not even Stark’s algorithms being able to crack them, like locks that have no keys… or even doors. To make things worse, what they *can* read often lacks context to make sense of it, it’s like Hydra developed their own version of windtalkers. And it’s not like they have access to other Hydra agents who had Rumlow’s clearance level they could ask.
So as it stands, Rumlow’s giving them intel, filling in the blanks, but he’s mostly giving them stuff they either know already or which is outdated. Getting anything new and relevant from him is like trying to squeeze water from a stone. Especially since they’re not even sure where to begin, where to insert the damn lever to get something that will allow them to crack Hydra wide open.

Not that she’s surprised at his recalcitrance. Even if Rumlow was what he seemed to be, a spider caught in its own web, giving it all up for the sake of a pup—turning traitor wouldn’t come easy. Worse, he might still be playing coy because he’s biding his time, gathering what intel he can, waiting for Hydra to extract him so he can stab them all in the back one more time.

And intel is only worth something if it’s trustworthy. With Rumlow, they haven’t even yet quite figured out which town he really comes from, because of course Hydra falsified their operatives’ backgrounds seven ways to Sunday. Easy to do, when the people doing the background checks were theirs.

Granted, she and Kruger could just ask Rumlow, but since they also need to figure out his weak spots, turn up the heat, preferably without using an innocent child as leverage, they can’t give him time to spin a tale of his choosing, let him brace for impact with this kind of thing.

Growling beneath her breath, she lifts a few things aside— an autographed baseball, a lemonade bottle with Japanese kanji, a pretty box with mother-of-pearl inlays that shape an apple tree heavy with fruit.

_Hm._

She checks her list. It says “tree box + baby shoes”.

It takes a moment to read through that line again, and then a long pause before she reads through it a third time. _Mu_, she thinks, _question null, please re-ask._

The box is a pretty piece. She’s no expert on antiques but it doesn’t seem at all shoddy when she lifts the lid, carefully placing it back to show an interior lined with red felt. Inside, knocked around a bit by the shuffling of evidence baggers, are a tiny pair of pink shoes.

They’re leather, and they fit right in the palm of her hand. Sized for she has to assume an average infant, almost pristine. Of course it wouldn’t make sense for the bottoms to be scuffed-

There’s a pair of white roses embroidered on the toes, a little crooked in some spots. It’s perhaps the sweetest thing she’s ever seen, and entirely incongruous with everything she knows about Commander Brock Rumlow, STRIKE Team Alpha- and agent of HYDRA.

The sweetest thing.

_They say that sugar boiled over-long is napalm—_

_How dare he._

Agent 13 does not lose her temper. Sharon Carter is perhaps a little bit _sharp_ when she shuts the lid on those tiny shoes, lips pressed tightly together.

Of all the dirty, emotionally manipulative _tricks_-

She’ll have to find out when these were bought, run them through the usual gauntlet of forensics to place their exact when, what and where, but it’s starting to paint a picture— classic in theme but bold and brassy and _vulgar_ in its execution.
Honey-trap. Draw in Steve as ‘one of the guys’, playing up that liminal role that omega men often occupy. Be the companion he needed, physical and emotional—a buddy, a confidant, and eventually a lover. Whereas her role had been to observe at a distance, trying to watch from the outside without intruding, he was under no such compunctions. And if, in the process of this budding intra-office relationship, the birth-control were to fail?

A super-soldier baby, either born and raised under HYDRA, or as fetal tissue to analyze. A distraction just at the right time, a kidnapping victim in potentia, a trusted mate ready and able to slip in the knife—all just possible uses of a many, many-pronged tool.

And here’s a convenient prop, just right for appealing to the sentiment of an old-fashioned alpha, lonely and lost in the future.

If it weren’t for the cool head that had been drilled into her over the years, Sharon thinks her ears would be steaming.

And oh, of course there’s a slim chance, rare like a snowball in hell, that this might not be a prop for this tragic drama, betrayal and all, but a—a précieux relic, part of a backstory worthy of one of those lovely, classic romances that has soft-hearted mothers all-over reaching for the tissue-box.

But anyone who could think so… they don’t know about the sordid tales buried deep in Hydra’s files, like ancient temples hidden in the sand, halfway unearthed by persistent digging.

The career of a university professor in the late 80s, well known for his liberal rhetoric, brought to an abrupt stop after his salacious affair with a freshman student is dragged through the media. **Brock.**

A promising young alpha biochemist who went missing in the 90s after a brief but passionate affair with an omega he met when his car broke down and the dark-haired beauty stopped to help him fix it. **Brock.**

A mob boss a few months later acquiring a pretty new mistress, proudly showing off the guy who’s a bit of a firecracker for an omega. And being found gruesomely murdered not too long after, making way for his second, who is much more amenable to making deals with the shadowy organisation that has been creeping into the neighbouring territories. **Brock.**

*He’s done this before. He’ll do it again.*

*I can’t LET HIM.*

Given what she knows—yes, the baby-shoes are either a prop he planned to snare Steve with, or a trophy from an earlier conquest. And there’s no amount of wand-waving that will be able to turn this into a magic fairy-tale, where the toad turns out to be an ensorcelled prince.

*Fuck.*

**FUCK.**

She sets the box aside, gently and so slowly, with a care that seems almost exaggerated. Balls her hands into fists and presses them against her thighs until they’ve stopped shaking.

She’ll have to confirm it, of course. Make sure she’s not failing to see the woods for all the trees, no matter what her gut is telling her.

But she already dreads having to tell Steve, to see the dark hurt creep into his eyes even as he keeps a stiff upper lip that would put her grandmother to shame.
And Barnes… shit.

There’s been books and movies about him and his relationship with Steve, the very popular but less historically accurate ones painting him as a sweet but feisty omega, who followed his one true love to war.

But she’s listened to stories about the Howlies, sitting on Duggan’s knee as a toddler and as a teen on a quiet, rainy afternoon over tea, told in a quiet voice by Morita, and she knows Barnes had bristly and brittle edges, orbiting Steve both like a moth would a flame… or like a mother hen brooding over her chick. Going by the reports, he dances to that very same tune for his omega-sister too now.

It would hit Steve hard, to have his hopes dashed. She has no idea what it will do to Barnes.

She’d give her right arm, if only she could turn into the kind of fairy-godmother who swoops in and sets things right. Song, dance, and sprinkle of stardust optional. Reality seems more inclined to cast her as the hangman instead.

One thing she won’t do- is condemn someone on shoddy paperwork, no matter how strong her gut feeling is. And if her renewed vigor in attacking the mountain is fueled by anger, well- evidence doesn’t lie. There’s sweeps and scanners and all manner of useful tools Stark’s put at their disposal, and she’s no slouch herself when it comes to cross-referencing.

First things first- find one true thing (there’s almost always something, you don’t live this long without getting entwined in places), and pull that thread. Follow it, until you find the knot, and then unpick that. And so on…

The shoes, the effects, all of it goes to forensics and after she’s returned to her office, they get back to her surprisingly quickly.

Examination of the baby shoes yields two results: a tiny drop of old blood in the stitching confirms that they’ve been in Rumlow’s possession for well over two decades. And as luck would have it, they belonged to a faulty lot that had been sold off cheaply at a bargain price, but not in New York, which Rumlow’s files claim as his origin.

Maybe Hydra made sure their agent’s records were well-falsified, but once you have a starting point like this, you can sort the wheat from the chaff, spot the tell-tale traces, almost unavoidable since even a well-faked background needs to be plausible and stand up to the pitfalls of everyday life. The best lies need truth as their basis.

It takes Sharon a few days to meticulously cross-reference these hints with the area where the shoes were sold, but the moment she’s done, it brings her to a small town in upstate New York where Brock is from. One Robert Rumlow had moved to a trailer-park there with a four-year-old omega boy in tow, after having bounced around New York State for some years, with a long stint in Brooklyn before moving out to the countryside, or as near as could be found.

Something tugs on that, and while Hydra managed to keep the information completely offline, a call to the local library has her hit pay-dirt. Soon she’s hip-deep in microfiche copies of local newspapers and old town records, finding a couple of generations there by the same name.

And then- something big pops for her.

*Local Sports Star Found Attacked. Armed robbery at local store. Arrest made. Charges pending.* Multiple articles, over several weeks- this had been big news, back in the day, and just in the right time-frame to have been Rumlow’s defining moment, his big break-
The thing that had drawn HYDRA’s eye to him.

It’s the right name. Right face, less a few decades, plus some truly hideous hair. A reputation for trouble. Tried as an adult because he was one at the time, a newly-minted eighteen. Unapologetic at his sentencing.

The face of the boy whose life he’d ruined is front and center on the article.

With a face, she has a name. With a name, she has a number. And with a number…

*I’ve got a lead*.

Now comes the old-fashioned detective work. Time to see if any of the Millers were still at the old number…

The call gets picked up at the second ring and the “Miller residence, hello?” comes in a soft, almost melodious voice.

Sharon introduces herself gently, the gasp on the other end of the line still unavoidable when she drops the word “CIA”.

Reassurances that there is no need to worry, that this is about research into events long-past buy Sharon a few moments of calm before the storm- but then the name “Brock Rumlow” drops.

The older woman’s voice quivers.

“Now why would you go and bring up a horrible thing like that?”

The next few minutes are spent making soothing noises as Mrs. Miller quietly sobs, and through it all Sharon gets a brief glimpse into the past, as the woman’s barely intelligible litany tells of her poor son, mourning how he was crippled and robbed of his bright future so many years ago.

Sharon grits her teeth, fist buried in her pocket, and patiently coaxes the crying woman back to the here and now. It nets her a meeting date for a quiet chat and the names of a few other people around the area which might be worth interviewing. Her go-bag is packed and ready and the few hours’ drive is plenty long enough to tailor her research strategy to the new information she’s unearthed.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for your lovely comments^^ Hope you enjoy!
Chapter 57

Chapter by Weirdlet

Brock wakes to the grey morning light filtering in through the windows, and the soft sounds of Jamie nursing Ben as he lies beside him, the other omega’s back radiating heat, warming him from behind.

He lies there, breathing shallow, taking it all in but not moving. Last night shifted the almost familiar and he finds himself once again a stranger in a strange land, not sure if this is the day where Barnes will remember just how much of a hand Brock had in his captive misery. Until Rogers had brought it up last night, hitting him again with the horror of it in full technicolour, the chilling memories had started to fade even for him, bleached out by the shining constant of Barnes sticking by his side come hell or high water.

Bucky shuffles a bit closer, until his back touches Brocks’, starts making little cooing sounds that segue into a sweet lullaby. There’s a scent clinging to him, of sweet content and alpha and other things that don’t belong to traitors.

It lures Brock like a siren’s song and he huffs softly, unable to hold himself stiff and away- he lets James press up against his back, melts a little into it. He’s raw inside, staring into the dark of himself- but there’s still this moment of softness, the quiet before the long ache of the day begins. Jamie’s hand reaches back over his hip, seeks his rough fingers to intertwine with his.

Resisting would be the right thing to do, but it seems so pointless. Why rob the man nursing his son of the comfort he asks for?

A little squeeze, a sigh as Brock finally acknowledges that he’s awake.

“How’s my little man today?” he whispers, staying back to back with James.

“Hungry- looks just like you when you’re cranky,” the other omega teases, just as softly. His voice is getting better, and his will to use it- that’s good.

“You hanging around today?” Don’t sound too eager, you’ll come off desperate.

“Might,” Bucky responds, adding a gentle thumb-stroke against Brock’s wrist. “The atrium- it’s really. It feels good,” he finishes, and the hesitation is enough for Brock. He’s going to be spending the day in interview anyway, so what does it matter how Jamie spends his time?

“You do that,” he murmurs back, and means it with all his heart.

He can fend for himself for a day.

Not that Bucky quite lets him. Once he’s done nursing, little Ben is placed at Brock’s side, yawning and making quiet little mumbling sounds, with Brock admiring the rosy-cheeked miracle he’s curled up around.

Bucky smiles down at them and promises to return with food, eyes warm and alive in a way that stabs at Brock’s heart. He’s seen that expression far too rarely on his bonded’s face and guess who’s responsible for that-

Brock pulls the blankets close around himself and little Ben and he must’ve dozed off, for by the time Barnes returns, bearing a sumptuous breakfast on a tray for both of them, the sun is bathing the
city outside in pale golden light that glints off the still pristine dusting of snow that must’ve fallen over night.

“If we’re lucky, we’re gonna get a white christmas.”

As Brock sits up, taking great care not to wake his sleeping son, the former Fist of Hydra gently sets down the tray on the bed where they both can comfortably reach it and then slips back under the covers and snuggles close, his hip pressing up against Brock’s as he picks up a flaky, buttery croissant and takes a bite, an expression of bliss spreading on his face as he licks the crumbs from his fingers.

“Kinda glad I get to spend it in a place that rivals the Hilton for comfort,” he murmurs. “Didn’t have central heating in the 20s. Or the 30s or 40s, even though my parents were middle-class. An’ during the war, we were lucky if we could spend a few days in a house or a barracks that had a roof an’ a boiler where we didn’t have to worry about getting shot at.”

His Brooklyn accent has turned thick as honey and he takes another bite of the croissant, makes a noise of pleasure that is almost obscene.

“Damn… I’d forgotten how good these were.”

Brock’s gone quiet, one hand wrapped around the cup of tea he poured himself, but not taking a sip. Bucky reaches out, gently touches his arm.

“I know we still have a rough road ahead, sweetheart. But we’ll get there. Together.”

He gives a light squeeze, the metal fingers on Brock’s shoulder as delicate in their touch as a real hand would be, and his smile settles down to something more contemplative, the easy change between emotions something that should be normal, but very much unlike the puppet Brock took care of for Hydra or the almost wraith that came to haunt him in a cabin in the woods. It makes Brock itch all over like a sheep’s-wool sweater worn on bare skin, even as Bucky goes on, his voice soft.

“Both you an’ Steve… you don’t do it easy, enjoyin’ the small things in life when sumthin’s buggin’ you. But I’m startin’ to remember I used to. Used to be I could badger Stevie into relaxin’ a little when he needed it. An’ I’m thinkin’ you could use some of that too. World ain’t gonna be better for it if ya munch on your breakfast like it’s made outta cardboard. But my ma used to say, it’s easier t’navigate life’s stumblin’ blocks if you’ve nourished the soul as well as the body.”

For all that the words eagerly jostle each other and try to slip out, Brock can’t disagree with that, and instead buries any intelligible response in the crisp body of a croissant. As he eats, he has to shift a bit, leaning out over the tray to avoid dusting Benji with crunchy flakes of outer dough, and if the whole thing feels like a dream, at least the sensation of real food is grounding.

Sometimes it feels like it’s the only tether keeping him from flying apart, the ritual of the motions of caring, and the approximation of same that follows. It doesn’t even have to be good food- though pride and practice says like hell will I allow a bad meal to be had here.

Bucky, newly chatty as he is and delighting in Stark’s selection of bread-products, seems to agree.

They sort themselves out after breakfast, Brock packing up Benji in his sturdy carrier. All the bells and whistles go into the bag, and he himself slips into clean sweats and a tee- simple, easy to remember, not too harsh on the stitches or his fully-occupied, lightly foggy brain.
“You- have a good day,” he says to Bucky as they part, packed lunches in tow, and he really means it. He feels like he’s saying goodbye to a beloved stranger, and it feels like he’s dragging that dreamy feel of early morning behind him like a cloak when he goes towards Interview. Maybe sitting down with Kruger will be the black-coffee slap in the face that chases it away.

Then again, maybe not.

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The interview with Kruger stretches itself out until the early afternoon with the vague unpleasantness of chewing-gum that got stuck under your shoe. Like a blind man, the SHIELD agent stumbles through unfamiliar terrain, to the point where Brock just wants to shout at him to get on with it. He could give Kruger a few useful pointers, but for fucks sake, if they can’t figure out even the basics for themselves, they don’t deserve to have that kind of intel. You don’t go handing grenade-launchers to toddlers either.

Late afternoon finds Brock in the kitchen, chopping up tomatoes and toasting slices of bread for a light supper as Ben sleeps in his bassinet nearby. The place is too damn quiet. Where are Whelan with his stupid jokes or Jack with his somber, comforting presence when you need them? Ah, yeah, right. On the run and possibly ordered to shoot me on sight. Soldier’s off to discover who Bucky Barnes is and Mr. Star-Spangled is busy cleaning up the mess I made.

Hell with this. He finishes up with the bruschetta prep, washes his hands and then grumps down to the in-unit laundry. It’s hidden discreetly in the walls of this overlarge apartment, but once you know where to go it’s easy enough to find.

The last loads haven’t been run. He digs, organizes the actual washing itself to his liking and sets it to scrub because this is his life, somehow- and makes off with his prize back to the couch.

Benji is gently pulled over to rest by his head, in easy reach, and Brock settles in for a damn nap. Face buried in one of Steve’s shirt’s, slightly stained with sweat, because it makes Brock feel better about the clusterfuck he finds himself in.

Yes, he’s spite-napping. So sue him.

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Bucky finds Brock hours later, just as the sun is setting over the New York Skyline, tightly cuddled around Steve’s shirt. Ben is just coming awake and Bucky picks him up, retreats to the neighbouring couch to feed him.

His mate looks ragged, brow furrowed even in sleep, stubble that’s grown to an almost-beard shading his cheeks.

Poor spiderling. This is the greatest challenge I’ve ever given you- to unlearn all I taught you, drilled into you so you’d survive. But we need you, Steve and I, just like you need us, to be happy and whole. We deserve that.
Someday you’ll be able to see that you deserve it too.

......

The night passes, and then the day again. Brock wonders if this is limbo, somewhere, even with the daily, sometimes hourly markings of time, of his son’s sleeps and wakeings, the shifting questions he answers in a dull voice. Not with a bang but a whimper, and somehow that disgusts him with himself as much or more than anything else that has brought him to this moment.

In between the dullness of the interrogations, there are sweet stolen particles of time, Jamie at his back or Benjamin at his breast, and yet there’s a yawning dissatisfaction starting to curdle in Brock’s stomach as the scent in the shirt he’s since plucked from the laundry room started to fade, making him short-tempered and grumpy at times and he thinks he knows bond withdrawal from simple boredom by now. If he’s missing Rogers that much to be pining and pissy that he’s not here-

Well that would mean he’s still that same pathetic omega, so gone on someone so far beyond his reach that the whole thing is laughable. And like hell is he going to be that broken again.

He keeps his temper in Interview that day, grits his teeth against snapping, or barking unwarranted clues at Kruger when the beta looks at him so patient. James- this strange new omega he’s becoming, he shows up for dinner, kisses Brock’s temple, and manages to pull the wind from his angry sails despite Brock’s best efforts.

I’m not making this any easier on myself. Or on him. Christ all-fucking Mighty, I’ve gotta get a hold of myself.

In the evening, when Bucky is taking a turn at nursing Ben in their little den after Brock having him all day- Brock finds himself wandering back into the living room, searching for something, anything to occupy his restless thoughts with. Maybe a book, maybe some carefully vetted and cheerfully boring fashion magazine, because you sure as hell shouldn’t give enemy agents unfiltered access to the news.

To his great surprise, there’s a stack of magazines and newspapers sitting on the couch-table and he grabs them, stretches out on the couch so he can leaf through them in comfort.

The Chicago Cubs did really well in this time round, especially postseason, and with a pang he realizes that Rollins isn’t around for him to tease about maybe his favourite team winning the World Cup series next year.

The UN is making noises about the Avengers needing some kind of oversight, serves them right, and inflation in the US is expected to be no more that 1.3 % this year. There’s been a heist at the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao a week ago that sounds like it might be Hydra’s doing, recovering some kind of artifact that Brock heard whispers about, something or other the Arm of Physics and Metaphysics was interested in.

Steven Grant Rogers, Captain America, attended the Crystal Charity Ball in Dallas yesterday, looking very dapper in a dark navy suit tailored perfectly to his stupidly broad shoulders, arm in arm with a beautiful brunette, some kind of semi-prominent actress, the two of them smiling happily into the camera.

For a moment, Brock just freezes as he sees the pictures, then swallows hard and gently puts the magazine down on the table. Takes a deep, slow breath and then sends the offending picture a glare
that *should* make it go up in flames.

**Goddamnit, Rogers.** Of course glad-handing involves PR which means pictures with pretty omegas. And we all know you’re not a hard product to sell, but of course even the best products require some *marketing*. Some wish fulfillment for the public. And of course he can’t let anybody suspect that he’s taken, that he’s *mated*- because the public can’t know about Jamie yet, and hopefully will *never* really know about Brock.

*But did you have to be so fucking quick and efficient about it?*

His chest aches like he got kicked by a mule and he stumbles more than he walks in direction of the den. He can’t tell if he’s more sad or angry, and he wants to pull his too-long hair out that he’s even *either*.

He curls up between Bucky and Ben, both already fast asleep, and lays awake for a good long while.

......

Next morning, eight days into his new life in Avengers nee Stark Tower, Brock wakes up, looks at himself to the mirror, and gags.

“James. Take the baby for a few hours, I gotta-” Bucky needs no further encouragement, leaning in for a quick nuzzle before plucking up Ben, the diaper bag, and on further prompting, a pair of socks. He’s out the door in record time, taking their kid off for his first big adventure while mommy’s busy putting his life back together.

Stark’s hospitality is a wonder. Almost two weeks post-partum, Brock’s still not cleared for soaking baths, but the shower is well-worth getting worked up over some plumbing.


Mmm- *mm*.

Shower and shave, the full routine, like he’s ready to face the world again- not going on a date by any means, nothing like prep for the style of ops he’d long outgrown, *but got a certain* standard *we gotta keep up*, *Rumlow* … Soap, shampoo, razors, moisturizers before and after, everything high-end- there’s even, shit, his *brand* of neutralizer in the cabinet.

Rogers remembered. Or if not him- *someone* was paying attention, sifting through the remnants of his life.

Brock’s not going to use it- everyone here knows he’s omega, knows he’s not available, and he’s not about to disrupt his natural scent while his son is still bonding with him. Nevermind that Steve Rogers is about the *last* alpha on Earth to be “unable to help it” and be bothersome, and- for all the flaws of the situation, anyone who *would* be bothersome would have to go through Steve first.

*If* he were here.

Brock can live with that.

After he’s cleaned up, he’s stuck looking at himself in the mirror. His stubble’s gone, hair’s back in something like acceptable condition due to the set of clippers. Nails are a *mess*, and he’s filing them
down, neat and clean, and finally there’s no more little things to focus on, just him and the mirror and a towel around his torso. His hands settle on the plush terrycloth, grip tight- and then push down.

*Let’s take a closer look at what the damage is.*

Full length isn’t necessary, he’s got a fair idea of what his legs look like. Face- his color’s back, still dark-circled under the eyes, but that’s gonna happen on nursing-hours. Most of the pregnant puff’s gone, he notes, running his hand over his chin and jaw- it’s left him almost gaunt around the cheeks, neck still fine and strong. Biteable, if there was anyone inclined to nibble. Scarring still swirls over his cheekbones and forehead, neck and arms- but it’s not as harsh as it oughta be. Not *nearly*.

Belly’s all loose and soft, where two weeks ago it was round and taut, and a year ago it was lean and defined- but at least he has a waist again. Hips, *fuck* does he have hips now. Tits- he flexes, and the muscle’s still satisfyingly present under the soft flesh, still strong. Active omega boys don’t often get a visit from the boob fairy until they’ve become men, and even then mostly if they get pregnant and have a reason to pack on the pounds. High and plump, and maybe, just maybe, they won’t start to sag right away.

The stretchmarks are going the way of his scars.

The incision below his navel’s most of the way there, now- a tight raised line of tissue dotted neatly to either side. Healing a lot faster than he’d have expected, even knowing what his enhancements had done to keep him alive after the fall. The day he’d left the hospital, the docs had muttered *high time* as they’d pulled out the little black threads.

The bleeding- because it’s so much easier to think of it that way than *discharge*, though it’s long since not even pink- has slowed to a crawl, too.

*Shit*, he thinks, staring into his own eyes in the mirror. *I could almost maybe get to the gym in a few days, see if I can start*-

Maybe. Maybe.

And in the meanwhile, he looks a whole lot less ragged this way. Less *vulnerable*.

*I can make something outta this.*

Maybe clothes don’t make the man, but feeling like he's got a handle on his appearance has a certain armoring factor.

He knows he must’ve done well, going by the way Bucky whistles softly as he emerges from the bath. The other omega sets down the newspaper he was reading as well as his coffee-mug and un-crosses his legs to slip down from the kitchen-top counter he was sitting on like some new-age buddha, man-bun and all.

Like a weathervane in a high wind, the mood snaps in a different direction and then it's the *Soldier* who circles around Brock like he was running an inspection. Involuntarily, Brock finds himself standing a little straighter, putting a little more steel into his back. The spell is broken when Bucky chuckles softly and places a little peck of a kiss on Brock’s cheek, drawing a startled breath from the former Hydra commander.

“You look good, sweetheart. An’ I'm glad you're feelin’ better. Had me worried there for a bit.”

Brock huffs, starts to protest, but hushes as Buck raises an eyebrow, daring him to protest and claim that everything had been just dandy and over-stretch his credibility.
“Fine. What now?”

“No, you go and open that package that arrived for you. You got another hour. Wilson’s gonna arrive at 15:00, pick you up for your interview with Kruger.”

Package-?

It’s sitting in the middle of their kitchen table, a couriered garment box, wrapped in plastic. Innocuous enough, but then the penny drops and Brock is somehow flashing back to Indiana Jones. If he opens it up, is it gonna be the holy grail, or face-melting disappointment?

The moment passes, and he’s gathering it up in his arms, glancing back sharply at at James even as his feet are taking him off to the room that’s his. Where they all three omegas seem to end up often enough that it might as well be theirs, but right this moment-

Bucky lets him go on his own, gives him a grin in passing. He’s got his own little giftbox at his side, and maybe some other day this can be a together-thing for them, but Brock-

Brock needs this to himself. Just this once.

*Just this once*, he promises himself, slitting the plastic with a newly-filed thumbnail as the box sits flat on his bed. He’s delicately lifting the lid, combat-heavy hands careful, and there’s just a layer of tissue-paper more between him and his prize.

The scent wafting up hits him, *Steve and working out, sweat, that lightning tingle of determination*, and he isn’t even thinking when removes the tissue paper and picks up the still folded t-shirt, buries his face in it, inhales sharply, with the urgency of a fireman who’s breathing fresh air again after his oxygen supply ran out.

*Fuck.*

It’s been less than 48 hours and in the meantime, there had been that old shirt, scent fading quickly and muddled, but still good enough to keep the hunger down, like a quick, greasy burger- but this, this is like sitting down for a nice rump steak with roasted potatoes and bacon-wrapped green beans. And a glass of red wine.

There’s no one there to see him or judge him, at least not in person, *and screw Stark’s surveillance, really*, so he just lets himself sink back into the mattress, rubbing his face into the delicious smelling piece of fabric.

He should have expected some kind of scent-package, really. Rogers might hunt those who he sees as the bad guys with the unrelenting determination of the fucking Terminator, and god knows Brock qualifies, but Rogers is also a goddamn knight in shining armour, ready to do the chivalrous thing and rescue a damsel in distress. And damn if Brock doesn’t qualify for that too.

*Even so- something light, a shirt worn at a boring meeting, just enough to catch his scent, it woulda been enough to make sure he did his duty.*

Instead, Brock’s gotten something Steve must’ve worn *at least* twice as he worked out, something *intense* and rich. The kind of thing to be exchanged between people courting, or newly-weds.

*Fuck me. What are you playing at Rogers? This isn’t some fucking fairy-tale.*

Shoving the thought aside, he finds himself rolling around in the scent like a tom in a bed of catnip, whining softly.
When he finally gets around to taking a closer look at the shirt, he can’t help but break out in a short bark of laughter. The tee bears the logo of the Strategic Scientific Reserve, the very organization created to take down Hydra.

*Damnit, Rogers, what are you trying to tell me? “Your side lost back then, you’re gonna lose this time round too?” Or “Come over to our side, we have cookies?” It’s not that easy, and I ain’t either.*

Still. Newfound dignity be damned, he’s rubbing this thing on his face and his neck and giving himself fifteen imaginary minutes of *this is my mate* to carry him through the day. Because that was the deal, wasn’t it. He spills his guts, he gets taken care of, even if nobody’s happy about it.

*He gets to have this, goddamnit.*

As he curls up on the bed, Steve’s shirt close, the intense blur of the alpha's scent diffuses into its’ components. Honey-sweet just offsets the clean, spicy musk of alpha male, tart but not sour from exertion and Steve’s own attitude while wearing it. Brock wonders how his alpha could even be that *calm*, that focused after the blow-out they’d had- lord knows he’s still feeling the aftershocks- and then has to look at himself and shake his head, because it’s one thing to know your enemy, and another to be able to read their mood from left-behind scent.

Head over fucking heels, he’s dug in deep.

Fuck it. Shameless indulgence time. After decades of discipline, of living on the razors’ edge, of *showing he could put it aside* - and now, even as Rogers picks up the playbook, thumbs through a few pages, and tosses it over his shoulder because that motherfucker *does not fight fair* - Brock is giving in. Rolling around in the shirt, taking it for all he can get, and letting those sweet dreamy clouds fill his head because he’s going to come crashing back to earth eventually. There’s landmines and faultlines underneath his feet and he’s dangling by a string above them- it’s very clear that at some point he’s going to have to jump, and he’s starting to find the energy to be pissed about that.

Might as well fly high and sweet while he can.

By the time he *knows* he has to pick himself up and quickly neaten his hair before heading into work, he’s running dangerously close to taking a nap, feeling physically *relaxed* in a way that makes it hard for even his very real worries to creep up the back of his neck and grab him. Fifteen minutes has become forty-five, and he may be pissed at the world but he’s *not* going to be *late*.

Slide in front of the mirror again, not even paying attention to the scars this time- quick swipe of the comb with a little product through the hair he’s left himself, enough to tame it if not to pull it back to its former heights. The sweat-stained tee is still rolled around his neck as he strides out of the bedroom, trying to be all business as he tugs on his sling, slips his hands under Benji and scoops him up for today’s *adventure*.

Bucky reaches out in passing and plucks it off him, dropping it in his free hand as he turns around ready to glare. Sends them off with a wiggle of metal fingers and a smile that at least outstrips a butterfly’s first flight, if not a sunrise.

Bucky’s *wearing* his.

Brock stares at the logo for another precious few seconds, then stuffs his scent-token into the sling, right alongside Benji’s warm little back. Sauce for the gosling, sauce for the gander, after all, and he stoops his head to kiss his son’s crown, breathing in deep as he power-walks down the hall. Taken all together, it’s just as heady as the warmth of Steve alone, and Brock knows he’s going to be
burying his face there all through today.

Jesus Christ. Coming off some of the drugs he’d had to withstand to qualify for his STRIKE shot might have been easier.

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Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The weather outside the lone Denny’s, smack in the middle of nowhere important, is somewhere approaching the level of hell freezing over, which is more than fitting. The temperature outside is almost in the lower twenties, there’s a high wind and the deluge pouring down has a hard time deciding whether it wants to be snow or rain. In any case, it’s icy, and Jack’s fingers still feel frostbitten, even though he’s been sitting and waiting at a table in the back of the dining room for almost twenty minutes.

It would have been worth it, if there’d been some kind of message from Brock in that last dead drop he checked, but nada. Zilch. All that hiking through the winter storm to make sure nobody would notice the little detour on his way to the meeting point, and it was all for nothing.

If his self-control were less perfect, he’d be smashing stuff right now- but Hydra beat that out of him a long time ago, and so he just hunches a little closer over his cup of hot, cheap coffee, and tries to be nonchalant as he flips through the pages of the National Enquirer.

It’s 3 AM and the joint’s virtually empty, save for the waitresses, but his team should show up soon. It's not the first middle of the night meet-up they’ve had in the last few months. They’re all wanted men, and laying low takes more than a cap and a beard. The last thing they need is any of them stepping a foot out of line, beyond what people would expect in such a setting, and attract undue attention. Blowing up is right out. For now, it helps that a guy reading a paper of some kind tends to get left alone if he can manage to stay halfway quiet, so he’s sticking to that.

Impatiently, he flips to the next page, lands on a piece about some kind of charity gala. On any other day, he’d have boredly stared at the page for a minute or three while thinking about more useful things, but today, there’s something that catches his eye. Amidst the vapid smiles of the rich and famous, in fucking glossy technicolor, wearing an elegant, dark-blue tuxedo and a pretty omega hanging on his arm, who gazes up at her date with stupidly adoring doe-eyes, is Rogers.

The paper’s edge crinkles in Jack’s grip, and it takes a long, steady succession of breaths blown out before he trusts himself to skim his eyes right over the picture and onto the next page. Rogers is a dead end walking, and it’s of no consequence that he’s gone and moved on. His belonging to anyone Jack knew was just a footnote in passing, between Rogers being in the dark and what was supposed to be his end.

Fruitless. Pointless. More trouble than it was ever worth.

And yet it still ticks in his mind as another little checkmark on the list of ‘Why I Am Going To Really Enjoy This If I Ever Get The Chance.’ It’s hardly fair to call Rogers faithless in this situation-

But ‘fair’ isn’t really a consideration. Not in this case. Not in this life.

Even he can figure out it’s a little screwed up to think of Cap as belonging to Brock. Or- and he buries this one down tight, not in a vault but a wine-press- of Rogers belonging to the Soldier.

Coffee. He could use more coffee.

Jack waves the cup in the direction of the waitresses and apparently, good service is still a thing in this place, despite it being cheap and paying the waitstaff just under the poverty line, because it takes
not even two minutes until a fresh cup of coffee is sitting in front of him.

As he flips through the pages, an old, off-white van pulls into the ill-lit parking lot, the icy rain mercifully helping to hide the flecks of rust at the corners and the dents both big and small that grace the rest of the chassis.

Just like the men pouring out when the side-door opens, it’s meant to be used for hard and dirty work, and it’s a familiar sight in an area where construction companies are known to semi-legally pick up day labor in other vans that might be this one’s twin.

With a grimace, Jack flips the Enquirer closed and unceremoniously stuffs it into the duffle sitting at his feet.

It’s gonna be hard enough, telling his team what he found out in the last few days, especially the bits he learned from that unmarked grave and from his contact, who had shown up eventually.

His team is not going to like what he found. They’d like it even less if he left the Enquirer out and they had to look at Rogers’ ridiculously chiseled features when he told them just which part that oblivious asshole had played in their current predicament.

And the orders Commander Taggart gave him for his team? Those would be the worst of all.

No need to be careless and rub it in. It’s gonna be hard enough as it is.

The men file in one by one, heads down, shaking off water as they mumble quietly polite greetings in the direction of the waitresses, slightly dragging their feet as well as their back-packs and duffles as they head towards Jack’s table. The very image of working men down on their luck, but hanging in there in a desolate attempt to eke out a living.

It’s less of a lie than it should be.

They settle into the benches, and the faces that surround Jack now are tired and grim-eyed, framed in damp hoods and hats still dripping rainwater. Asena, Whelan, Hayes and Callahan... Delgado brings up the rear, struggling with the wind outside for a brief moment as he shuts the restaurant’s door, then taking a moment to stare through the glass out into the rain before shuddering and heading over to find a seat next to everyone else.

Muddy boots and dripping ponchos leave puddles on the floor, hopefully the only trace of themselves they’ll leave here. One of the waitresses comes by, discreetly trying to straighten her posture and hide a yawn, and orders are made. Soon, rounds of coffee, bitter, hot and dark, start to chase off the chill- but Jack knows he’s going to drive it right back into them by the end of the night.

He waits until the waitress makes her way back to her station again, then takes a long look at all of his brothers in arms.

“You all know who we’re looking for. But you don’t know why.”

Like a pack of dobermans that have picked up the scent of blood, they come to attention. It’s subtle, not enough to alarm anybody, but they sit a little straighter, lean in a little closer. Their eyes turn to Hayes, expecting him to test the waters, sound out what might be shallow spots.

Their medic takes another sip of his coffee, then looks up at Jack and sets his cup down with a precise and deceptively slow motion, his voice dipping into that deep southern drawl that always gets a tad thicker when he figures they’re well and truly fucked.

“So. Yo’ the only one to find even a hint of a trail. And by now- higher-ups are desperate enough
to give the real job t’ us,” Hayes says, turning the words over and over, stones pulled up out of a field. “Cause absolutely no one else has found anything.”

“Yes,” is Jack’s answer.

“An’ now we finally get clearance. We get t’ know what’s up. But it’s so bad, they think we might turn on ’em if we knew.”

Callahan snarls quietly, the knuckles of his fingers wrapped around his coffee cup going white for a few seconds. He looks to Jack at the head of the table, trying to find leadership where their usual is gone.

“No matter what they say, he did not betray us. He’s no traitor. He’s loyal.”

“He was pregnant,” Jack says.

It falls like a brick. The dining room was quiet before, but now there’s dead silence except for Whelan’s mug clattering to the table-top, and him hissing as its’ contents slop over his hand.

Asena’s the one who draws a shaky breath, rubbing the bridge of his nose as he whispers. “You have to be fucking shitting me.”


A hiss sweeps across the table, water droplets hitting a hot frying pan, spitting fury underneath. Sudden jerky movements abruptly freeze as the men belatedly remember their training and the importance of not attracting attention. With Hayes, though- there’s not much more than a tightness that springs up around his eyes, the kind that Jack hasn’t seen since Sanchez’ funeral. Coming of age as a black alpha in the deep South, Hayes dealt with the inevitable by refusing to show his upset. It’s steadied his hand, and served him well in their org- though you’ll know it when he disapproves of your shitty field-medicine.

His voice is so soft, it can make the ugly questions that need to be asked almost sound pretty.

“The Commander was- religious with his use of birth control. Always. But… ah figure th’ higher-ups saw a chance to get their hands on a super-soldier baby? And- goin’ by the time that’s passed, kid shoulda been born ‘bout now. Kid like that? …valuable. Not somethin’ you wanna see fall into the wrong hands. Right, boss?”

Jack’s about to reply, when Callhan’s quiet snarl, that never fully went away, erupts into a harsh growl that has the waitresses in the back flinching, before segueing into a furious whisper.

“What I want to know is, who knew? Did Rumlow know the day we tried to launch Insight? Was he playing teacher’s pet, going for the extra credit? Was…was it somethin’ he used to string Cap along?” he spits, stumbling over the words in his anger. “Or was this the higher-ups just fucking with him for fun and profit?”

The outburst earns him a hard jab in the ribs from Delgado and a stern, disgusted look from Asena, who spins the ugly side of business that Luke seems to have forgotten into delicate words.

“Careful there, my friend. Upset like that… is not good for your blood-pressure. Or mine.”

Their explosives expert deflates a bit. He’s still bristling some, but thank fuck a tad quieter- mutters about knowing why would have made it easier to call the right shots later on. They all knew it
would get real messy real fast, that’s what STRIKE’s for, but...

It is telling that the others unobtrusively nod along to Callahan’s sorry excuse. Questioning things in such a way, full of rage and doubt- that was borderline weak-link, and it seems that for once, neither Jack nor any of the boys are sure about whether that is good or bad.

“This is why,” Jack says, voice carefully measured. “They didn’t tell us.” Get your shit together, his anxious fingers tap on the countertop. Can’t fight if you aren’t clear-headed.

He can’t say the same words as Luke’s haven’t crossed his mind. But you should never, ever, let them cross your tongue. They wouldn’t be STRIKE if they didn’t know that.

“There’s more,” he murmurs. “And worse. So bear in mind when I start talking, you need to listen. Attentively. Quietly.”

There is so much to unpack.

But Brock wouldn’t have asked for him to be his second in command way back when, if even in a situation like this, Jack weren’t able to lay it out both plainly and discreetly - the bodies, the stuff on the cloud. The likely nature of just what they’re chasing.

We don’t know. We don’t know.

But they can assuredly guess.

The Soldier is beyond their pay-grade- in theory.

In practice, they are in the shit and they know it.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you sticking with me as I navigate, thank you so, so much. Thank you to Andartha and Bofuriff, the heart and the bones, and for sticking with me as things stretched, for encouraging me, and for keeping me going. Thank you all so, so much.

More to come, and soon. I swear.

Join me on Tumblr for pictures of cats and late-night ramblings!

Works inspired by this one:

Fools Rush In - Chapt 5 ART by LePeru (Nizah), Loyalty, in a mirror dark by Andartha, The price you pay the piper by Andartha

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!